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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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The Return of the Squirrel Man

No one here knows why he chose us. Sometimes it seems that he appeared in a dream and then decided he liked us enough to stick around after we all woke up. For about a year, he liked us enough that even when he left for a couple days or a week at a time, he’d end up coming back to us. Now, even though we have a bunch of TV news people camped out in town waiting for him to return, we don’t let ourselves talk about him—not with them and not with each other. It’s an unspoken rule that we keep to almost religiously. People like to forget the unpleasant things in their lives and that makes sense. But sometimes I get this need to talk about him and the time he spent with us. It’s like when you got a sore in your mouth and even though it makes no sense, you keep fooling with it anyway. Maybe that’s just what people do. People aren’t always sensible, after all.

As was our habit, we didn’t ask him much when he first appeared in town. We would come to know things about him just by seeing him every day, and for a while that was enough. He almost always wore the same clothes, so we knew he didn’t have much money. And he seemed to like being outdoors more than anything else. He could climb trees with an ease that almost made you question what you were seeing—that skill of his made him an instant hit with our kids.

He lacked that ease when he was inside, though. Then, he was mostly jumpy—like a kid who’d had too much candy. Normally, this wouldn’t have gone over very well with us. Fidgeting is one of those qualities that make a person seem suspicious, and we’re not ones to trust outsiders very easily. We live and work in one of those small towns where you don’t get a lot of visitors. At night, our homes make up little constellations that people pass on the interstate, and during the day, the dun color of our buildings make us almost invisible against the hills we’re backed up against. You’d think, then, that we wouldn’t be too accepting of a man who was always wearing the same clothes and who didn’t talk about himself and who preferred to be outside all the time. But the truth of it is that from the start, we considered him to be one of our own.

Maybe part of the explanation for this is that he caught us in a lie—a lie that we’ve told ourselves so long that we’ve come to think it’s a secret only known by us. Before him, we took it as a given that the world would pass by our town and never once think about us. There were times, sure, when we thought it would be nice if someone new would come around and ask us questions about ourselves and listen to our stories. If you live around the same people all your life, you never get the chance to surprise yourself. Everyone thinks they know everything there is to know about you, and you, in turn, start to believe that that’s even possible.

But then he showed up. It wasn’t just that he was new to us. There was also something about the way he watched us, and how his eyes seemed to take in very detail. Though he was a nervous man, he calmed down when we told him our stories. Whenever we spoke, we could see that he was concentrating on us. He would force his legs to keep quiet and his hands to stay still in
his pockets for the duration of our stories. He was so focused on us that it didn’t take long before we got used to the attention and maybe after a while, we even started to need it.

Nobody who’s not from our town believes me when I tell them that for the year he lived among us, we never once asked his name. For the first couple months, we were so excited to have someone new to talk to that we never asked him about himself, and after that, it just seemed rude. He was already one of us.

As a result, we never referred to him by name. But it should be said we never called him the Squirrel Man, either. That’s been the doing of the local news folks who’ve been staying with us ever since they got wind of what happened. They’re waiting for him to arrive in cuffs in the back of a police car. A monster who took advantage of a small town’s trust: that’s the story they’re looking to tell because that’s the story we’ve given them. They’ve been waiting now for more than a month.

Watching them kind of reminds me of those church-goers who talk about waiting for the Second Coming. I even heard that some folks from Hollywood are coming up to make a movie about him—The Squirrel Man, that is, not Jesus.

My wife would kill me for saying this, but there are similarities between the men. I’ve been thinking this lately. Both Jesus and the Squirrel Man were peculiar and both had a lot of people who loved them for how peculiar they were. It’s not every day you meet someone like that. Both of them made a lot of people feel loved and both had a lot of people who didn’t want them to leave. You can’t take it too far, I know. Jesus is Jesus and the Squirrel Man is who he is. And there is the simple fact that Jesus never did anything as horrible as what we’re accusing the Squirrel Man of. But still, it’s interesting to me when you can find similarities between people. It’s a habit of mine, I guess.

∴

As is the case with any relationship, over the year he was with us, things started to change. At some point, he stopped being just the friend we could tell our stories to. He started being the person we told stories about. He had this way of vanishing unexpectedly, and while waiting for him to come back, we passed hours trying to figure out where he was and what he was doing. Then we started having dreams about him, and after that, we started telling each other what we saw in those dreams. Some dreamed he lived in a shack out in the hills off the old highway—an old piece of land that one of the big oil companies and the state are always fighting over. Others dreamed that he lived in one of the caves on the other side of Rocky Peak. Some of the church-goers, they said that God was speaking to them through their dreams, telling them to pray for the Squirrel Man and his tormented soul. They believed that his absence was due to week-long binges and days of debauchery. There was no shortage of stories when it came to the Squirrel Man, and the longer he stayed away, the more confident people became in what they believed about him.

For the most part, the dreams were mostly harmless. But there were times when he stayed away from us for weeks and we started feeling the little pricklies on our necks, the beginnings of something like anger. We wanted to know that we weren’t the only ones dreaming. We worried
that maybe when he left us, he’d forget us. It wasn’t fair and in our dreams, we started accusing
him of things as a way of getting back at him.

Food started disappearing from our markets about that time and the store owners started
grumbling. Nothing too obvious—small sacks of flour, a couple boxes of health bars that no one
ever ate. But then more expensive stuff started going missing as well: five-pound bags of sunflower
seeds, a case of peanuts. No one ever saw him at the market, but that didn’t stop us from pointing
fingers. If he climbs trees like a damn squirrel, then it seemed reasonable to think he ate like one as
well. Only the church-goers defended him. They tried to dream tolerant dreams that lined up with
the ideals they tried to live by when they were awake. As a result, they dreamed that God was still
calling them to save his soul. They told the store owners to calm down. “What does it matter,” they
argued, “a few pounds of food that no one eats anyway. Maybe he needs help. Real help. Spiritual
guidance.”

The shop owners and the church-goers weren’t the only ones arguing. When the Squirrel
Man stayed away for any amount of time, we all started in on each other, blaming our neighbor for
not being nice enough to him. We blamed our kids for not giving him enough attention when he
climbed our trees. We looked for any reason to explain why he was staying away until he’d come
back to us, and then we’d forget our dreams.

There were still arguments when he came back. Toward the end of the year, whenever he’d
reappear, we started acting like divorced parents fighting over a child. We argued about who
would get to buy him a drink or a cup of coffee. We fought about having him to ourselves for a
meal at home. Some of us even asked our children to give up their beds so he could spend the
night. No one complained though. Our sons and daughters would’ve given anything to be able to
brag to their friends about having him as a guest. There was nothing we wouldn’t do for him.
Looking back on it, maybe that was the problem.

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During his last week with us, just before he disappeared, the Mayor realized how desperate
we’d become and he instituted a daily lottery to decide who would have the honor of hosting him
each night. We never asked him if that was alright with him. He’d made us suffer by leaving us.
Staying with us in our homes was the least he could do.

Even with the lotteries, the fights got more vicious and the lottery caused more
disappointment as the week went on. We didn’t care, and we were too busy fighting to see that he
did. As a result, the more we wanted him around, the more he stayed away from us. By mid-week,
he started climbing our trees not only to entertain our children, but also as if he was trying to get
away. By the end of the week, it was like he was scared of us, and maybe, like he was judging us.

No one likes to be judged, let me tell you. What we did, we did for him—all that fuss, all
the care we put into picking out meals for him and making sure he was comfortable when he slept
over in our beds. We loved him; there’s no need to mince words. And when you love somebody,
you don’t want to be judged or feared. And more than anything, you don’t want to be left behind.
So we came up with an idea.
On the morning before he disappeared, we were sitting around the diner barely talking to each other after the Mayor announced the lottery winner for that day. The Squirrel Man hadn’t arrived yet, but everybody was thinking about him. Then someone yelled out that it wasn’t fair that we were making all this fuss while he was just going to end up leaving us like he’d done before. We knew it was true. He never told us and we never asked him, but still we recognized the signs that he was getting ready to leave us again. His legs were starting to get antsy—more than usual—when he sat down with us. And even when we wanted to tell him a story, something that no one else had heard, he seemed distracted. That’s why as soon as one of us said what we’d all been thinking, the whole room agreed: we needed to convince him to stay.

From the diner we marched like soldiers to our homes and to our jobs and we told our kids and our wives and our bosses, we told anyone and everyone we saw about what we’d decided. And all of them were so excited that their faces turned every shade of pink and red, and some people’s faces even went all the way to purple.

He must’ve sensed what was going on because he didn’t show up that day like he usually did. We looked for him all over. We looked for him at the park and on the streets. We even looked inside the church, though we knew we wouldn’t find him there. By late afternoon, we almost gave up, thinking that maybe we’d missed him and that we’d have to wait until he came around again. But then I had an idea.

I’m not one to brag. I’ve lived here my whole life and why it is, I don’t know, but I’ve always tried to avoid looking at the world as if I had much to do with its workings. It’s just the way I am. But that day, it was me who changed our town for good. While everyone around me was giving up, saying that we were just going to have to wait, I couldn’t let it go. And then it dawned on me what we had to do and I called everyone I knew and told them to do the same.

By evening, we had chopped down every tree in town—even the old knotty pines that had lined our blocks for longer than any of us could remember. The sight of our treeless streets, it gripped the belly. Those fallen trees laid flat on the ground like corpses on a battlefield. They’d sacrificed for a cause they didn’t understand and didn’t want to be a part of.

Soon after, we had him. He’d been hiding out in the older trees by the pond, waiting for the sun to go down so he could run away from us. But a Squirrel Man without trees to hide in doesn’t get very far.

He wasn’t anxious or nervous-acting when we brought him back to the diner. I remember noticing the difference, though with all the excitement, I didn’t ask myself why he was acting so funny. Even his hands, which usually moved around every which-way, hung at his sides—lifeless. We were so happy to have him around that it wasn’t long before we started hugging him. No one said anything. It just happened. Like children playing with a doll, we took our turn holding him and only reluctantly let go so that the next person in line could have his turn. Pretty soon, we realized we just couldn’t hold him tight enough. It was like being hungry in a way that no meal could ever satisfy. So we started holding him closer, and pressing him to our chests.

It went that way all night and all day the next. Everything stopped in town. We didn’t go to work. Our children didn’t go to school. We didn’t eat or drink anything because all we needed was to hold our friend and let him know how happy we were that he had decided to stay with us forever.
It’s a miracle to love someone, and maybe that’s why we were so caught up that day that we didn’t notice him leaving us the way he always left us: sudden and unannounced. The realization crept up on us the way a sunset does. You’re in the light one moment, and so lost in the beauty of all those colors off in the horizon that you don’t realize how, out of nowhere, you’re surrounded by darkness all of the sudden. That’s what him leaving us was like: it was like a terrible darkness.

We started to pull away from his body—slowly at first. No one saying anything. Soft and quiet and respectful. And if his leaving us wasn’t bad enough, we saw that he’d taken a couple of our little ones as well.

Was it his way of getting back at us? He didn’t seem the vengeful type, but then again, we took his trees from him. What I know for sure is that at some point after seeing the two little bodies on the ground—the Hoyt twins who weren’t more than ten years old—some of us started to scream. A terrible noise we made that night as we pointed at the two little bodies crushed almost to the point of being flat. Like the rest of us, they’d been trying to get close to our friend, but at some point, they must have fallen under the weight of us. Now their eyes were closed and they looked as peaceful in expression as the Squirrel Man did.

Out of respect for Edward and Mary, the parents, we don’t let ourselves talk about that night, but I’m willing to guess that there are at least a few of us who are jealous of those children and the fact that they get to be with him forever. As for where our friend went off to with those little ones, people have their theories, but no one really knows. And no matter what my wife and her church-going friends seem to think, they don’t know either.

What I can say with some certainty is that he’ll never be coming back again. My wife would disagree, her believing in the Second Coming and all that other stuff that happens along with it. But like I said before: Jesus is Jesus and the Squirrel Man is who he is.
It was one of their grabs at the Musharaff Corner Store that changed everything for Jimbo. The day was like any other—except it wasn’t, not quite; the day never really seemed to start it was so overcast—and they were walking the estate; himself, Si and Si’s two brothers. Jimbo never remembered the names of the brothers, and their names never passed between them; it was as if they had no names. They looked identical, too, with shaved heads and Helly Hansen puffer jackets in shades of green, so they might as well have been called nothing. Jimbo did silently refer to them as Helly 1 and Helly 2. Helly 1 had a huge zit on his forehead, in the middle of his eyes, which Si said made him look like a Hindu. That was the distinguishing feature that Jimbo went by.

Si was on top form. He wanted to clear the till. Cause a diversion for the proprietor Mr. Musharaff, and then just swipe the contents of it. Normally, they would slip a few bottles of JD into their pockets; this time, Si was strongly in favour of hitting a jackpot.

“Mr. Musharaff is blind in one eye,” he said, as if the fact was commonplace.

“How d’we do it?” Helly 1 asked, sucking a cigarette.

“Easy. We get Jimbo to fake falling over. He does it in the middle of the store and old Musharaff shuffles to help him—I’m in the till.”

Helly 2 nodded. “Yeah, that’s nice.”

Helly 1 flicked his cigarette into the air. “How do you get in the till, then?”

Si flashed a smile. It was the kind of smile Jimbo was getting used to.

“We’re tooled up.”

Out of his jacket, Si pulled a rusted crowbar. He showed them, concealing the hooked end in the fold of his jacket.

“Nice,” Helly 2 conceded.

Helly 1 put another cigarette into his mouth. He nodded and without warning gave Helly 2 a shove to the shoulders, causing his brother to lose balance and fall against a short wall. Everybody laughed, except Helly 2, who tried to act casual by sitting on the wall.

“What was that for?” he demanded, making to push at Helly 1 in return, but holding back.

Si laughed. “What was that for?” he mimicked, crossing his long arms over his chest. “What was that for?” he said in a posh accent, directing it at Helly 2.

Helly 1 lit his cigarette in a quick movement like he was rubbing his face with his cupped palms. He exhaled the smoke.

“I just felt like it.”

∴
They made their way to Musharaff Corner Store by the usual route. Si led as normal, his bowed legs pronounced in skinny jeans. Jimbo felt nervous. Si was walking in that aggravated way like he was angry with the paving stones. He was hunched, one hand holding the crowbar through his jacket.

Jimbo didn’t like the look of the crowbar.

At the corner of Dunfield Street, they paused, or rather Si paused and they all did the same. Si looked up and down the street and lifted his leg up onto a bollard. He slotted a finger into his boot.

Helly 2 frowned, hiding his Hindu spot.

“What are you doing?”

Si looked around at Helly 2, but didn’t see him. He just kept fishing into his boot with a real purpose, pushing his finger around as if to release some pressure from his foot. “Fuck’s sake,” he whispered, finally pulling his boot off.

Out of the boot, he took a cellophane wrap. He unfolded the wrinkled plastic until the contents were revealed. Some of it spilled onto his fingertips, and he quickly dabbed the powder onto his gums.

Hellys 1 and 2 whistled and pushed each other in the arms, and crowded Si until he had to cradle the wrap out of harm’s way.

“Fuck’s sake,” he whispered again—louder this time, but controlled.

Once more, nerves attacked Jimbo. He didn’t crowd Si, just watched him intently, unable to keep his eyes off the powder. Each speck seemed to glitter, even in the dull light.

For that year after finishing school, Jimbo had stayed at his mum’s house, sleeping in a cold attic, trying to sustain himself with his own kettle and toaster and collection of cheap chocolate to avoid going downstairs.

Staying with his mum wasn’t a choice; it was a necessity. His dad had landed a job on an oil rig and wasn’t going to pay rent for a place he wasn’t sleeping in. Even if Jimbo was sleeping in it, he wasn’t going to keep up those rent payments. He’d said, It’s only natural to be with your mother, while throwing his clothes into a frayed, old Adidas backpack a day before he was supposed to leave, not really making eye contact with Jimbo at all.

Either way, Jimbo didn’t spend much time at his mother’s house. He was fishing mostly, or taking long walks up the canal to look for new spots. Through summer and autumn, it was all he did. Even in the winter, when he couldn’t feel his toes and his eyes leaked tears without warning, he’d be out there casting off with the other loners who dotted the canal-side. It had been a hobby at school, but now it was more than that: he needed to fish; fishing was a way of getting out, a way of escaping his mum’s new boyfriend, Steve, who had a beaten-up BMW and was not much older than himself.

It was a relaxation. He could sit for hours—rod in stand—staring at the brown, oily water until the sun was gone. Sometimes, a heron would glide by; without a sound, it would settle itself
on the upturned shopping trolley in the middle of the canal, as motionless as Jimbo was, making little adjustments to its neck and head to watch for prey.

Jimbo would marvel at its poise. Stick-thin legs, arrow neck—how did it remain so balanced and graceful? Jimbo, conversely, needed all the centre of gravity he could get: he was sitting on a green crate, underneath which was a wide-load pallet he’d hauled from the canal bank—even then, he found himself keeling to the side. But the heron remained as steady as if it were floating. It would dip its long beak into the murky water in one easy, flowing movement and rise out again, untroubled. Stability was its number one advantage.

Apart from fishing, he signed on every Wednesday. This was no fun as the Job Centre was the worst place for his trips and falls. Stepping onto the zigzag carpet at the entrance filled him with fear because he knew zigzags would fuck around, dropping and rising at a whim. He knew he looked strange, his steps staggered to counteract the shifting patterns on the carpet. But he had to get his money; without that fifty quid a week, he would be reliant on his mum; if he was reliant on his mum, he was reliant on Steve.

One time, after negotiating the zigzags successfully, the whole ground disappeared. People had crowded around to help, of course, but people always crowded around and he hated it; the puzzled looks of those who had seen, really seen, would imprint onto his mind. It was worse than the hysterics of Si and his brothers—at least with the hysterics there was a soundtrack, something to lose yourself in. Not so with the staring.

After that particular trip for his Giro, he had changed his route home. Instead of cashing it at the central post office and getting the 26, he jumped on the number 30, which headed to Samuels Park. There, he withdrew his money from a local post office and made his way to the Victorian bandstand—notes balled up in his fist—where he knew a few people; knew was not exactly the word, but he could name them.

The wind was strong at the bandstand. He shielded his lighter, flicking the wheel a few times until a flame appeared. He lit a cigarette and held on tightly to the railing. Si and Hellys 1 and 2 were listening to Grime on Helly 1’s mobile phone not far away, but Jimbo wasn’t about to approach them. They had been two years ahead at school, so his hands were tied. Si, especially, wasn’t someone you approached. You waited.

Si was the guy that everybody knew on the estate.
Eventually, he came up to Jimbo.
“St. Michael’s?”
Jimbo nodded.
“Yeah, I thought so,” he said, looking Jimbo up and down. “You got a cig, then?”
Jimbo delved quickly into his inside pocket and passed one to Si.
Si lit the cigarette and blew smoke into the air above. Up close, Si was smaller, more compact than Jimbo had remembered—he had seemed so tall at school, towering over the teachers, head and shoulders on his peers. But here in the dark—his neck zipped up in his coat, a closely-shaven head—Jimbo was level pegging.

Jimbo lit another cigarette.
“You look like someone…” Si looked straight into and through Jimbo.
“From St. Michaels…”
Si shook his head. “No. From the television, what’s his name? You know who I mean…”
Jimbo shrugged. “Like an actor or something?”
“Yeah…” His eyes were wide open, searching. “No, not an actor. Ah, what is it? Hey bro! Bro! Come here, a second.”
Helly 1 glanced over from a wooded area, just north of the bandstand. From what Jimbo could tell, he was counting out money. There were a couple of kids with him. He tried to ignore Si.
“Bro! Bro!” Si kept calling, unfazed. “Get over here!”
“Who’s this?” Si said, pointing to Jimbo when he arrived.
“I don’t fucking know,” Helly 1 said, glancing from Jimbo to Si. “I was just in the middle…”
“Look at him,” Si interrupted. “Just look at him, a minute.”
Si gave up after a while. It felt good to be recognized, though.

∴

Mr. Musharaff studied the four of them as they filed down the narrow main aisle of the corner shop. He had half-moon spectacles perched at the end of his long nose; the spectacles were attached to a strap of leather, which meant he could let them hang at his chest.
Helly 1 and Helly 2 went forward to the till, while Si and Jimbo hung back in the aisle. As planned, Si and Jimbo searched for something on the shelves; the blood was thumping in Jimbo’s ears, but he concentrated hard on the dusty tins of spam and corned beef, moving across to the baked beans, the spaghetti and sausages, the breakfast tins, and finally the Pot Noodles.
Through the thumping in his ears, he heard Helly 2 ask for Marlborough Lights. Helly 1, in turn, ordered his usual Superkings.
“Jimbo.”
Though Jimbo knew it was time, he couldn’t get a message to his legs. He had a Chicken and Mushroom Pot Noodle in his hand. It felt good to hold on to, like an anchor. He felt sure he was about to fall.
Si came in close to him and pulled the Pot Noodle out of his hand; he was restricted in the way he moved, one arm still pressing onto the crowbar under his jacket. He managed to jab an elbow into Jimbo’s ribs.
“Now,” he whispered, his lip curled to a snarl. “Now.”
Jimbo could feel the cocaine dripping down his throat, numbing his tongue and his teeth. His legs felt like nothing. But in feeling like nothing, he knew they would hold.

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Si was the deciding factor.
It wasn’t at all certain Jimbo would become friends with them, especially taking into account Hellys 1 and 2, who were suspicious. But with Si on his side, and with Si’s insistence on him ‘sticking around for a bit’, the clique formed.
He started falling down regularly after that. One night, he lurched forward onto the grassy embankment leading to the bandstand; another, he took the stairs of the bandstand on his knees, rolling off into the gravel and skinning his left cheek. Helly I thought it was all an act. He was so convinced of this, at first, he'd refused to laugh, and had pulled Jimbo from the ground, squared up to his face and said, ‘Do that again’. Close up, the Hindu spot was blazing on his forehead and there was the stink of the Superkings, and a grin in his eyes; a grin that flickered off and on.

Si, on the other hand, embraced Jimbo’s clumsiness. To him, the falling was what Jimbo did best—his calling card, his special power.

Si was always inquisitive about that.

“You must be like an epileptic or something,” Si had stated, the night Jimbo had fallen over on the grass.

Jimbo had shrugged, brushing the wet off his jacket. He could feel that old anger boiling up inside him again.

“I don’t think it has a name,” he lied, knowing the name very well—Ataxia. “What I have, it’s just…”

“It’s just your fault?”

Jimbo shrugged again, accepting a spliff from Si. “Yeah.” He pulled the smoke deep into his lungs. “My mum took me to a clinic…but they didn't know.”

His mother had known all along. It had skipped her, and it was now Jimbo's problem—it was coded. He had not been too young to understand what his mother was doing, or not doing about it. They never went back to the clinic.

Si pinched the spliff out of Jimbo’s fingers. “Yeah, well. Fucking typical, isn’t it? Do you know what NHS stands for?”

Jimbo didn’t.

“It stands for No Health Stupid.” He laughed and punched Jimbo in the arm. “But serious, you have a problem.” He touched his head with the hand holding the spliff; the smile was gone. “It’s here. Not in your legs. Do you know what I’m saying?” He kept on pressing a finger into his temple, the smoke trailing around his head. "Do you understand?" Jimbo nodded.

“You’re right,” he continued, looking off into the distance. “You’re fucking right. We’re all fucked up here.”

He laughed so hard that the end of the spliff showered hot rocks onto his jeans. He kept laughing as he brushed off the burning hash.

“We’re so fucked up!” he shouted into the beams of the bandstand.
Turning to Jimbo, a light was in his eyes that Jimbo could hardly forget about. His eyes were translucent; Jimbo could see the workings behind them, the wires and arteries wound around each other and sending signals.

Jimbo didn’t move. He glanced up the aisle to Mr. Musharaff. Mr. Musharaff was staring at them both, his pencil poised over the notebook on the counter. By now, the cocaine was working its way into Jimbo’s arms and legs and fists and knees and elbows. It was making him strong, super strong.

Si was in close.
“Go on,” Si mouthed, as loud as if he had shouted.

At this point, Mr. Musharaff had taken his glasses off and they were resting at his chest. “What are you boys doing?” he demanded. “If you want to buy something, buy something. If not, you leave now.”

Jimbo could see that one milky eye.
“Do you understand English?” Mr. Musharaff was lifting up the counter. “I suggest you leave now!”

Jimbo had his fists balled up. He was supposed to fall down. Now that he had everything in place: his legs in place, his arms, his fingers—all strong, all how it could’ve been in his life—he was supposed let that all go.

“I asked you a fucking question!”

One of the things he hated the most about Steve was his F reg BMW parked badly outside their house. It would be half on and half off the curb. There’d be the muffled bass of his music and that shrill sound of him shouting into his mobile phone. Jimbo would hate that moment. He would hate the door slamming and that pause before his mother's excited welcome.

“Fuck it!” Jimbo could feel the anger twist and snap as he said the words, he could feel the twist and snap, but also the calm and ease that contained it. With the cocaine, he could stand his ground. Literally, stand. Not have to hold onto anything.
He stared into the Mr. Musharaff's bad eye. The eye stared in return. Behind the film of his blindness, there seemed to be an understanding in what Jimbo could do. In the eye, he saw Si approaching, the gait in the way he walked, the crowbar coming out.

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It happened: Si cracked open the cash till, using the crook of his elbow for leverage; Helly 1 emptied the cigarette stand into a bin liner, taken from the shelves; Helly 2 gently slipped bottles of whisky and vodka into his backpack.

In all of this, Jimbo felt slow. He could sense that maybe one or two of his knuckles were broken; he could sense, also, a pinch of guilt somewhere, layered away. But he was comfortable in his body. His body was a vehicle now—controllable. Behind every inch of his skin, Jimbo could feel light.

Stepping over Mr. Musharaff, Jimbo glided out of the corner store with Si and the Hellys following behind him. The pavement was like air under his feet, and the cloud cover was no longer so grey and lifeless. It was blue in colour now; a dark shade that made it almost electric.

As they made their way to the bandstand, Hellys 1 and 2 were jogging and pushing each other. Every so often, Helly 1 peeled open his backpack to show off the bottles he'd snatched, the liquids sloshing around.

“Anyone thirsty?” he beamed.

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Each street corner they turned, each road crossed, each hill and slope, brought Jimbo down from the cocaine. It stepped down. There was nothing sudden about it. By the time they reached the bandstand, Jimbo was no longer feeling anything.

Si was counting out the money.

“…sixty, eighty, eighty-five…”

Helly 1 dived a hand into Si's pocket. "Is that it?" he said.

“Yes, that's fucking it! Where do you think we were robbing?"

Jimbo's attention was drawn away to Helly 2, who was quietly rolling a spliff at the other end of the bandstand. He had his knees up to his chest and a paper in each hand. He seemed to be having trouble sticking the papers together.

“Jimbo?” Si was sipping from the Jack Daniels' bottle. “Come over here, a sec.”

Jimbo sat down next to Si. Already, he could feel his muscles switching off and on, the tiny impulses, the twitches that he knew too well.

“This is your cut, mate,” he said, handing two crumpled twenties and a ten to Jimbo.

Jimbo felt the notes between his fingers. “This is too much,” he said.

Helly 1 perked up. “Yeah, too fucking right!” He barged onto the bench, pushing Jimbo over a little. “I'm thinking...what am I thinking, Jimbo?” He both glared and smiled at Jimbo. “I'm thinking twenty each, aren't I, Jimbo? Twenty each, Si, you fucking maths genius.”
Jimbo looked to Si. He was swigging from the bottle now, a blankness to his face like he was younger. A kid of ten or twelve, not eighteen.

Putting the bottle down deliberately so that it balanced on two bench slats, Si turned to Helly 1. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had regained his years—but not all of them. “You know what, bro? You know what?” he began.

Helly 1 stared at him in confusion.

Si stood up. “I didn’t see you do what was needed. I didn’t see you facing up to Musharaff.” With a sudden jerk of his foot, he kicked the bottle of Jack Daniels off the bench. “I’m thinking fifty goes to Jimbo. I’m thinking, bro…”

From across the bandstand, Helly 2 shouted, “Yeah, bro, you know what I mean, it was all Jimbo.” He was slurring his words badly and trying to get up from the ground, hands slipping on the railing. “Fuck. It was all Jimbo. He didn’t even fall. He was supposed to fall, right?”

When night came, Jimbo thought about the heron. He hadn’t been back to the canal for weeks and he wondered if the heron was still there, or if it had migrated. He wondered if the bird could be there, even if he wasn’t. He was connected to the heron; the heron was what he was not—it was logical.

Instead of taking the cash, he took the cocaine, wrapped in Si’s boot. Si was apologetic. There wasn’t enough, it wasn’t a fair swap, he’d said. Jimbo could see that he was reluctant to part with it—and he couldn’t blame him. It was like gold. It was the best thing Jimbo had tasted—the sourness was still there on his tongue. But he persisted, and Si eventually gave it to him.

Leaving them to their whisky and vodka, Jimbo made his way to the canal.

At the canal, his crate and pallet were in the correct place. He took his seat and watched the black water ooze by. There were all sorts of things in the water: petrol bottles, plastic bags, bubble wrap and a kid’s bike. But no shopping trolley.

Jimbo half-expected the heron to fly across. A few pigeons swooped down near him, pecking around for food. He watched their heads jerk back and forth as he dipped his finger into the white powder. At some point, he would snort the cocaine, he told himself. At some point…but not yet. He was comfortable with just eating it. He enjoyed the sharpness. He knew that within ten, fifteen minutes it would rise up inside him, flooding every part of him, easing his muscles and slipping that light under his skin.

He would wait for that.
How the Natural World Holds Together

The funeral ends in reception, ends in pastas slumped in oily vinaigrettes. Mourners gone, the house all but empty. He finds his sons upstairs in their bedroom, cracks open the door and feels cool air streaming from inside. The father thinks of sunken caves, of underwater exploration. The coolness causes him to shiver.

Do we want to talk about it? he asks, nose and mouth pressed to the crack. Would that help?

Son number one watches a game show blaring noiselessly on the muted television. Son number two has burrowed beneath his bedcovers. Neither responds.

Hello, the father says, inching the door open, anybody in here?

Are we in trouble? asks son number two from beneath the covers. His brother does not look away from the television.

Of course not, coos the father, his tone sweet, a friar talking to woodland things. No one’s mad at you. Now come on out.

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On nights when their mother worked late, the father invented bedtime stories featuring bizarre forest creatures: elk with beautifully feathered antlers, fish that leapt into trees to catch their prey, burrowing birds that lived in underground cities like ants. Before long he’d invented a zoological kingdom all his own. Usually the stories ended with one creature devouring another, to which his sons feigned repulsion. Then the father would announce, his voice thick with grandiloquence: But that’s how the natural world holds together. Soon the sight of their mother entering the room with book in hand prompted the boys to shout, We want to know how the natural world holds together! They’ll fail biology one day because of you, she told the father, whose imagination wasn’t particularly remarkable: he worked in an opaquely glassed building overlooking a manmade pond. They give you all the attention in the world, the father replied. Can’t you give me these twenty minutes? In response she threatened: Don’t make me feel like the tedious one.

One afternoon son number two, who’d begun to keep glass tanks stocked with reptiles and amphibians, summoned the father to his bedroom. Watch, the boy said, plucking a frog from a plastic bucket on the floor, dropping the frog into a tank containing a fat snake. The snake immediately struck the frog, twice, before swallowing it whole. Watch, the boy said again. The
snake struck the second frog and swallowed. Watch, the boy said again. Enough, said the father.
Why are you doing that? To which the boy frowned and replied, It’s how the natural world holds
together. Well, your mother wouldn’t like it, the father said. Mom is boring, the boy responded. A
slight smile spread across the father’s face as he knelt to watch his son drop another frog
into the tank.

Welcome, thank you for coming, he greeted mourners at the door. She would have been so
happy to see you here. The guests tried not to stare, his body trembling like a fledgling deer
overwhelmed by the sounds of the forest. In the living room he presented a tray of desserts,
claiming that carrot cake with cream cheese frosting had been her favorite. I made them myself, he
announced. Inexplicably, the guests applauded.

A neighbor from down the street, a ruddy-faced man sitting on the piano bench, cleared his
throat and began to speak: Just last week I heard an alarm going off down the block. It was the
middle of the day, one of those quiet afternoons when it seems the entire place is deserted. I
walked down the street and saw her furiously punching codes into the box. When she finally got it
right and turned and saw me there, she said, I can’t believe I forgot my own birth date. See, that’s
the security code, the man said, his eyes watering. He said, That was the last time I saw her.

Then the guests gathered around the piano bench, squeezing his shoulders. The father, who
was often annoyed that this loud man had gotten on so well with his wife—they took evening walks
around the block several times a week—said, Well, thanks, Frank. Now everyone knows
our security code.

Maybe it would be nice, someone announced, if we shared a few stories like Frank has
done. So they moved the gathering to the backyard deck, beyond where children leapt raucously
from treehouse to trampoline. Has anyone seen my sons? the father asked the guests. The ruddy-
faced neighbor leaned against the deck railing and shouted at the kids: Someone has died. Can’t you
idiots behave? Then he began to weep. The father imagined leaping forward, shoving the man over
the railing, the man’s skull smashing on the rocks below.

While the adults talked outside, son number one and son number two stole the blender
from the impromptu bar in the dining room and retreated to their bedroom. Several minutes later,
they returned the blender unnoticed.

Outside, one of the mother’s friends from college pointed at the father. The first time she
brought you around we all wondered what she’d gotten herself into. The woman beamed at the
guests. Listen to this one. We’d taken a camping trip to the North Shore and here was this new
boyfriend she’d been going on and on about for months. And what do you know, he brought salmon
to cook—salmon, in the heart of bear country.

The father’s eyes brightened; he smiled as the adults began to chuckle. Sure enough, the
woman continued, middle of the night, three or four bears show up, start rooting through our
campsite. These were small bears—a couple cubs even—but bears nonetheless, and you don’t
want to take any chances with bears. All the while, we’re hiding in our tents, listening to her chew
him out for forgetting the pocketknife, our only line of defense, for locking the pocketknife in the
Damn it, she kept saying, you’re going to get my friends killed. Shut up, we wanted to yell. The bears will hear you. So much for first impressions!

The guests erupted with mirth, only slightly embellished for the sake of the father, several clapping their hands or reaching over to slap his thigh. The ruddy-faced neighbor pitched back his head and gargled with laughter. Never cook salmon in bear territory, he announced. Everyone knows that.

Downstairs they huddle at the far crook of the couch, an L-shaped chunk of furniture consuming most of the living room. Before, the entire family would stretch across the couch, head to toe, toe to head; now, its immensity seems absurd. I’ve already called the school, the father explains. You can stay home all week. We’ll go through your mother’s stuff. I want to go to school, son number one says. You shouldn’t go to school, the father says. Why? the boy asks. That’s not what people do, replies the father. What do people do? asks son number two. They grieve, replies the father. Together. Our friends are at school, son number one says. I’m your friend too, says the father. You’re our father, says son number one. Forget about school for now, says the father. Why don’t I tell you a story, it’s been weeks since I told you a story. I don’t want a story, says son number two. Let him tell a story, his brother replies. It’ll make him feel better.

Now it’s your turn, the guests said. The father shook his head. Tell us a story, they urged—we’re preserving her memory. Nothing comes to mind, the father said. How about Mexico, someone said. Tell us something from the trip. I don’t know, replied the father, clearing his throat. With her passing so soon afterwards, it seems inappropriate…. But she was looking forward to it so much, said one of the mother’s friends. It must seem nice now that you had that final trip together.

It had been her idea, the father said. Cozúmel is where everyone goes these days, she kept saying, it’s ranked higher than all the other tourist destinations. The funny thing is the boys were against the trip at first. What other tourist destinations? they asked her. She had no idea, so she made something up: Acapuerto. Where’s that? I teased, trying to catch her in the lie. I didn’t understand why we had to go so far just so the boys could get sunburned. But she was resilient, claiming we never take them anywhere fun. Which isn’t true—they loved Pennsylvania, they loved the coal mine tour. Plus, Pennsylvania’s cheaper and close to their grandmother’s. But she wouldn’t let it go—we’re going to Mexico, she insisted. Eventually, she pried them with snorkeling, with the promise of iguanas and sea turtles.

By now several of the guests glanced apprehensively at one another. The father, staring at the deck, continued: Of course, snorkeling sealed the deal for the boys. And I suppose we did see some interesting stuff: there was a column of silver fish, hundreds if not thousands of fish all swirling together. The boys noticed first. Before long we saw there was something else inside the...
column—a pink, milky froth glinting with bits of silvery flesh. Several fish, long and thin as rifles, emerged, turned, darted back into the column. It scattered in a coordinated flash so that, for a moment, just the blood remained. Then it re-formed and the predators shot back in to continue the killing. You can imagine how wild the boys went over that, the father said. Afterwards, she really played it up, really wanted to show me how great they thought her idea had been. We can do this all week, she kept saying, we can go again tomorrow if you two would like. Really, the father said, shrugging his shoulders, it was nothing more than safety in numbers, all those fish swirling together. One of the most common strategies in the animal kingdom. Nothing too exciting. But isn’t it funny, in hindsight? Or ironic, maybe it’s ironic—the boys all riled up, this fascination over death. With what’s happened, it all seems pretty irresponsible now...

The father looked up at them with hopeful, expectant eyes. Several of the guests shifted uncomfortably before realizing he expected laughter, which began in a trickle. Then their concurrence bubbled forth, they expressed sympathy—it was, they agreed, ironic, although how could she have known at the time? Behind them, in the dark, the children had progressed to a form of tag using tree branches to lash one another, and when the chatter had finally subsided, the father leaned forward and smiled at each member of the group, one at a time, before asking in a voice heavy with grief: Can any of you tell me what I’m supposed to do with my two boys?

Just then a guest returned from a trip to the restroom and announced that someone had placed several frogs in the daiquiri machine.

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They are a foreign species to me, he said, leaning forward to tap the blender. The frogs, gulping at the air trapped beneath the blender lid, dipped down, clustered around the stainless steel blades. The father turned to the adults. Please, he said, I’m asking for whatever advice I can get. I realize how dearly they loved their mother.

The guests could only watch the frogs in the blender behind him. Finally someone spoke:
Have they begun to demonstrate remorse?
Yes, replied the father, I believe so.
Good. Have they cried?
Of course, replied the father.
Have they spoken with their friends about the tragedy?
I don’t feel comfortable allowing them to leave the house yet.
Have they spoken with you then?
We’ve pieced together a few observations, he said.
Have they eaten anything that you’ve prepared for them?

The question, which caused several of the guests to snicker, came from a woman claiming to be the mother’s roommate in college. I’m serious, the woman said before repeating her question. A few oven pizzas, the father replied. I’m not talking oven pizzas, the woman said, I’m talking food from scratch. I’ve tried, said the father, but the boys aren’t often hungry. They don’t trust you, the woman said. They don’t yet believe you can adequately replace their mother, who was a wonderful woman. Several guests nodded. I think I understand, said the father. Tell me the
proper way to proceed. Trust will only come with time, the woman replied. You must give them space and show them that you care. How? asked the father. You must allow them to consume you, she said. Your attention, your love, your money—you must give them everything you’ve got.

Meanwhile the ruddy-faced neighbor, disregarded by the guests thus far, had inched closer to the blender, fingers groping the legs of his pants. The woman continued: Be patient. You must allow your sons their mutiny. But you must also make sure they eat. They don’t like my cooking, said the father. Then lie to them, the woman said, tell them someone else made it.

Wait, shouted one of the guests. What’re you doing? Before they could stop him the man lunged at the blender, jammed the appliance’s MINCE button. With a crunch the contents turned a slurry brown. Several of the guests screamed. Then the blender continued whirring, a private, whining tornado. That blender was a gift to my wife, the father said to the ruddy-faced man, who sobbingly replied: You think you’re the only one upset? Now everyone’s upset. The adults stood in silence while overhead footsteps thumped across the hallway, down the stairs, through the living room. Son number one and son number two appeared in the doorway. We got you, they announced, pointing at the father. When they saw the rest of the adults, their eyes went wide.

Finally the woman, the mother’s college roommate, stepped forward and unplugged the blender. In the resulting silence several of the guests gave sickly groans while the boys stood looking both triumphant and terrified. Then they turned and ran, footsteps thundering up the stairs. Get back here, shouted the father but the woman grasped his hand. Wait, she said. This is exactly what I’m talking about. The father shook his head, tried to free his hand. That’s no way for boys to behave, he said. It’s sick. It’s disturbing and unnatural. They gave her that blender as a gift—I helped pick it out. The woman stroked his hand. It’s time to forget about things like that, she said.

The father turned to the guests. For the record, he said, they told me afterwards they’d have preferred a trip to their grandmother’s. It’s too hot in Mexico, they said. He laughed. What are you talking about? asked the ruddy-faced man. You should be grieving, you son of a bitch. But I am, said the father. Then a peculiar smile distorted his face. He began to blink rapidly. His sons could be heard thumping about overhead. As if drunk, as if seeing the guests there for the first time, he said, Who are you people anyway?

Eat, he says, urging them to sample the copious foods. The boys approach the dining room tentatively, eyeing the blender as if its mucky contents harbors contagious disease. They return to the couch carrying plates heavy with leftovers, and when they push the food about without eating, the father says, It’s okay, I’m not upset. It was a good gag. He fakes a laugh. You got that man good. Now please, eat this food our friends were kind enough to provide. A pleasure spreads through his gut as they spoon into their mouths the potato salad he made from scratch that morning, before the funeral. It’s good, isn’t it? he asks. Wasn’t it nice of our friends to bring all this food? Don’t worry, he tells them. In a little while we’ll all feel normal again. The important thing is that you know I love you. Then, feeling alleviated, giddy almost, his lips moving silently, hungry for words, he says, Do you love me?
Of all the writers to be born in the last years of Nixon’s presidency, novelist Kurt Knight can probably be considered the most political because of his dedication to searching for ways in which writing—novels in particular—could “act politically.” In other words, Knight tried ceaselessly to discover how the act of writing itself could contribute to “change,” whatever those changes might be. He wanted authors to be more than “simply transcribers. It’s not that I don’t appreciate the concept that the author can ‘give voice,’” Knight said in an interview from the now-defunct Novelistic magazine, “I just think authors have been doing it for so long, it’s like giving money to a bank. I want authors,” Knight said, “to be part of the political process. I want writing to be a political act.” But how that could happen Knight couldn’t say. He couldn’t say because he had yet to discover how it was possible—“it’s true I’ve had some setbacks, but that doesn’t mean the search is over. All great minds have had failures. And I’ve had mine.”

Among these failures were the write-in, the yawn-in, the butt-in, the ear-in, and the stab-in, all of which failed to gain wide support. The write-in, in particular, had failed to gain wide support, according to Knight, “because it was misunderstood. Everyone thought we were conducting a workshop. I think most people thought we were trying to set a world record—the largest workshop in the world.” The event which took place at Gage Park just south of the capital building was really meant to serve as a starting point: “I wanted people to come only to be inspired. They were supposed to go home after I gave them instructions, but they didn’t. They just milled about, lying on blankets, drinking wine, and passing stories around. It was about as political as a protest rally. I remember being up until almost five a.m. reading stories about break-ups and road trips.” Despite the write-in’s failure, Knight’s friends said the effect on Knight was negligible. His friend Steve Smith, for example, author of I’ll Die Before I Go to Heaven, said this: “The effect on Kurt was negligible.” Knight’s colleague at the Institute of Insignificant Things, Carol Boxer, author of Hook Jab said she “would probably use the word negligible to describe the effect the failure of the write-in had on Kurt.”

Unfortunately, the write-in didn’t deter Knight. Despite threats and criticism from the press and academic community, Knight persisted. But instead of staging yet another in his series of “ins,” Knight decided to stage an “out.” In other words, instead of bringing people together, he decided to stay home by himself and watch “some T.V.” This, surprisingly, was Knight’s most successful event since he managed to “completely convince” himself he was “working” by watch the Woody Allen marathon on AMC. Although, to be honest, he didn’t convince everyone; his dog Chester, despite Knight’s pleas, still “despised Allen,” finding his films “not worth the paper I poop on.”

The success of the “stay-out” prompted Knight to stage another “out.” The “write-out” took place on March 15 of 2004 in Kurt’s kitchen. Kurt, despite threats from his dog who was “dying to get some park-time,” sat down at the bar which separated the kitchen from his dining room,
opened his laptop, and proceeded to write what he thought, at the time, was nothing more than a short story. Because the short story proved to be long enough to be a novella, Kurt felt his “write-out” was even more successful than his “stay-out.” Chester agreed, calling what Kurt wrote “not bad for a human.” To this he added: “can we please go to the park now?”

Kurt, to Chester’s chagrin, restaged the original “write-out” over and over again. And the outcome of these “write-outs” was a novel that Kurt was able to get published through Hedgehog Press, a small, non-for-profit publisher located in Chicago. Unfortunately, even though this new book was the result of a series of protests, the book did nothing more than Knight’s other books had. In fact, this particular book sold the least well of all of Knight’s books. In addition, it was his worst reviewed. One critic, for example, punning on Knight’s process, called it “out-rageous and out-standingly awful... What Knight seems to want,” the reviewer wrote, “is his book to change the world... good luck! Unlike other authors who are happy to simply make a living, Knight seems to want his sentences to be the bombs of a revolution. In this, Knight should be happy since his sentences, as he’d hoped, are bombs.” And although this reviewer’s comments resulted in Chester leaving teeth marks in the reviewer’s leg, they only contributed to the “failure” of the novel to make even a literary impression.

Why had Knight been so intent on making his work political? Why was he so concerned with making sure his work was, in Knight’s words, “more than art?” Knight, we can be sure, certainly did not get his political ambition from his father and mother, both of whom, according to Knight, had never read a book in their lives. And although Knight was sure they both voted regularly, they never talked about who they voted for. “It was,” Knight said, “as if politics didn’t exist. It was as if it was something for adults, as if as soon as they would start to discuss it, my mother would tell my father to be quiet—‘the boy, dear,’ she would say. I think I must have been sixteen before I realized people actually voted for the president.”

Knight’s first real experience with politics came, it seems, when he went to college. Intending to sign up for a class in statistics, Knight signed up for a class called “the History of the Sixties.” It was in this class that Knight learned, for the first time, about “what people can do to make sure their voices are being heard.” It was the first time Knight learned about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, for example. It was the first time he’d read about the SDS. He’d, of course, known who they were before he took the class, but he’d never actually studied them with “someone who’d been there.”

The person that had “been there” was the class’ instructor, Tom Keen, the department’s best known professor of history and, perhaps, the greatest influence on Knight. Keen had been part of almost every political party or group that had petitioned, polled, persuaded, paid in, pitched in, pouted, pounced, and paraded like God’s own revolutionary army. Keen, for example, had belonged to the Sunday Socialists for Satan; Constitution Yea!; Progressives, Progressives, Progressives; Citizens for Citizens; and the Dependent’s Independence Party, among others. He held memberships in the Pacific Islanders for Peace and the Afro-Pancratic League which, to his surprise, was actually a local soccer league which consisted only of black men, a requirement that eventually forced Keen to resign his membership. Their “curt and unwarranted” dismissal, according to Keen, led him to join, in retaliation, their sister league—The Second Afro-Pancratic
League, which, because he wasn’t a black woman, he was just as quickly dismissed from. He even worked for a time at the Institute of Social Policy, a neoconservative think-tank comprised of ex-politicians and scholars whose sole purpose was to design a plan that would enable the deregulation of deregulation.

But Keen’s real impact came from writing which consisted of a variety of attempts to remove himself from his own work to defy what he called “the protestations of an intestinal generation,” going so far as to claim authorship of poems he hadn’t written. These poems, he often said, were his best work. He claimed, for example, that the insertion of the author had become not simply unnecessary, but was an act of imperialism—“to speak for one’s self in the guise of art,” he said, “is like speaking for oneself at the expense of everyone else.” Keen’s mission, as he defined it in a 1982 interview with PoEthics magazine, was to create “a democratically-minded alternative to language itself. I want a language of gesture. I want a language,” he said, his hands, the interviewer noted, moving wildly in the air, “that will speak for itself.” When the interviewer suggested that’s what language already does, Paul got up, called the interviewer a parenthetical stooge, and walked out of the room. Unfortunately, Keen’s work was soon forgotten, replaced by his reputation for getting into trouble. In addition to walking out of his interview with PoEthics, what Keen is best remembered for is a fight at a conference on the sixties—The Sixties, Duh—held at a hotel in Berkeley.

Although Keen’s supporters want to think the fight was the result of some clash between passionate advocates for change, it wasn’t. The fight was the result of a comment made by Keen’s colleague Rockefeller Cohen, a professor of literature at Coleman. Cohen was rumored to have questioned the motives of the so-called “sixties radicals,” asking Keen if “it was really all about drugs, about having a good time.” Keen responded to Cohen’s question by standing up and pouring his drink over Cohen’s head. Cohen uncharacteristically responded by taking a swing at Keen, but since Cohen was as about athletic as a snail, he missed Keen and tumbled forward into a potted plant beside the bar. Keen, in turn, made a leap for Cohen. “I’ll show you you Nazi!” he screamed. But when Keen, who like Cohen had never exercised a day in his life, jumped, he tripped over his own feet and landed beside Cohen to the left of the potted plants, falling on top of him, hitting his head on Cohen’s chin and thus knocking Cohen’s front tooth, leaving Keen with a scar on his forehead. Then Keen, trying to sit up, managed to knock heads with Cohen which sent Cohen stumbling into a professor from Harvard who in falling backwards got her skirt caught on a tiny nail which was sticking out of one of the stools gathered near the end of the bar leaving her in her underwear in the middle of twenty male professors who were shocked to see she was wearing any underwear at all since they all thought she was a radical feminist. The professors who’d been watching the melee between Cohen and Keen hadn’t separated the two because it took the professors the entire time Cohen and Keen were fighting to process what was happening. After all, as one professor who was there remembers, “Professors don’t act, we think.” This would explain why the hotel manager, when arriving with hotel security, was surprised to find all the professors looking at the two well-dressed men rolling around on the floor and the woman with no pants who was walking briskly toward the elevators as if none of it was happening. When he asked why they had done anything, the professors witnessing the fight had simply answered, “My God, but we did.”

The fight was seen by the quantum physicists who were having a conference of their own in the same hotel as a great example of physical law. “The first law,” one physicist remembers, “is a
body continues to maintain its state of rest unless acted upon by an external unbalanced force; the operative words being external and unbalanced. The second is force is equal to mass times acceleration; the operative words being mass and acceleration. And the third is that for every action there’s an equal and opposite action.” When asked if he meant reaction instead of action, the physicist responded by saying: “No, I mean action. You see humans never react. In other words, their actions aren’t necessarily based on another action. Thus the third law, at least where people are concerned, should be every action is simply an excuse for some other unrelated action to take place. You see people see their bodies as singular objects. They see them as these pure, unadulterated vials of potential energy, potential actions.”

This fight, and what this particular physicist said about the fight, is important considering the influence Keen had on Knight who, as a result of Keen’s influence, decided to begin what turned out to be his life-long investigation in how literature could be political. Specifically, Keen’s anger, his temper, was passed on to Knight, although Knight never actually got into a fist fight with anyone (it’s tough to say Keen did either considering the fight he had with Cohen). Knight, instead, seemed to internalize Keen’s anger, using it to radicalize his own investigations (specifically with what Knight did after the failure of his write-ins).

Knight didn’t only stage his series of “outs” after the failure of the “ins,” he also re-imagined his “ins.” In particular, Knight created the torture-in which, according to Knight, was a “radical new technique to really electrify the writing process.” The torture-in consisted of sitting down at a desk—“preferably a wooden desk with plenty of leg room”—in front of a computer (“or other writing instrument, be it a word processor, a typewriter, or pen and paper (‘torture unto itself,’ Knight said”) and writing (“I think a novel would be best since the novel form offers the most possibilities for suffering excruciating pain”). Even though it was very similar to the “write-outs,” the “torture-in” was different insofar as it required a needle to be inserted into the base of Knight’s skull which would send an electric shock to his brain every time he stopped writing. Knight had invented the process because he felt his inability to concentrate on his writing for no longer than ten minutes at a time was the reason his work wasn’t changing things. He felt the “electrical stimulus’ would “shock him out of his apathy” and into a “revolutionary fervor.”

Unfortunately, all the shocks did was to give Knight the very seizures that were, eventually, the cause of his death. Yet, even though it can be said with certainty now that Knight might have been misguided to some degree, these early “torture-ins” went a long way to advancing science’s understanding not only of writing, but of art in general, a subject science typically found, in one scientist’s words, “ridiculous and annoying. I’m not sure why they just don’t get a real job.”

Knight’s torture-in, because of the understanding it gave scientists about the artist’s process, could, in some ways, be considered Knight’s most political act (unfortunately, what the scientists learned was the result of the autopsy they performed on Knight, thankfully, after his death). What these scientists (veterinarians to be precise) found was nothing short of miraculous. They found not only that the human brain was, despite its similarities as far as intelligence, much larger than a dog’s brain, but that the electrical shocks did absolutely nothing to help Knight write. This discovery led them to assume that Knight was more of a masochist than he was a writer, enjoying the pain the electrical shocks caused him.

Yet, interestingly enough, this conclusion has since been revised. Now scientists believe that writing and masochism are one and the same and that writing is political in direct relation to
the pain it not only causes the author, but the pain it causes those who read what the author has written. In layman’s terms, writing and reading, as one scientist who was a scientist simply because both his father and brother were said, “really suck ass.” What he meant was that writing—especially creative writing—can really do nothing politically other than to get the creative writer into “deep, deep trouble. And even then,” this scientist writes, “if the author gets into trouble for his writing, it is not so much because of the writing itself, but because the author is ‘taking action’ and writing is simply the form that ‘action’ takes. What I mean is art’s capacity to be ‘political’ is more about context than it is about the art itself.”

And although Knight was not alive to refute that claim, several of Knight’s friends who were, of course, artists themselves, defended not only Knight but Knight’s desire to find in art some political capital. In particular, Knight’s longtime “lover,” Marguerite Sampras, wrote in the now-defunct *Art and Politics*: “Kurt understood that his writing, no matter what form it took was culled from society’s refuse. What I mean is that he understood how art was inextricably bound with business. You see artists don’t simply lock themselves away somewhere and work, they enter into the world like a diver into a stormy sea.” Unfortunately for both Knight and Sampras, the article was published long after the discoveries of the scientists working on Knight’s brain since Sampras was locked away in the top of a tower in an undisclosed location working “on a new project about the nature of God.”

Fortunately, Sampras wasn’t the only one of Knight’s “lovers” to come to Knight’s defense. Juan Ortiz Ortega, writer of the “underappreciated” novel *Love in the Time of Swine Flu*, found in Knight’s “dedication and ambition dedication and ambition.” For Ortega, Knight’s “sociopolitical commentary was reflective of the artist’s urge to be relevant. Unfortunately, Kurt wasn’t aware that artists don’t need to try so hard. Just by being creative,” Ortega continued, “artists are engaging with the world. They’re talking about things that aren’t talked about in everyday conversation. It’s consciousness-raising.” But when asked if things would be all that different if people weren’t having their consciousnesses raised, Ortega said he didn’t know because he didn’t hear the question.

Sampras and Ortega aside, what Knight was able to achieve was the stripping down of the artistic process. He was, in other words, able to recognize its sheer physicality— the motion of the arm, for example, in making the symbols which would be recognized as language, the sore neck, the aching back, the stiff legs all the result of working late into the night on the story that never seemed to end. He was able to acknowledge that part and parcel of writing was the gauzy teeth and oily face, the pounding headaches the result of looking too long at the computer screen. There is, Knight wrote in his novel *It’s Hurts When I Do This* and in its sequel *Well Then, Don’t Do That*, something in writing that is akin to the sit-in: “If you’ve participated in one, you’d know they’re absolutely awful. It’s typically too hot. You never get to sit next to the people you came with. You go for hours without eating or brushing your teeth. And, in the end, it’s not like you ever get anything accomplished. It sounds a lot like writing to me.” Knight’s dog Chester agreed: “I’ve never been to a protest but I have been around Kurt when he writes. Hours on end I’m sitting at his feet watching him do absolutely nothing. Once in a while he looks out the window, but most of the time he’s just typing away. I’d rather watch paint dry.”

Knight was able to see that if writing was going to be political, it was going to have to be within the writing itself. Anytime, he said, someone begins to talk about the writer’s life or their
intent, they’re not talking about writing anymore. Unfortunately, it was exactly statements like these that caused Knight not only to be disliked by the public who found him and his novels to be “pedantically boring,” but by his colleagues who found Knight to be “a pedantic bore.” “It’s not our job” said Alistair Wild, noted author of Rules to Live By, “to prescribe, but only to describe.” Another colleague, Arthur Avenue, author of Politics for Sissies—the twentieth book in a series that included Fascism for Sissies and Sissies for Fascism—said Knight’s political “program is both too weak and too dandified to be much use to anyone.” And although Avenue was an idiotic racist homophobe, he was right insofar as Knight’s name was Knight.

But perhaps the greatest criticism came from Knight’s longtime partner, Henrietta Stowe, political activist and popular lecturer, who came to conclude that “nothing Kurt said is all that interesting. I mean it’s not like I ever loved him, really. Come to think of it, I’m not sure why I was ever with him.” And when asked what she thought about Kurt’s political stance, she simply answered: “Kurt who?” Her quickness to separate herself from her longtime partner was most likely the result of the criticism Knight was getting from his colleagues, criticism Kurt himself was apparently very hurt by—“I’m not really sure why so many of my friends have been so quick to judge. My new ‘political stance,’ or so they call it, does tend to negate their entire life’s work, sure, but it also shows exactly how literature can be more effective. It at least gives us a start to understand how ‘literature’ works in our everyday life. I mean isn’t it possible that it doesn’t do anything if no one reads it? I mean the tree may fall in the forest, but who gives a shit?”

Unfortunately for Knight, his many justifications for why he was saying what he was saying fell, essentially, on deaf ears, and not only because most people stopped listening to him. Knight was, in other words, shunned. He was asked to leave Coleman. Friends who’d known him for twenty years stopped returning his phone calls. He was dropped by his publisher. Even stories he sent out under another name were somehow discovered to be written by Knight. When asked how they knew, editors said they could recognize Knight’s typewriting—“All of his letters are spaced evenly apart. All of his sentences end with a period. He typically places the noun before a verb in almost every sentence. It’s obvious.” And although Knight tried to disguise his writing by using public computers, it didn’t matter (and not only because he could only write for ten minutes at a time). Pretty soon, Knight’s opportunities for publication dried up and he was relegated to publishing on his own through leaflets and posters created on an old mimeograph machine he found in his father’s basement.

In some sense, Knight was happy about what happened since, he said, it got him “back in touch with how things used to be done. And maybe that’s what we need. Maybe we need to fall backwards instead of moving forward. Maybe we need to start over instead of just adding more and more to the great heap. Can there be too many voices? Were some people born to be quiet? Were some born to speak up? Maybe if we actually stuck our fingers in each other’s faces again, we could really do something. Maybe if we forced people to believe in what we believe, things would be O.K. Then again, none of this has to do with writing and, in the end, that’s all I really wanted to do.”
When it got so I didn’t know which route to take through the city anymore, only going one way hoping to see you, and the other to avoid hope, when it got so every head in the street was yours before it turned, when every movement outside a café window made me jump, and when at last I let them cut my phone off because I was nauseated every time it rang, I went to a travel agent and sat at her desk feeling grateful. It was the first time in a long while I had felt anything for anyone other than you. She smiled, overcharging me exorbitantly, and two days later I stepped into a city crowded with your absence.

I’d worked from nine to six those last days, riding down toward Notre Dame afterwards with no reason, until I saw the cathedral, and the closer I got, the better the light on the façade was. They’d finished cleaning it, and the sun went down over the river and I sat thinking, nothing in Paris is real, but at least with the cathedral they did it right and perfectly. Perfectly fake angels, perfectly fake demons, perfectly fake kings in perfectly scrubbed limestone, electrified to keep the pigeons from shitting on their perfectly fake faces. You and I had watched a show about how they electrified the heads of the kings on the portals.

In quarters where youth is everywhere in the streets, it’s easy to find beauty. That was ruin to me. After knowing you, I knew the men in the street were carefully constructed images, and the more careless they looked the more care they had used. I’d pass a boy on the sidewalk who looked a little like you, and could tell by the cut of his hair how long he primped in the morning, and had the knowing feeling that if I woke up beside him, his gestures would either be so calculatedly uncaring that it would annoy me, or else his turnings and caresses would ignite in myself that same fire of uncaring. No one is innocent in Paris. I will qualify that—or strengthen it, I’m not sure which—nothing is simple in Paris. Because Paris is memories, and memories are rarely simple. I will qualify that further—memories are rarely honest.

In this new city, buses sounded different. Menus were different. Coffee cups were bigger. People had different haircuts and clothes. There were less of those moments where my brain surged suddenly as a head turned on the sidewalk. For a while, I moved through this new city blind and deaf, as there was nothing to remind me of you.

—Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road, 13
Then one night, a man in a bar started talking. At first I didn’t turn my head to look, afraid I might hate him once I saw his eyes weren’t yours. But I listened to his voice, and later followed him outside, and then we were in a truck with a breeze coming through the open cab, rolling across a bridge with the lights of the city below us.

“I don’t think you want to do that,” he said, when I touched him, and that was how I knew. He was sick like you.

In the morning, for the first time in months, I knew where I was. Before I opened my eyes, it seemed you were beside me on one side of the bed, and he was on the other. “It’s my birthday,” he said.

I took him to a restaurant and had the waitress put a candle in his dessert. We got coffee and read about his stocks. On rainy days, we went to museums. We spent hours in a deep naugahide booth by the fireplace at the House of Chan. We raided convenience stores for Grape Bubble Yum at midnight, made love in the shower, climbed on his roof, watched the sunrise with his cat. He would drive me to work in the mornings. Before I got out, he would push his head to my chest as if I was something he could hide inside.

I deleted his emails systematically, with a pang of regret, to keep myself ready. I had never meant to stay in this city. Soon it was time to leave it.

Last days are always either hard or not. It started in an Italian restaurant. I was not looking at him to avoid crying. I watched his confusion sink from dumb hope to something more like embarrassment. Then we were searching for truths—we wanted everything out on the table. We were stretching the bounds of our subject, walking up and down the streets of Gastown in the rain. What he explained of himself seemed strange stories I knew, but had never heard. What I said sounded equally strange to him—he hardly listened, hardly knew what to make of it. We tried to explain ourselves, but it wasn’t the moment for explaining. The only moment it could be was the moment for platitudes. And so we reached the point of saying nothing. Later he would remember what I said and wonder at some unknown part of me that would already have changed by the time he remembered it. That’s how truth is, out of context.

“It’s not goodbye,” he said at the airport.

“No,” I said.

Whatever he saw when he looked at me, he would see it for a long time. He wrote to say he was painting the corner I used to write in, when he suddenly broke down crying. “Suddenly, just at noon, I was sure I had lost you,” he said. I counted the hours to verify his intuition, tabulating the exact moment he had. He sold his house and came to this city where your face no longer haunted other faces in the street. He wanted to travel, so we flew to another place, then to another, taking buses and ships, until we came to a sea rich in ruins.

A road wound to a city now disappeared, a weedy field. We climbed the top of the theatre and around the halls of a roofless stone bath. The more expensive bus companies were safer. But the cheap ones were faster. When the bus broke down, everyone got out to watch the driver repair the engine, somewhere with cliffs, a castle, and cave houses. The traditional greeting for tourists was “where are you from?”—street vendors and hawkers were everywhere, so you answered the question every ten feet as you walked. We had taken to saying “from hell,” but then they wanted to know where that was. We walked through a necropolis, swam in a radioactive Roman thermal bath in our underwear. He lost the guidebook and we wandered through countrysides where we didn’t
speak the language, taking pictures of each other in ruins. A Russian shepherd led us through the hills. At Priene, with its pine needles, I hiked up the hill and found him alone at the temple of Demeter, crouched by the pit where the offerings were thrown. The fields below the ruined city were on fire. A dull blur of yellow lit the tall grass, like light through a sea-washed bottle.

There were cities of every sort: flooded cities, dried up cities, earthquaked cities, burned cities, trampled cities. In Aphrodisias, the temple was closed. You could stay in the historic part of the hotel, the owner said, or you could stay in the part with electricity. We took the historic part and a few extra blankets, applying Oscar Wilde’s advice for drinking absinthe at the restaurant: After one glass, you see things as you want them to be. After two, you see them as you don’t. After three you see them as they are, which is the worst of all. A man at the next table told us a story: A woman is promised to a man, comes home to see her father before they are married and is blinded, then goes back and marries him. We stepped out under the sky into the silence of the town.

“Is it you?” wrote a voice from long ago.
“Where are you?” I asked.

When I had your answer, I walked up the hill to the citadel and sat on my bags watching the sun set over the cliffs of the old city. The air was full of little gusts of the cheap fuel they burn here in the narrow pink streets. Children were flying kites as the sun moved across the hills. I put him on a bus, stood watching the snowflakes fly in the headlights. He sat close to the window, watching me. “Those last days together,” he wrote, “I was sure you had met someone else.”

The highway to the airport goes through a gaping hole in the Byzantine wall. On the other side of the sea, I checked into a hotel and waited. It had been raining. The wallpaper showed dark patches. Above the mattress, the sun shone through the marble windowsill, and I thought of Venetians polishing a sheet of alabaster so thin you could use it for church windows.
Valerie Vogrin

This is the story

Melody is drooling, her left cheek pressed against the bus window. She sleeps. She is sleepy all the time. She knows but does not want to know that she is pregnant again. The bus rumbles down Montlake. She awakens with a jolt: her baby boy is drowning.

She knows. She left Andy at home with Max and Max is drunk and he’s forgotten Andy in the tub and Andy is drowning.

Daycare had been out of the question—Andy woke that morning with a fever—and Madeline had made it clear that taking another day off work was not acceptable, and Max has been doing better since she let him move back in, only temporarily, until he gets his feet on the ground—at least Max certainly wanted to prove himself. He dutifully marked the want ads in the paper with checks, check-plusses, and poignant exclamation points. He changed the oil in her worthless car, and did laundry at the good Laundromat, not the crappy close-by one, but nevertheless, Andy is drowning.

She yanks the bus cord. Her stop is still three stops ahead but she can run faster than the bus can cover the distance in this traffic. She’s across the white line and down the steps before the driver can scold her.

She wills herself into sheer movement. She hurtles toward the ugly blue house, the hideous paint color and shoddy paint job—the landlord painted around the bushes pressing against the house rather than trimming them—that shouts poor people live here!

She doesn’t feel sorry for herself, not even in this terror.

She’s already reached her regular bus stop. She runs past Pete, the blind banjo player, not hearing his humph at her not acknowledging him with a hello and fifty cents or a dollar dropped in the banjo case. She ducks into the Honda lot, zigzagging through the aisles of cars. She whacks her elbow, hard, on a silver Accord’s side mirror.

She’s almost there. Her baby is drowning.

You want this story to be the story in which Melody is a guilt-ridden, fear-filled woman who shouldn’t have trusted Max with a load of whites much less her child, a disastrously fertile woman with an affinity for men who resist being saved even as they believe that being saved is their destiny, a woman whose imagination has run away with her, as impetuous as the dish and the spoon.

She takes the four stairs two at a time. For some reason the mailbox is sitting in front of the door and the door is ajar and Max is snoring on the couch and her baby is in the tub and the bubbles are gone and he is blue. His dark eyes look up at her through four inches of unfathomable water.

She screams at Max to call 9-1-1.

She lifts Andy from the cool water and sets him on the nubby yellow bathmat. She tilts his head back with one hand and tips his chin slightly with the other. His body is so still.
She presses her mouth over his nose and mouth and exhales one tiny breath. His chest raises. His chest lowers, but he is not breathing. She gives him another very small breath.

_This could work_, she thinks. It feels right to have her lips pressed to her baby’s skin.

“What is it?” Max hollers. Then he’s standing in the bathroom doorway holding the phone. His brown plaid shirt is mis-buttoned by one. She can tell he can’t make sense of what he sees exactly, but he stumbles down the hall and she hears him talking into the phone. _Baby. Drowned._

Next, thirty chest compressions. She counts. Help is on its way.

Thirty is a magic number now. Not like when she took the class at the Red Cross and wanted to ask the instructor _why not twenty-nine or thirty-one?_

Max is sobbing. “What have I done?” he says.

This is the story in which she will never have an answer for that question.

She wants her baby to breathe, she wants his body to get warmer. She thinks, _this isn’t working._ She gives him two more small breaths and begins the compressions again. There’s hard knocking on the front door, Max’s frantic voice, heavy footsteps. 

_It makes no sense to her when the paramedics take his body away. Take me instead, _she wants to say, though of course this makes no sense either. _His body is a splendid vessel._

This is the story in which the new baby will hold her in this world against her will.

Andy is drowned. As long as Max is crying she can’t cry.

She needs to pull out the plug and follow the paramedics outside, but the water in the tub won’t stop moving. Andy’s red and yellow plastic boat bobs in the water, sloshing this way and that.
Lisa Norris

The Danger is Hardly Greater

Martin was a beanpole who wore his blond hair below his ears and had a thick moustache. He was not jokey like some of the others, but serious and controlled, which made me feel nervous. The inside of his small pickup was uncluttered. He’d hung the dress-up shirt for his intended night out in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, on my side of the cab. As we drove out of Rock Springs toward Pinedale on Highway 191, I was anxious about messing up his truck, and that no doubt led to the shaky hand that toppled my soda onto that nice shirt, causing him to curse and pull the truck off the road.

He got out, shook the liquid from the shirt, and wiped it down with water he had in a bottle in the back of the pickup. The shirt was cowboy style, with yokes in front and back and pearly snaps on the pockets and cuffs. I was not used to being around men who cared about their wardrobes, and the shirt seemed sissy to me, as did his fussiness about the spilled drink. Still, I was sorry, and I apologized.

“It’s all right,” he said, avoiding eye contact in a way that told me it wasn’t.

After that, I thought it was better if I didn’t say anything. We rode in silence as the two-lane took us out of the treeless desert and farther from I-84 with its stink of exhaust, into the terrain that rose up around us until finally there was a greening of trees and brush, a marching of evergreens down from the slopes toward the road, a ruggedness dominated by boulders and serrated mountaintops. I forgot about Martin’s disapproval, and watched antelope appear and disappear in small herds, marveled at the ribbon of blue river next to the highway. Finally we reached a high mountain lake where Martin dropped me off at the trailhead with scarcely a goodbye. I wondered if he’d keep his promise to pick me up there the next day.

For the first time in my life, I was truly alone, dependent only on my own resources—no mother to call me to safety, or father, employer or big brother to stand between me and whoever might wish me harm. It was Friday evening, and low clouds threatened a thunderstorm. I ate a mouthful of Granola, then hoisted my pack and ventured up the bouldery trail where something buzzed the way I imagined rattlesnakes. I leapt to avoid it. Then heard it again. There were so many of these buzzes, I decided they must be insects, but each time I heard one, I hustled to the next rock just in case.

I was eighteen, far from my home in Virginia Beach, Virginia, following my ambition and desire for independence in my first summer job with the federal government. I’d been hired as the fire dispatcher for the Bureau of Land Management in Rock Springs. In the BLM yard, two shabby trailers sat up on blocks in the backyard of the office at the edge of town. These were essentially
bunkhouses, though less stable than real structures might have been in the relentless wind. Surrounded by chalky dry buttes and hills at the edge of a treeless area along I-84 east of Rock Springs, the trailers, outbuildings and office were enclosed by high chain link fences with barbed wire stretched across the top, as if we were in a prison compound.

Planning my summer in 1976, I’d looked at the map, noticed Rock Springs’ proximity to Jackson Hole, and remembered pictures of the Tetons. I’d imagined myself among the gorgeous toothy peaks looking down on the glittering Snake River in the wild valley. I’d had no idea Rock Springs was, in fact, barren and industrial, that its red light district had provided material for the news show “Sixty Minutes,” and that it was infamous in history for a massacre of Chinese coal miners by whites in 1885, a race riot that prompted a New York Times writer to say, “The appropriate fate for a community of this kind would be that of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

To me—a sheltered, upper middle class, still-virginal girl who prayed every day and read the Bible—Rock Springs did seem like a Sodom and Gomorrah. When I drove into town in a government car to collect the mail every day, I crossed the railroad tracks into a seedy district where, though I did not then know the history, I would not have been surprised by reports of prostitution and gambling and drugs. I felt endangered and was glad to find letters for myself everyday in that P.O. box—lifelines from home and from a boyfriend in Virginia who was a steady communicator.

Every day, wind rocked the trailer where I lived, and one night, I heard the men on the other side of my closed door discussing what they’d like to do with me. “I just want to cop a feel,” said one. I sat on the mattress, arms tight around my belly as if to protect myself, then remembered that because my father had called—insistent as ever from 2,500 miles away—our mutual employer had made my trailer mates install a lock on my door. I’d been embarrassed, but now I was glad for the hardware. I tiptoed to my bedroom door and turned the lock. Still I lay awake on my one article of furniture—the mattress on the floor—knowing it would not be a difficult lock to force.

Between the disappointing landscape, the banality of my job and the threats to my safety, despite my new income and the lock on my door, I wanted out. At the BLM office, looking at the maps, I concocted the idea of a solo backpack trip in the mountains 100 miles distant. I’d convinced my co-worker Martin, one of the older men who seemed relatively benign, whose shirt I’d now soiled with my drink, to give me a ride.

After he dropped me at the trailhead, I hiked a couple of miles in, and stood on a bluff overlooking another pristine mountain lake. Two men in cowboy hats were packing up their fishing gear, heading along the trail toward what looked to me like a good campsite. When they got close enough, one of them said, “You better turn around before that storm hits.”

“I’ll be spending the night.”

The two men glanced at each other uneasily. “Got a good tent?”

“A tarp.” I didn’t tell them I’d never set it up before, but my inexperience must have been obvious.

The shorter one put down his fishing rod. “We’ll put it up for you.”
I pulled the tarp out of my backpack. The men took over, and I stepped back in a way that had become usual for me. Men always seemed to know better. I always stepped back. My father’s lock on the trailer door was a case in point. They tied the tarp to a tree in a sideways V, with a log on top to hold the bottom of the V in place, so that I could both lie down on the tarp and use it as a roof.

“That ought to hold in the wind,” said the shorter man before the two of them wished me luck and hurried off to get ahead of the storm. I barely had time for another fistful of Granola before the weather hit. Then, the only thing between the lashing rain and me was that layer of plastic. Beyond the blue roof, wind tossed the pine branches overhead, and the rain came down in liquid spikes. I lay beneath my tarp praying and singing, as the water gathered in sagging pockets just above my chest. The air crackled with electricity; and thunder warned with close, violent explosions that lightning might solder earth to sky. I did not know then how commonly lightning ignites Western forests, and have since heard of people being electrocuted when they slept in puddles of water inside their tents. The men had deliberately placed me under a tree that was lower than the others and less likely to attract lightning. I would not have known how to set up the tarp so expertly. Even so, the ceiling came down closer to my face with the weight of rain. My muscles knotted. I’d brought along a tape player, and I listened to an audio letter my Virginia boyfriend—a man I would marry too soon and divorce years later—had spoken into his own recorder at home. I played his voice over and over.

I was trapped again, this time in the doorless and unpeopled wilderness. No locks kept out the wind and rain. I thought of John Muir who clung like a bobolink on a reed 100 feet up in the branches of a tree on a ridge so he could experience a windstorm. He wrote, *The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves . . . [f]or on such occasions Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof.* Unlike Muir, I was not exhilarated, but wet, cold, and frightened. Whereas he had previously experienced wilderness on his own and knew the physics of the trees intimately enough to be sure of his own safety, I had no idea whether the pines under which I’d staked my tarp would hold or fall on me during the storm. Each explosion of thunder was so close it shook the ground, and the accompanying lightning lit my tiny nest with an electric fire that I feared would fry me.

In the morning, though, when I rolled out gratefully from under the wet tarp, the rain-washed scenery glittered in sunlight. The mountain opposite my camp—a granite face stippled white and dark with light and shadow, scree and boulders—reflected perfectly on the lake’s surface in the windless quiet. The heat on my face and shoulders felt as marvelous as a warming fire to a victim of hypothermia. I closed my eyes and turned my face up to the cloudless sky, still as a lizard on my boulder-seat near the lakeshore. Never before had I experienced such silence. It lulled me into a trance.

Hearing a splash, I startled awake to see a bull moose, not a hundred yards from my camp, plunge into the lake. It paddled to the opposite shore like a gigantic dog, head and antlers held high, climbed onto the gravelly bank, shook, and disappeared into the trees. Now I began to feel the sensations I’d come looking for. I had shed the layers of brick, wood, chain link, barbed wire that normally kept me at a distance. The moose had been given only to me—for there were no other
spectators—and I laughed out loud, raised my palms and said thank you, not because—as in a church—I had been told I should, but because I could not help myself.

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When I returned to the BLM trailer, my housemates expressed no interest in what I’d done. As usual, they went out to a bar and came home drunk; so once again I locked myself in the room with its single high window and lay on the mattress on the floor. Now I was not so much fearful, however, as resigned to waiting out the danger. To cheer myself, I spread out my newly-developed photographs of the lake where I’d camped. My backpack, still smelling of smoke, was propped against one wall. This was an era before the advent of self-timers or digital cameras, so there was nothing human in the photographs. Considering those images—pines sprung back to straight, conical shapes after the storm—I felt the wind, a constant in the treeless area around the BLM, rocking the trailer differently. It was an agent of change that, pressing against the metallic walls, didn’t find the same elastic quality of tree branches, but instead pounded the structure like waves on a shoreline, threatening to break it apart.

I got out my Wyoming map. I’d only experienced a fingernail’s width on the many inches of uninhabited terrain marked as Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management or National Park Service land in the state, and much of it was within 100 miles of my trailer. I imagined other lakeshores where I could be the only camper. More solo moments with moose and other wildlife, under my tarp, in the weather.

A few weeks and another camping trip later, in the wee hours of the morning before I was to fly back to Virginia, my trailer mates had thrown a party, and the tiny living room of our metallic home was crowded with beer-drinking BLM workers. The trailer began to rock, though there was no wind, and we all looked at each other in confusion, until we understood that one of the residents had taken a girl into his room, where he’d apparently begun to have sex with her in an athletic way that rocked the whole structure. My co-workers rolled their eyes, and a few of us went outside to escape the embarrassment.

In the yard, under the moon, I found Raymond, the heavy-lidded young man who’d wanted to cop a feel. By now Raymond had figured out that I was a good girl with a boyfriend back East, but even so, he stood too close, looking down—for he was a head taller—into my eyes. Now I noticed the soft black hair falling in thick waves to his shoulders, high cheekbones tapering toward a handsome chin, eyes that—in memory, at least, were green with thick, dark lashes, the irises glazed from beer and pot. Around us, the barbed wire kept the coyotes and criminals out—at least those who were not employed by the BLM. Broken glass, used condoms, tampons, toilet paper, and wrappers littered the dirt roads outside the BLM compound, where people rutted the soil with motorcycles and dirt bikes. I’d been advised not to walk alone out there, though I had, of course.

As I stood before Raymond at the end of that summer, no doors between us, I no longer cowered. Instead I kissed him—no, I didn’t just kiss him. It would be more accurate to say we made out. He tasted of marijuana, sweet and smoky.

“You’re really leaving tomorrow?” He looked at me with eyes that did not focus.
I nodded, then turned back to the trailer, understanding that he was too stoned to follow. The music had softened, and most of the partiers had dispersed. Sodom and Gomorrah or not, revelers got sleepy. I entered my tiny room, where I could see a sliver of moon out the high window. I did not lock the door. I lay on my mattress thinking of Muir swaying in the branches and drifted off to the sound of wind.
Marguerite’s Monument

"In every age, people are certain that only the things they have deemed valuable have true value."
—Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History*

Salt

Dover, Arkansas 1964: There was a parade, the mayor came out to do the dedication. Reporters arrived early and were scheduled to follow Marguerite down to the spring afterward. It was a show, the installation of this cast iron pot, because Marguerite lived that way. She was a playwright, a writer of romances, and now an amateur archeologist. There was just one more detail, before the parade started from the school grounds and rolled the block and a half to the town square where the pot sat solidifying in a bed of concrete, draped under a sheet. She needed salt.

South of the square stood a row of storefronts, the bank, the variety, the grocery. Marguerite made her way across the street, toward the grocery, the last item on her list glaring at her like sun through the dust rising up from the street. It was July, the air sticky like wet smoke. People were already lining the street, watching the preparations for the dedication. She walked toward a man standing outside the grocery, hands stuffed in his pockets. She moved slow on her three-inch heels, so that when she waved at her accomplice, she looked like she was trying to keep her balance.

He knew her, so he waved back.

“Did you get it?” Breathless, worried, wound up Marguerite knew everything hinged on this final theatric.

“In my truck. You want me to go down there now?”

The man tried to look nonchalant, tried to tell himself that Marguerite’s trust would be kept by the man behind the counter in the grocery, his clerk, and the two or three other folks who suspected the truth about the cast iron pot. They probably already knew the truth about the salt spring—it was fresh as lake water. But there was always the chance someone would blab to a reporter or two and ruin the show. Salt springs dried up all the time and went fresh, but try convincing a newspaper man of that. It was a small detail, some reporters way of convincing himself that Marguerite, who didn't have anything resembling a History degree, could successfully trace the origins of an artifact belonging to Pope County's most famous long-dead resident, Sequoyah, the man who developed the modern Cherokee alphabet.

“Yes. Go and get back before the parade starts. You have an hour or so. Hurry.”

Marguerite always stood too close, leaned in too far, breathed too hard. She was brash and skittish, a flash of lightning. In the middle of this deception, she told herself there was really no
reason to worry. There was a spring, the pot was found nearby, Sequoyah lived near the spring and
appears to have owned it. The records told her that. It was a matter of deduction, connecting dots
on a map. Pouring salt in the spring was just a historical recreation. Still, she had to do it, so that all
the pieces of the story came together neatly. There was high drama lurking all around Dover, and
all over Arkansas, buried in the historical record. If Marguerite could just get the public to
understand that, the way she did, she might finally get someone to pay attention to her writing. She
might be able to do something with herself besides type the correspondence of powerful men.

Marguerite was not just a secretary. She was one of “those who give tirelessly of their time
and unselfishly of their efforts in order to bring to the people of Arkansas a more profound
understanding of the beauty God has placed in man.” She dedicated her book on the legend of Petit
Jean to people like herself, who saw that the people of Arkansas needed to understand the beauty of
art. Marguerite tried to help by writing histories, full of scoundrels and lovers, heroes and villains,
royalty and peasants, and all of it, somehow, connected to this backwoods state, or this little hick
town of hers. She thought of Petit Jean, the French girl who died for love, on the mountain that
now bears her name. Petit Jean was the perfect example of how Marguerite felt about Sequoyah.
She thought about what she'd written about the girl, “To those who dare live each hour fully and
completely, joyously accepting the gifts life presents with a blythe disregard for the unsurrendered
secrets…To those, Petit Jean gambled and won all that life could give.” Sequoyah was no different,
she thought, it’s just that his passions ran to the linguistic.

The rest of the town knew there was something off-kilter about this parade, this show in the
middle of summer, this huge ugly pot with a crack in one lip, this woman in high heels and full
makeup and perfect hair with a pearl chocker around her neck. The boys that sat on the curb,
picking at scabs on their knees, never heard of Sequoyah, never thought about Dover as anything
more than a farming town so Baptist they outlawed dancing. But they knew Marguerite, they knew
she was a conundrum. Their mother's whispered behind their hands about her, told the boys to stay
away from her house, to politely step aside when she walked past them in town. They said, “don't
look her in the eye.”

The salt was poured. Marguerite stood on a rickety wooden stage and told the story:
Sequoyah moved to Arkansas around 1823, a year after he finished his work on a Cherokee
alphabet. He lived on the Illinois Bayou River, two miles north of Scottsville, six miles north of
Dover. He began and finished the project in Alabama, where he moved from his birthplace in
Tennessee. The alphabet elevated Sequoyah from lame silversmith to statesman. He became a
dinner-party celebrity in Washington. Six years after he revealed his alphabet, Sequoyah signed a
treaty with the U.S. government, The Treaty of Washington, which moved the Cherokee further
west, into Oklahoma, ten years before the Trail of Tears. It explains his ownership of a salt-spring
or "saline":

…five hundred dollars for the use of George Guess, another Cherokee, for the
great benefits he has conferred upon the Cherokee people, in the beneficial results
which they are now experiencing from the use of the Alphabet discovered by him,
to whom also, in consideration of his relinquishing a valuable saline, the privilege
is hereby given to locate and occupy another saline.
This pot was found half buried in a field near where Sequoyah lived. It had previously been used as a watering trough for cattle. Now, it has been restored to a place of honor, where it can show every citizen of Dover and every visitor the importance of history.

The mayor read his dedication. He read the plaque officially designating the cast iron blemish on the Dover town square. Reporters snapped pictures and the air got heavier, as it does, when the day shifts into afternoon. A caravan drove to Scottsville and then to a cow field along the river. Marguerite lead the way, picking across cow patties in her heels, talking.

“I knew the pot was out here for a long time but I didn't make the connection until I read the treaty…”

The photographer readied his camera while the reporter took a tin cup from Marguerite and dipped it into the spring. Yes, he confirmed, salt water. He drove back to town to write it all down as fact.

The bronze plaque engraved with Sequoyah's name grew a deep green patina.

**Story**

When I was a teenager, maybe younger, my mother said: Marguerite had a map of De Soto's travels across Arkansas. It was original, drawn on parchment in faded ink, the work of one of De Soto's scribes, or maybe, the man himself. How she came across the map, no one knows. No one knows what it looks like, either, because she refused to show it to anyone. As a matter of fact, *National Geographic* got wind of the map and wanted to take pictures of it, write a story. But they only got as far as Marguerite's front step, where she told them she'd talk about it but no one, ever, was going to see the map.

My grandmother said: “She was always different, but she had hard parents. They made her stay right there with them all their lives. She took care of them until they died.”

My father said: “They never said why we should stay away from her. They just insinuated there was something deviant, something sexual going on there that we should keep away from.”

Marguerite said: Her first husband beat her, so she left him. Not long after, she took a lover, an Air Force Colonel who lived in Texas and flew up to see her two or three times a year. When her brother found out about the affair, he convinced his family to commit her to the state hospital in Little Rock. There she stayed, for seven or eight months, languishing with the insane and the infirm, swallowing pills on a schedule and waiting in line for meals. One day she found a telephone in a broom closet and managed to call the Colonel, who flew to Little Rock that night and helped her escape.

My grandfather said: “They came and bought a hundred pounds of salt from me that morning.”

This is what I saw: Marguerite walking across the square to the supermarket in the middle of July. Baby blue eye shadow smeared over every inch of her eyelids, mascara so thick she looked like a china doll, pearls around her neck, her blond wig whipping in the wind, her ankle-length fur coat clasped over her chest. Underneath she wore a nightgown, or a summer dress so thin I could see through it. I stood at the front of the store, waiting, while my grandparent's worked. I was
eleven or twelve. She bought a can of tuna fish and paid with one wrinkled dollar. I watched her coat fall away and reveal her spotted skin.

This is the last image of Petit Jean in Marguerite’s book: “The late sun flung out the dark shadow of the mountain across the wheatfields. A herd of buffalo grazed on a green meadow far below. the willows at the river bend swayed back and forth in the breeze. A nameless melody from Baptiste Dardenne’s flageolet came from the mountain top and floated out across the vast expanse. The two figures were there, against the sunset, looking out at the sky and the valley and the river, and never speaking.”

Love

I don’t know how it happened for Marguerite, this seduction by the idea of Sequoyah—maybe when she first became aware of the salt spring. For me it was an accident, a fact-check gone wrong. I was writing the history of the Dover Supermarket, my grandfather’s business and now my uncle’s. The Bartons and their relatives have been in the grocery business in Pope County for more than seventy years. I started with the store itself, the land it stood on, the town square. This was once the town school, before that it was the court house, before that a stretch of buckeyes along the lowlands near the Illinois Bayou.

The salt-pot arrived in an interim, when the square was nothing but a patchy stretch of grass and the ruins of the burnt school building and before it became the supermarket, with its steel walls and glass façade. I figured that out from the plaque, erected three years before the grocery. I took notes on the shape of the building, on the cars in the parking lot, on the people coming in and out of the front doors. I read the plaque and made the important notations—Sequoyah—Scottsville—Salt Spring. The idea really was irresistible, a beautiful coincidence. A huge pot, found near a spring, near a place where a famous man once lived and ran a saline. I knew it was ridiculous, sentimental, simplistic and definitely made a mountain out of a historical mole hill, but I couldn't help it. It would have been a fantastic piece of trivia to know that Sequoyah did once live here. If this really was his salt pot, it would be something tangible, something real that connected the town directly and immediately to its own history. Someone could at least build a roof.

I asked around town for someone who could tell me the history of pot. How did it get there? Who was responsible? My grandfather told me, “It was Marguerite. That was one of her projects. You should ask her about it, though I don't know if you can get any good information out of her.” But it was late in my summer vacation and I didn't have time to arrange an interview with Marguerite, which I knew would take a day or more. Maybe two. I drove back to Kansas.

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I began to read. I discovered that Sequoyah’s life is a mystery, too, if only because his biographers give such contradictory accounts of his life. He was born in what is now Tennessee to a Cherokee mother and a white father—given the “white” name of George Guess. Many biographers
believe his father was well-known frontiersman Nathaniel Gist. Sequoyah grew up without his father around, helping his mother run a small dairy. He was probably born with his lame foot though he could have injured it farming or fighting in the war of 1812. Some sources claim his name means “pig’s foot” which may indicate he always lived with his limp. According to Stan Hoig's biography Sequoyah: The Cherokee Genius, this injury would have excluded him from "the accepted methods of achievement within a tribe as a hunter or warrior." Instead, he turned to working silver, which earned him a reputation as a highly skilled artist. He was able to ride a horse, though, and fought in the war of 1812 as part of the cavalry. He didn't learn to speak English until much later in life, and had no formal schooling, and so was himself illiterate before he began to create his famous syllabry. This is the fact that has amazed white observers of Sequoyah's life since the day he first revealed his alphabet. How does a person, who has no ability to write in any language, figure out the concept of an alphabet, much less create one? These observers don’t, of course, give the Cherokee or Sequoyah enough credit.

No one knows exactly why he decided the Cherokee needed their own alphabet because he gave more than one answer to the question. Some say he noticed that the whites were able to get a lot more done because of their ability to write down their thoughts. Some say he was encouraged by a white neighbor to learn to sign his name to his silverwork, which inspired the alphabet. Some say he was distressed that the Cherokee people could not keep their own history, and therefore sometimes lost valuable knowledge. In 1822, he presented his invention to Cherokee leaders in Tennessee. By 1823 there was an official Cherokee-language newspaper. Missionaries were busy translating the Bible.

Sequoyah left all this to move west across the Mississippi River into what is now Pope County. The “Western” Cherokee actually moved into an area that had been part of their hunting grounds since the mid-18th century. Some sources say that moving to Arkansas put Sequoyah on the wrong side of his compatriots in Georgia, who felt the move was a sign of weakness, an unwillingness to stand their ground against the whites encroaching faster and faster into their lands in the east. Other sources point out that Sequoyah was a strong Cherokee nationalist, and may have wanted to escape the influence of whites as much as possible.

Like my own ancestors, and Marguerite's ancestors, who started settling the Arkansas River Valley only two decades later, the Western Cherokee found the barely-populated wilderness a more attractive living arrangement than the socially oppressive east, despite the Osage threat north of Fort Smith and the Whites south of Morrilton—and despite the isolation. The Arkansas River wasn't a truly navigable waterway until the 1960's, when Albert Einstein's son figured out the best way to get a barge north of Fort Smith was to rebuild the river from the bed up. Roads were another story entirely—muddy and rut-riddled at best, non-existent at worst. Before Sequoyah got anywhere near the Ozarks, he had to travel a tricky river upstream on wood rafts or walk through two hundred miles of swamp, cane break and impossible mud holes. Either way he suffered swarms of mosquitoes and oppressive heat. It was such a difficult journey that one early 19th century visitor said, “Arkansas is not part of the world for which Jesus Christ died--I want none of it.”

Salt was as precious in the Arkansas Territory, important enough that the government tired to strictly control the use of local sources, usually naturally occurring salt springs. Getting a permit to operate a salt-making enterprise was highly competitive and a sore spot between the Western Cherokee and the few white residents of the area between 1819 and 1836. The cast iron pot itself
was a huge expense, because it had to be shipped from the east or from New Orleans by boat and then, presumably, horse power. Dover's salt pot is four feet in diameter. If Sequoyah owned a salt-making business, as the Treaty of Washington tells us, he had to have had plenty of money and support to run it. Daniel Littlefield writes in his essay “The Salt Industry in Arkansas Territory, 1819-1836,” that just setting up a salt-works required, “much labor and capital outlay…and a large labor force, consisting mainly of slaves, was necessary to maintain the operation.”

No one mentions Sequoyah owning slaves or, for that matter, having much money. No sources indicate his life was at all extraordinary before the alphabet. The spring at Scottsville was small. Production couldn't have been very large. All I learned from all this research was what Marguerite knew what must have been true. If he lived at that spot at Scottsville, he had to have at least been in the vicinity of Dover. It's possible he could have stood on the spot of land where square stands now.

But something wasn't entirely right. The plaque struck me as odd. No cultural or historical group claimed credit for installing the salt pot on the square. No dates were given for Sequoyah's presence in Dover. There was no governmental entity I could consult to check the validity of the salt pot. What it if was used for making soap? Or washing clothes? The year before I'd seen a woman up the hills near Mt. Judea, Arkansas boiling water in a cast-iron cauldron just like this, washing her clothes with a stick and lye soap. Who says this is even a salt pot, much less Sequoyah's salt pot? What expert carbon-dated the iron flakes or deciphered a serial number or maker's mark rusted into lumps on the lip? And if the salt-spring was near Scottsville, why was it here and not there?

This was all conjecture. I needed to talk to Marguerite.

She opened the door dressed in a faded floral silk sun-dress, pearls, full make-up, bare feet. She gave me the most comfortable chair in the house— a high-backed wicker lounger—and took for herself the piano bench. Marguerite moved like a dancer, even in her eighties, like someone who felt entirely free dressed only in her own skin. She sat for only a few minutes at a time, hopping up every other sentence to dig through filing cabinets and cardboard boxes, looking for pictures, manuscripts, letters to prove the stories she told.

She talked for three hours, starting at the beginning— her birth in Russellville to a banker and a strict mother, Marguerite grew into a girl so intelligent and beautiful that she had to be carefully watched, her movements controlled. I sat and listened, my tape recorder humming next to me, while Marguerite told every one of her stories: The parents, the bad marriage, the State Hospital, the Colonel. She told me about working as a secretary for a bauxite company in Little Rock, for a real estate company in Russellville. She wrote for Arkansas history magazines and organization newsletters. She began to write novels about Arkansas history—one about Sequoyah, another about Petit Jean, another about the life of Lee Barnes, the last man hung in Dover. She established a group of three or four local women who dreamed big—a plot of land near Dover dedicated to the memory of the Western Cherokee, complete with an amphitheater, a museum, and historical recreations.

She sat down at the piano and played me a tune she wrote herself. The song recasts Bill and Hillary Clinton as being from Bullfrog Valley—an even more isolated spot north of Dover, on Big Piney Creek. It was a raucous love story, with Bill pining after a Hillary, who played hard to get.
I never got around to asking about the salt pot. As soon as I mentioned it, she launched into a long explanation of how she worried about it all the time, even though it was perfectly safe with my grandfather looking over it. After it was installed, she told me, she worried about boys from the hills coming to town, chaining the pot to the back of a pickup, and dragging it off into the woods as a joke. She begged one of the local businessmen to pay for a seven-foot chain link fence to protect it from vandals. By then, of course, the story of Marguerite salting the spring had spread through town. The business-man refused. The scenario Marguerite presented was so specific it sounded to him like an overblown day-dream. But she was persistent, loud, impossible to avoid. The fence went up.

The lock that chains the gate has rusted there for forty years.

History

This was what was left, on a Saturday afternoon, when the auction company sold her house six months after her death: two chest of drawers, a dining room table, half a dozen paintings, boxes and boxes of dishes, clothes, knick knacks, silverware. I went to the auction looking for a specific box, a box of novel manuscripts and essays and failed autobiographies. Mr. Robinson, Marguerite's old friend and now heir, promised me he will let me arrange the papers later, if he could find them. Until the day of the auction, no one seemed to know where Marguerite's papers went. I had been worrying about her papers since she died. I sent polite e-mails to both parties involved in the dispute over the deed to her house. She was so poor at the end of her life that she promised the deed to anyone who might loan her a few thousand dollars. I said, “I don't want them for my own gain. I simply want to restore them, put them in some kind of order. I believe that Ms. Turner kept relatively accurate records of the history of Dover. She's been the town historian for decades, even if she worked in an unofficial capacity. It would be a tragedy if her papers were thrown away.”

Standing there among the decoration of her life, I was desperate to save—something, her papers, her? I don't know. I began to circle the other buyers like suspicious dogs, I dug through boxes, I asked people if they’ve seen any papers. Just papers. Manuscripts, maybe? Across the lawn from me four or five women hovered over a box of photographs, picking out black and white pictures and whispering—somewhere in there was a snap-shot of their ancestors. I got so paranoid, I thought I saw one of the women slip the photograph in her pocket.

Then the bubble burst. The manuscripts were found and removed, quietly, from the boxes on the lawn. Mr. Robinson nodded at me kindly, we'd talk later. My attention shifted to the photographs. If I was going to take something to savor, to mull over, to keep for myself despite my protestations to the contrary, it might as well be something I could learn from. I paid $100.00 for the box, outbidding the town historical society.
Sex

I didn't even try to imagine who the photographer might have been.

This didn't come up until later, when I whispered about it to my mother who conjectured, “Could it have been that old man she lived with for a while?”

No, I knew for sure, Marguerite took them of herself. I don't know how I knew this. I just insisted on it, instantly, because I couldn't imagine anything else.

“Could be,” My mother tells me, “But why?”

For the same reason, I wanted to tell her, that I took a Polaroid of my own breasts and used it as a template to make a painting in shades of blue—a gift for my husband, a celebration of my own body. But I was not eighty years old and single and living alone in the center of town with a pile of unpublished novels and a mountain of unpaid debt. I was the opposite of that. Newly married, about to finish graduate school, talking about having children. But I didn't say anything to my mother, who would understand but would still dismiss it. She'd heard the story about Marguerite calling my grandfather to come fix her plumbing and opening the door stark naked except for her wig and her signature string of pearls.

In secret, when no one was around to catch me and question me, I sat with one of the photographs and tried to decipher them. Here she lounged across the couch, arms flung above her head, eyes looking way from the camera. Her breasts rested against her ribcage lightly, her legs long and shapely. Only her face revealed her age entirely: gray bags under her eyes, the way the skin folded around her mouth. Here was a photograph of the top of her bare legs, neatly shaved. A white lace gown barely covered her crotch. In this one, she’s surrounded by fat Arkansas crystals laid out on the bed around her. She must have had a tripod, I decided, she must have taken these with a timer.

But there was no tripod in her effects when they were laid out in boxes and on tables by the auction company. Just a box of pictures of everything Marguerite ever loved—her sitting next to the salt pot, her directing the 1969 Memories Day pageant, her talking to a Cherokee man in fancy dress at a pow wow. Her parents, the house she grew up in, the classroom where she earned her high school diploma. Hundreds of pictures in a cardboard box, thrown in together for convenience. Only a few dozen are marked with a date, a time, a name. Some are as old as 1895. Down in the bottom, one in tatters, maybe to protect it from eyes like mine, but two intact were these photos of Marguerite nude on her couch, on her bed.

Maybe she borrowed a camera. There were plenty of borrowed things in her house. Half the pictures in my box don't belong to Marguerite but the family she shared expenses with for a few years during her sixties and seventies, long after her parents were dead, her ex husband vanished and the children she never had a dead twinge in her gut. This is how she lived, on the kindness of strangers and friends and long held acquaintances. Mr. Robinson took her breakfast lunch and dinner from the grocery’s deli every day, except Sunday, when a cousin came by to take her out to eat. He paid her bills and mowed her lawn. This went on for more years than I can remember, and more years that he can remember too.

I was ashamed for her and angry with myself for being ashamed. If she were a young woman in the photographs, I would have thought she was brave and uninhibited. Like I was, the day I pulled out my camera and canvas to do a portrait of my breasts. Or the painting before that, when I
took a photograph of my headless body draped in purple gauze and placed it in the center of a
collage. But she was old, too old to want to show her body to anyone. Not like this. Surely.

That day, in her living room, Marguerite exaggerated. Maybe it is safe enough to say she
exaggerated all of her life. She told stories that no one believed anymore, if they ever did. She told
me, “When I was in college they tested my blood. The nurse called me back into the office after the
test and told me I had royal blood. Me. Royal blood.”

The last thing she did before she died was to borrow the money to self-publish her final
book, *Jewel*, a novel about a personified clay mannequin, who was once part of the clay that
Michelangelo used to create “the Holy Mother holding the dead Christus.” She described
Michelangelo working his hunk of clay like a man making love to a woman. “In wrath, in joy, in
humility, in hate, he touched me, but the consuming, enveloping passion in which all his moods
were couched was the expectation… He was almost desperate as he neared completion of his
work. White and exhausted with long hunger and thirst, his body was scarcely sensitive to its pain
any longer…There was fire in his eyes as he bent forward to peer at the last two figurines that he
was perfecting.”

She told me her final secret, too. I didn't want to know, she simply confessed—matter-of-
fact. She told me so easily, it was like I was family, or an old friend. Someone worthy of her, and
not a stranger, interested in her for extraneous reasons. I wanted Marguerite the storyteller, the
player-maker, the teller of myths. I got the truth, instead.

She said the man later became a famous baseball player. She was sixteen. It was her first
date. He took her out in his car. Somewhere near Dardanelle, he raped her. Her parents paid for an
illegal abortion. She couldn't remember the year exactly, I didn't bother to do the math.

That day, she told me more than once: “I was a beautiful woman. I was always a beautiful
woman. I'm still a beautiful woman.”
ERIC ARNOLD

The luxury of consequence

BE INERT

We were in the 90 day program,
Getting rambunctious with a therapeutic dog
On the soft, forgiving turf.
47 days and nothing stronger to drink than
Air.
It was that relentless Pacific almost-cold with
The hills as shaved brown rolls of bloat and the ocean
A swarm of infinity marbles.

We had let shit get away from us;
We had oil wealth; we
Had moms that only appeared publicly in
White satin gloves. We
Threw pennies in the garbage, dropped
Quarters on the ground.

BE COMPLACENT

W.H. was there, to no surprise,
But spent most of the days with the
Double-digit relapsers.
We recognized him from when he was younger and
Not caked in red burst capillary sheen and
Barnacled by time. But
Decay clung to all our faces like windblown sand.

I recalled his book
Walk Like a Woman, and that it taught me how and why
Not to care and not to want to.
It did wonders for my posture; made
A graveyard of the Earth.
BE POLITE
    I was looking out the window and you were standing
    By the sink, a detached
    Chunk of light.
    The help was talking too loud in Spanish;
    A tree outside caught a cough of wind.

    Its waxy leaves twisted to show their
    Pale beneath.

    We had been talking about the difference between
    Thirst and hunger:
    Hunger for knowledge, thirst
    For revenge.
    There is something I need, you said,
    At the window, by the sink.

BE COLORLESS, ODORLESS
    We had run into doubt before,
    We had seen it
    There.
    We had lips of fathers, eyes of mothers,
    Noses, somehow, in between.
    We saw them see it.
    I think we saw them see it,
    Filtered like breath through teeth.

    We were astonished and regarding the
    Amplitude of life.

BE MASSLESS
    I’ve killed people, I know it. I have
    Somehow made them die.
    So has W.H. You can see it in the black
    Bones of his eyes.

    So have you.
    They were living and then behind us:
    Our blind dumb swollen wake.

    I can see it here. From
    Adobe Villa, number 6 on the morning of
    Day 48.
Man with gun

That was a time in my life in which every
Palpable moment felt like waking from a dream, putting
A thresher to reality. Perhaps it was

The medicine, putting clear Windex curtains to slip and
Tremble around everything. Every moment, waking,
And sometimes in mid-speech, thinking:

This Is It

I was maybe 29, ineptly trying to hold down all
Those rising things. I had that older, bitter girlfriend,
Janine, with the silver spray paint hair.

I had the only independent tuxedo rental business in
Southern Pennsylvania; I swear I was barely conscious,
If at all. And Janine, she

Frowned and she meant it, had skin like dried apple
Sauce. I’d awaken touching it, confused, to the stares of
Lunching secretaries and receptionists, who were everywhere

Then. Out the windows of moving vehicles that were some-
How controlled by me, my tight white hands clutching
Cyanotic at the wheel, through the tinted dead mist at

The Susquehanna Gorge. My kitchen ensconced in
Electricity, my city entombed in snow, brown and last week’s.
Me in the mirror and Janine, frustrated:

Of course the mirror works

The new pornography will be just this, I think,
People recognizing themselves. Men in plaid holding
The angles of their elbows. Women in

Nightgowns testing trees outside their bedrooms
For hardness, structure, real vertical life, for treeness with
The pulsing, throbbing pulp of their hands.
From his memoir, *The Attributes of Loss*

(One)
Sleeping after lunch until the afternoon gets
Real dense and cobalt
Blue and starts to collapse on itself.

Opening the window, just
Adding depth to the silence, with the (Two)
Shadows of sounds quaking around in its
Bowl.

I was a businessman, a managerial consultant,
A strategist and a
Logician.

Listen:
(Three)

My insides are cold and foodless and
Starting to get warm.

My face is red with loosed blood. I must
Be dreaming.

What I mean to detect, lying there, is the
Movement of
A tree in the wind, half an
Exclamation.

(Four, Five)
Half the life breathed out of me.

I have entered rooms with podiums, American
Flags and lunchmeat stacked into
Hydrants of flesh, into white-pink (Five[again])
Mirrors.

I have purchased matching jet-skis, a
Waffle iron, furs, cheese by the
Wheel.
Someone else’s laundry. (Six)
Someone else’s fumes of laundry through
Time and window,
Computerized flower aroma riding warm
Front’s ridge,
Breeching my person.

(Seven)
I have, in the past, made myself more
Clear.
But never about what I have been
Losing all this time.
(Eight)

Ok,
Try this, you big
Child: count
Slowly to ten, let ten seconds go by, ten
Hollow thuds and tell me: do you feel
More or less alive? Do you feel more
Or less?

(Nine)
It could go either way, couldn’t it?
Anecdote of the Sea

Take a child from the land, the country’s Center, put him beside the frothing sea.

A fretful sidestep moves his feet, detours Him along the tide, away from his miniature

Fear beside the sea when empty shifting space Collides his feet with dampened undulations.

The sky becomes the ground. There and air Are languid liqueurs sticky on his hands and face.

Salt licks his tongue, implores acquired tastes He hasn’t found in lines lush and still on horizon blue.

Or white? Shaded grays between confuse The child’s thinking wheels. These mathematics Evolve too quickly for his wheels. He’s confused— What’s pulling the string behind these waves?

And these banks built beneath the wind, His feet wonder where to stand, if stand

Is what this land allows. Such silly shadows come Off the sea. The boy is one, he sees, a negative stain

At the edge of what’s in front of him. His view Blends between sand, land, a bit of sea froth, too,

Like distance. Little shadows granulate in sand, To wander far enough is to mature, to be

Taller than the ocean’s line in front of him, The boy who doesn’t understand what’s rolling
Over in great stampedes out there, or under
The gluttonous glimmer of what’s going out

From here. The child learns which edges weaken under
Foot and orders his steps into methods of not falling in.
Weather Sick

I moved my desk, turned it to face north, the yard,
Alley and leave my back to the house. I did it last night
Before going to bed, and I was anxious to fall asleep

Like the thirteen year old I was was anxious to feel a woman,
So I could wake and come back to some new, shifted perspective
That might make the view bearable. I never had a desk

In my home north of here—just a bed, dresser and shelves
That didn’t hold books. I used to watch the windows—one
Looking west and the other north—for the storms approaching,

Lightning, snow and plane bleeps in the night sky. It must be
Cold by now, the weather up there, and more specifically,
The coffee in this pot. A train heaves in the distance, north

Of me looking north. A long horn sigh I first mistake for
The hundred odd box cars it must be pulling, is in the sky
Now, that noise, a plane pushing up, wheezing and circling

North as if to Kansas City or Denver and I want to be on it,
But the train blare is back, this time sounding east, pulling
Me down, heavy on the ground, this room’s hard tracks.

Light above the fence grows down the utility pole
As the sun rises and draws out of the dark wires, transformers,
The tree in my back yard I still don’t know the name of.

And the stones I set two years ago this month for a garden
That now sits fallow glow, push light into the grass still alive,
Uncovered by crinkled and twisting tawny leaves. I miss leaf burn,

Diesel and black soil stench turned under. I want an October carrying
Rot, first frost and sweater scratch on a walk in late afternoon when light
Fades and I can make out the breath in the dark air in front of my face.
MARK DECARTERET

from Feasts/Week 16

st expeditus

boxes of ashes
smudged in toxic-black letters
emergency stash

st bueno

I blat & bleat but
these abominable brays seem
always beyond me

st theodore of sykeon

idolatrized sun
& these crocodilian eyes
long-trained on its throat
Julie R. Enszer

One Explanation

Elaine’s family owned a Chinese restaurant in this dumpy, redneck town thirty minutes away from Ann Arbor—I can’t remember the name—but I’d have starved without it. Elaine hated white men who dated Asian women. She’d see the despised couples on campus—always frat boys with gorgeous Chinese or Japanese women (occasionally Filipino, rarely Thai or Malay). She’d approach them and say, Do you like Chinese pussy? Is it better? More exotic? Is that what you like about Asian women? Then she would turn on the women, You are being exploited. Reject the whities. It was daring. Uncomfortable. The couples, mortified, but silent as if what she said was true. Elaine was always angry. That’s what I liked about her. At first, she only dated Asian men, and then, only Asian men who had never been with a white woman. A friend of mine was Japanese-American, his girlfriend, white. She hated them. Later, he married a white woman; now they have a baby who is beautiful. I send them holiday cards and postcards when I travel to places like Thailand where I walk the streets and, emboldened by my completed Hep series, eat food from all of the vendors even the one woman who offers to kill and cook a chicken for me. She holds the caned cage with the staring chicken and says, Cheap, cheap. I have never been that close to something alive I could eat. I buy vegetable dumplings and pay her more bahts than she asks. This prompts her again to offer the chicken. It is raining. I walk to the international telephone booth, and call my wife. She is angry about work. They treat me like shit. I’m just another house nigger to them. We talk, her anger softens to loneliness. I am sick from a cold, tired from jet lag and hours of touring ancient wats.
I want to eat chicken but not freshly slaughtered;
I want chicken with sweet and sour sauce
back in Belleville—that was the name of the town!—
at the China King Express—right off the freeway.
I haven't talked to Elaine in years.
I want her to be angry and fierce and righteous—
things I am no longer,
but she, too, may be feeding on something new.
Every day, parked in front of the school
waiting for my daughter, I see the same man
pushing a wheelchair up the steep hill
that leads to just about where I slouch
in the bucket seat listening to Schubert.
It’s a struggle, he’s not young,
either the father or grandfather
of the boy who wears thick glasses
and has feathery black hair.
His head droops forward, rolls
to one side or the other. The man always stops
to straighten it, then pats him on the shoulder.
You can tell it’s love, even more than love,
this extra devotion, this most bitter ministering.
I don’t know what they’re doing out here;
the child is a first-grader from what I hear
and class is in session. Could be the man,
let’s call him father… wants to take
his stricken boy out for air
or just extricate him for a while
from the madness of walls and desks.
Whatever, he is punctual and steady,
equipped with Kleenex, inhalers, prescriptions.
I admire him enormously but must refuse
to think about him, or the boy.
Word is, it’s terminal.

I wait for my robustly healthy daughter
to spring from the door, rush down the steps
and toss me her backpack. It’s her radiant smile
that I need to expect, to remember always.
The boy in the wheelchair never smiles.
He seems mostly asleep in some dream world
all his own; nor does his father smile,
though he feasts on every fraction of a second
with the child. How he endures day after day,
that poise of absolute defeat transcending itself—
as if to convey a kind of joy I hope I’ll never know.
But I can’t dwell on it. I’m waiting for my daughter.
The bell has rung. She’ll come barging out the door
any minute now. We parents congregate near
the concrete steps and I imagine, in some sense,
hold our breaths. When the children flutter forth
in happy commotion there’s always a twinge
of panic if we don’t see our own right away.
The man pushes his boy on the sidewalk
amid all of us. We nod, he nods, and then we clutch
our children’s frail little fingers and lead them away
to cars and head for home. Today my daughter
says she’s had a bad day. She’s about to cry.
Her toy watch fell off and some boy’s shoe
crushed it into a pile of plastic splinters.
I assure her I’ll get another.
Can’t mess around with time, I laugh,
and watch the smile consume her face
though I don’t think she gets the joke.

We drive home singing the new song she’s learned:
*Button you must wander, wander, wander*—
The sun blasts through our windows like sweet cream.
She’s buckled tightly in her car seat
and I anchor an eye in the rear view mirror
to make sure she doesn’t disappear.
I feel an ease akin to that of trees lining the road,
their red, yellow and purple leaves ready
to unhinge; yet, suddenly, at the stop sign,
I want to scream. But, of course, I don’t.
Sick Visit

for Madeleine, not yet one

They isolate rosy, wide-eyed bloomers
in for check-ups and shots
from the febrile, listless lumps
collapsed in parental embrace
as if failures at infancy, childhood,
Being itself.
And she, so limp in my arms,
gazes with the hope and trust
I long to assure with mere touch
since she has not yet acquired
the pretense of language.

She howls when
a starched severe nurse
draws fever from her ear,
burrowing into my chest,
waiting as I wait, not in fear
but near its borders.
She rouses to peer at a clacking
industrial clock, the slack-lipped boy
across the hall whose eyes ooze,
a cheerful mural of elves and toadstools;
yet she always shifts her eyes to mine
to make sure this new place
has my sanction.
New doubt clamors
as the doctor probes her back
with his cold stethoscope;
clothes removed,
she lies on the paper sheet,
her existence no longer easy
as a glass of water.
Mayhem in the left ear
will require antibiotics:
candied pink liquid so bellicose
it needs refrigeration—
a tough good cop
not himself above suspicion.

When it’s over
she bounces on my knee
while I now probe the doctor
with stale, sensible questions.
He smiles, reaches in his drawer
for a fuzzy bunny sticker.
She is half won over
when evolution makes
its sudden leap:
sticker tightly clutched,
she cocks her perfect cartoon skull
toward the door, points, and squawks
something close to "Home?"
She has learned,
without quite knowing,
that we lurch like assassins
from the silence of innocence
into an infirmary of words
where fear is never pure.
For Crying-Out Frogs

*after a line in a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay*

While Pooch-Cat squinted, rain-wind wrung
hydrangea mops. Four
o’ clocks struck. Even lizard’s tail

  waged, free from Mama’s
  ill-will tugs. Even beggarticks
  loosened splinter-seeds, glib with springtime
  love. Like the long-haired seal she

was, Pooch-Cat arfed
appreciative. Even Grr- Hound bared his gums—
like Cerberus, snaggle-fanged—to
katydids’ singsong drub. Or, may-

  be, Hound heard wrong. Even harpies harmonized.
  Erinyes croaked arpeggios—less vengeful
  than tree frogs’ lipless saw.
  Who needed skitterin’ aliens when
  ecoterrorists showered us all with “Kyrie
  Eleison”? Such ululation
  neither Pooch nor Grr could sanction,

much less when performed by frogs.
Even hailstorm weren’t so odd

  as this fusillade floppin’ onto roof slate.
  Nearby, plaster swan
  dappled. Radio flyer

  tipped, then yawped as red-eyed, orange-toed
  haunts walloped Mama’s garden.
  Even crookneck squash ker-plopped.
Couldn’t blame child-forsaken dog for runnin’ head-first into andiron, yankin’ hearth rug to ash grate. Illin Papa could have saw Pooch-Cat matterin’ and shuttlecockin,’ he’d of got religion onct-and-for-all.

Only like last Sunday, he’d forgot, leavin’ Mama
to shepherd all they’s children. The youngest huddled under pew, evangelizin’ ant family. Simple

faith defies much law, ‘specially nature’s, only righteous seldom caw ‘bout frog showers outside Apocalypse. Still, even Mama did not blame Grr- Dog for dredgin’ goblins out of scum-pond. She believed in plagues—also in giggin’ prongs.
Crescentia, Alone, Then

1.

I didn’t know her anymore than you did: eyes a lighter shade of sepia, dress tucked about her feet like a chrysalis, but damp as though she’d fallen in a well rank with rust water.

In the photograph, she hovers, ectoplasmic and grim, beyond her almost lover’s shoulder. If he turned, he would not see her. Only the collodion plate reveals her, fixed like *Morpho laertes*, stilled by a camera’s clairvoyant focus.

Invoked, Crescentia is speechless like De Quincey’s Mater Tenebrarum, that opium-limned Lady of Darkness. In the photo, she seems to be keening at decibels below human notice. If he touched her, he would not know it, fingers dipping through shade like silver emulsion.

Skimming through a book on spectral photography, you see her, floating sylph or invalid, arranged amid layers of cloth, tousled, but graceful, despite being caught in this awkward, impractical pose; this ghost seems displaced, like a mermaid out-of-water, and all too aware of the obvious duplicity of grief, that double exposure.
2.

Crescentia. He didn’t know her anymore than you did. Yet, he touched her hand each day for a week as if by accident. She kept her gaze on the keys, the ebony amid so much ivory, as if pondering a love song she could almost recall, music of the spheres, not heavenly, but sublunary, a feminine descant that held her, enthralled.

3.

She did not know herself, Crescentia, though she tried out provocative poses: Madeline on the Eve of St. Agnes; Kore Before She Bit the Pomegranate; the Divine Sarah Reclining in Her Coffin; Julia Margaret Cameron Huddled Behind Her Lens, Vivian to Tennyson’s Merlin.

Crescentia never tired of playing the feminine in tableaux vivants; her eyes stayed so wide, so opaque, they defied focus. Now, she is all image, all levitation, tricked out with veils, summoned by frauds, toe-crackers, scribblers, mediums with gauze up their sleeves, crystals in their pockets.

4.

“Crescentia, Alone, Then” is the title of this portrait. Clamoring, but mute for all intents and purposes since no one living can hear, see, or feel her, not even those said to specialize in translation of tantrums thrown by the restless, but all too vigorous dead.
Though they comfort the desolate mothers
of stillborns, give hope to almost lovers,
grant others assurance of lives continued
after death, they offer little solace to ghosts.
Crescentia, alone, then, remains suspended
like a scream in the sleeper’s unresponsive throat.

This is the story of a ghost, haunted by hypotheticals,
by selves never realized, never even tried out.
Crescentia, alone, then, her fists full of asphodels,
murmurs, melodramatizes, implores. If death
were a stage, she would need no limelight;
but, death, unlike life, is no tableau vivant.

Crescentia is alone, then, waiting for her curtain,
yearning for an audience to notice and applaud.
Ornithology

When we consider all these changes of animal form, and innumerable others, which may be collected from the books of natural history; we cannot but be convinced, that the fetus or embryo...is formed by apposition of new parts, and not by the distention of a primordial nest of germes, included one within another, like the cups of a conjurer.

—Erasmus Darwin, Zoonomia

The reader once saw a glass hummingbird pause by scarlet seaweed (dyed to revive the aquarium), and wondered if the widgeon or the anchovy ketchup had conjured this vibrato from light, or perhaps it was fatigue that, as usual, had compromised her eyes.

She’s reminded, now, by this girl of a vagueness suspended in flight, something slurried beyond music or genera like that bird in the parlor, a sight that not even Audubon could render plausible in India ink.

Such nervous energy, confined to a room already full of inlaid cabinets, étagères, and mahogany bookcases, probably would not be calmed by chocolate or seedcake.

The reader could not be sure that the child would not spring wings and fly into the mullioned windowpanes. After all, her cat, or whatever one called it, had already tried this particular form of escapism, and, now, hiccupped and hyperventilated against the girl’s chest, its pupils hugely askew.

The reader had never seen such variation in any species despite her affinity for Dickensian creatures, that is, animals that others thought madly misbegotten, or else too sentimental to live.

Even the coral with its perpetual hives and the anemones with their feathery tines are less baroque, more classifiable than the bird-feline- bug that the runaway coddles and tries to distract with grim lullabies, in which moths peck at eyes, but are eaten themselves by a gargoyle, or some outré, impossible dragonfly.
The reader, impressed by the song’s malapertness, puts reason aside
and studies the child: skin of clock-face patina; eyes
of moss-light; dress of dustbin-gray wool, but implausibly bright
as the rest of her.

The reader would not be surprised
to learn that her belly was navelless, and what this implied
could give clergy more reason to fret than amoebas and fossils had yet;
or, else, her conception might prise
renewed faith in a populace where fasting girls, weeping stone eyes,
and spirit photography thrive as miracle and credulity connive
to sell memento mori on lithograph slides.

If Erasmus Darwin and his grandsons had fathomed her ontogeny,
her peculiar development from germ cell to fetus to sylph-child
(or silverspot butterfly),
how would their theories of natural (or unnatural) selection be rectified?

The reader can only surmise,
her own faith given to capricious mutation during Sunday
sermons, when her conscience rewrites
all the pastor’s promises of vengeance as privilege for sinlessness.

She could never abide
the condemnatory impulse in her fellow Christians, preferring
instead to believe in a happily-ever-afterlife
in which humans grew wings, but weren’t angels or parakeets
named Folly or Sheepskin or Life.

They might be archaeopteryx, scarabs, and other zoomorphic delights
that made the Book of Kells seem nigh
colorless, indeed drab by comparison.

Just now, this child
with her furious concentration and her hummingbird reflex to shy
at sudden movement, then return with an intimacy to light
just out of hand’s reach, but enticed by unfamiliarity,
encouraged the reader to mind what drew the child’s eye.

What could she offer a hummingbird that knew such unusual rhymes?

One might offer her claret or other red things,
but the reader, instead, picked *The Chimes*,

and, then, paused as another slim volume with dodos, flamingoes, and sundry strange birds drew her gaze to the mulberry wine of its cover. Inside were such fancies of flight to unnerve ornithologists, but might be a nectar to right wayward girls and mock felines, besides,

so the reader began, “Down the Rabbit-Hole,”

and the air became redolent with thyme.
Poolside Triptych

One last dog day,
then the feet will wear
new shoes.
New shoes,
do you see?

Of course you don’t
find yourself dodging
dogshit dropped on
poolside pavement,
alone with fleabitten feet
and piles of dead flies
that belie the beauty
of california in fall.

You don’t find yourself
alone with fleabitten feet,
and a november moon,
suddenly shivering
in the metropolan desert,
with nothing but paper & pen
and letters to loved ones
half-traced in your head.

Now I find that
my hands are cold
because of the mist
(do you hear?
because of the mist
which coats palm trees
with a night without echoes;
a freeway can’t find a voice
between crickets and mist,
though a thought of the sun
at the back of the brain
burns through the fog
at the beginning of dawn).

And the last young dog
disappears in the morning,
bounds his way through
to the end of a dream, slipping away
(do you see,
slipping away)
with the remains of a shoe,
leaving me standing
on sunburned concrete.
scudding

The shift of photographs taped
to a blue and ambient wall
in an antivalent wind:

…to get behind the scenes of existence:

the musty shadows behind the photographs
like the underskin of loved ones

(a face asmile in celluloid, a sigh in spring)

Half-asleep; a sound:
the shuffling of feet
or something close to it:

… the rustle of leaves outside.

realize the afternoon air,
realize teeth

(the ground, the leaves have left it)
Vietnam Vet with Dog, Ya Know the Rest

the homeless man’s sign says.
Today the bum with the German shepherd
has added something new to his panning station—
a gigantic yellow Easter bunny.

I don’t know the rest.

Scored during a dumpster dive,
the rabbit is his newest marketing ploy.
It is working.
Reeled in by the black button eyes,
grubby-faced children squeal.
Soccer moms look twice,
roll down their windows,
empty their change purses
into rough hands.
One rabbit eye pops out of its socket
and dangles from the black-yarned optic nerve.

For the first time,
I watch his statuesque dog
stand guard for his master,
and I imagine what the rest could be.

The rest of the day?
The rest of the war?
The rest of a lost story?
At dusk, the man smooths
out fresh cardboard
creases it along the corrugation,
and styles a lean-to.
He folds shaggy blankets,
and fills a crumpled waxy cup
with water for the dog.
He holds the rabbit
—now a long-eared Cyclops—
that still smells like children’s shampoo.
He presses it to his face like a gas mask.
Rich Murphy

Just Outside the Pied Cow

Thus talked Zarathustra in the city he loved, which is surnamed "The Pied Cow."
—Nietzsche

“quiet desperation.”
—Thoreau

Most camels don’t survive to children.
Beasts of burden pace the desert
of dragon scales as house cats. The weight
of family alone makes rising from the doomed
a crushing heave for the bulk. “You shall,
you shall” flares from the bellies
of teachers and police until manes
and backbones spread as backyard mulch.

Spitting at a front lawn refreshes the first
insult. The reptile plants its neighborhood
claim for humps of youth sunning themselves
for a load. Fierce devotion to chimeras

and to the play of a knight on a dune
call to Ovid’s bedtime readers before
they are buried or eaten. World heeders
dance alone at each morning of their lives.
The Cities in One Place

Mayor of memory reconstructs
each epoch's architecture for
the citizen's inkling to conquer,
inhabit, or negotiate. Unearthing
obelisks and coliseums, Madeline
cake's archeologist enshrines the ability
to walk in museums of intentions
and attempts. Spoons and sifters
and photo albums materialize
the forgotten of natural disasters
and of human conflict before wind
or warrior again snaps fingers.

To think on one's feet across town
logs a mnemonic journey through
allusion's Alps or Daedalus' prison.
City foundations and infrastructure
emote the fictive logic of reverie.
The Acropolis' apocalypse surrounds
the commuter as slowly as its construction.
Lifetime's experience confronts the monk
of progress who remains undaunted,
even though the upright insect knows
how every cloistered colonist discovered
an end among the disfigured statues.
The Existentialist’s Judgment Day

Bad faith parts for its Moses,
but no one walks upon absurdity.
Houses on both sides of the streets
own gills squirming in bills for
abandoned dreams while the lonely
leader slogs through irrational
commandments. Disoriented by duty,
the hectic heretics possess no time
to smell the senseless air of things
and only grasp what they can grasp
with hands. Keeping to his individual
path, the tablet smasher begins
and begins with the irrelevant flower
and weeps when efficiency’s sea
closes on the pursuing salesmen.
An old testament sinks everyone
to their knees, but condemned
for their false god, so many
neighbors flop around cul-de-sacs
with fishbowls on their heads.
Tegan Echo Rieske

Interstellar Travel

What we wanted to believe was the alien landscape,
a sort of cratered Lego creation
we could affix ourselves to, holes in our shoes
stuck with gravity to the dimpled highway,
until we unblock our eyes and return
to the wet streets we know by name,
the grids and dividers,
the concrete walls and our bodies
perpendicular, and these finite street lights
that allow us to forget
what night feels like and turns unfinished blacktop

into a mirror image. Trees suddenly point like arrows
into the street, and our surprised expressions
wobble behind headlights
and windshield wipers, pebbled
and indiscreet. Any moment we expect
to crane our necks and no longer recognize
the simplest of constellations, expect stars
to fall like quarters or nickels into our hands,
where we could finger the light. Still, the moon doesn't blink
and seems to have a nose, fuzzy like an ashtray, which reminds me.
Most nights, I pretend I'm the passenger
in this scenario. I never steer, or make
a decision. The only capable part would be
my teeth, as my eyes close against halos
of light, vapor-like streaks bouncing
off the rear-view mirror, disassembling
the night. And then I believe memory
is more accurate than a map or diagram. Routine
prayers and ways of pleading will unclick from my mouth
as the unassuming landmarks become quarantined

question marks. The tourism department tells us to wait
for three a.m. Something terrible will happen, I'm sure.
The story will start again, the fast-forward button
will dissolve into nothing under my hand, and this momentum
will stop, paused on peculiar faces tipped upward, mouths slack
and without. My body will start to suspect underground motion,
feral and toothy, but gleaming with such brilliant memorabilia, such
substantial movement, each cellular structure turning to crude oil.
NANCY SCOTT

My nightmares are like that—

after “The Empire of Light, II,” by René Magritte

A single street lamp, not illuminating anything,
the street’s bathed in darkness, and I’m running
and stumble, and there’s a house, maybe two,
maybe three, I lose count as I’m running, out of
breath now, and light from a window, here
and there, but the street is deserted, no people,
no cars, not even a stray dog, and yet behind
one of those closed doors may be what I’m trying
to reach, but I can’t stop to find out, so I keep
on running, and will myself not to look up,
because over the trees, above this desolate street,
there’s a bright blue sky frothy with clouds, and
if I could get a good running start, I could lift off
and soar, leave this endless street where no one
goes out, not for a smoke or to walk their dog,
and if I stay steady, I could float forever
in perpetual day, but I know that’s not what
I’m looking for, so if I can reach the corner,
I’ve got a hunch that on the next street, day is
day and night’s night, and with my legs aching,
I’d settle for that, so I keep on running, past
the same windows, same trees, still hopeful
I’ll make it, because as I said at the start,
my nightmares are like that.
Eric Arnold grew up in Texas and now lives with his wife in San Francisco, where he is currently training as a psychiatry resident. His poetry and short fiction have appeared or are forthcoming in many print and online journals, including New York Quarterly, The Saint Ann’s Review, Elimae, The Labelletter, and Rust+Moth.

About the Work

I like to think of the poetry I write as casual observation and passive experience, amplified. If you (here I go in the second person …) turn up the volume of the dull and droning world loud enough, you are given a swarming mass of perceptual data. Not just the car salesman talking to his wife on the phone, but the flapping swats of the giant American flag, the raw daylight soaked by the tinted showroom windows, the slight vibration of the linoleum floor when the air conditioner kicks on. You filter out some salient pieces of that data, trying again and again until you arrive at something of a pattern, something with its own skewed physics, something like the start—but never the completion of—some great truth, a personal science of perception and emotion.

The challenge is to find a way to balance the acts of focusing, to create the content of the work, and abstracting, to create the affect and tone of the work. To somehow deliver a summation of the poem’s emotional and physical architecture that is striking but not overbearing. There is the task of having to give weight to each word line or stanza without weighing the whole piece down. In writing “From his memoir, The Attributes of Loss,” I had fallen asleep with the window open. Try it: open a window into a tranquil spring afternoon. The wash of noise in near infinite space can be somehow overwhelming and debilitating. How does one describe this helplessness? What physical laws does one ascribe to it? I can start with pure descriptive narration or raw emotional outburst, but I’ll ultimately have to draw a map between the two if I hope to achieve anything with the work.

Poetry is a deeply personal exercise. I can hope my work, my personal science, resonates with others, but I can’t ever count on it. It is a way not to be bored by the world around me, a reason to look out the window and a reason to look at the window itself, and the streaks of condensation in its corners. And then sometimes, if you are receptive, the act of writing or reading poetry can reveal the outline (or perhaps the shadow) of a bridge between the emotional and physical worlds. From Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Blues Chant Hoodoo Revival”:

bad luck isn’t red flowers

...crushed under jackboots...

This is the start of the great truth that you will never be able to see, describe or understand fully. It is a glimpse, that’s all.
Eric Arnold on the Web

porchlightzine.com/2010/05/01/porchlight-issue-4/

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Curtis Bauer has published and has poems and translations forthcoming in Barrow Street, The American Poetry Review, The Iowa Review, Circumference and Tar River Poetry. He has been a finalist for the New Letters Poetry Prize, The Willis Barnstone Translation Prize, and The Glimmer Train Poetry Open. He won the John Ciardi Poetry Prize for his first poetry collection, Fence Line, published by BkMk Press in 2004. He teaches Creative Writing and Translation at Texas Tech University and is the publisher of Q Ave Press Chapbooks.

About the Work

I have a little office at the back of my house in Lubbock: it has windows on both sides, one looking south, toward the main house, and the other looking north, toward the part of the country where I used to live. Depending on the season, and of course on my state of mind, I’ll move my desk for a change of perspective. The poem “Weather Sick” came about after one of those moves. It was fall, and I wanted to watch the trees in the yard; I hadn’t lived there long enough to realize that autumn wouldn’t be as dramatic as in the north; leaves don’t turn different shades, but die suddenly and fall down or blow away in the constant West Texas wind. The other poem, “Weather Sick,” is also about looking out, but in this particular case I was looking at a photograph of a child standing beside the ocean. One can see immediately that the kid wasn’t accustomed to the waves, to walking on the shore; there’s a certain fear and uncertainty in his gesture and posture, and he’s just a little speck in the photograph’s landscape. I spent a long while looking at that picture, wishing I were a little closer to the ocean, or at least some large body of water.

I might say that these two poems attempt to capture feelings of loss and anxiety, that they are methods in an attempt to explore how place possesses a transformative power over the observer. At the same time, music and play are important for me. I had been reading a bit of Wallace Stevens at the time of composition—I think that’s especially obvious in “Anecdote of the Sea.” I’m a fan of his craft and music and imagination, how he travelled so far without ever leaving his rooms, a bit like Proust, like Walser, and of course Pessoa (three other writers who are highly influential in my formation, whose voices are always conversing in my head). So in a sense, I want the poems to not only travel or possess an element of movement, but they should also provide music that captivates and carries the reader forward. I’d like to say that “Anecdote of the Sea” does this especially well. I see the pressured syntax and rhythms as jarring, sometimes rough, like waves in the tide moving in and out. That’s how I hear it anyway. “Weather Sick,” on the other hand is a poem that doesn’t have as much playful and conscious rhythm as it does jarring juxtapositions of time and space. The poem attempts to capture how we are constantly moving into and out of a remembered place by identifying its relationship to the space we inhabit. In a way, it’s a bit like collage, how putting diverse images beside each other can create a new image; concentrated reflection in the midst of looking at the mundane.

It’s challenging to bring these ideas out in language. When the syntax is slightly quirky, like it is in both of these poems, a poem runs a risk of confusing the reader, so there has to be more than text and music to hold together the structure of the poem; there must also be some thread the reader can hold on to that will slow down the reading, force the reader to be more conscious of
other tools at work. Part of my writing process involves reading lines and stanzas over and over, listening to how they sound by themselves, but also in the context of the whole, how they build a foundation. Hearing the poem helps me identify its strengths and weaknesses and this allows me to revise the poem accordingly.

Curtis Bauer on the Web

thediagram.com/7_2/bauer.html
www.fishhousepoems.org/archives/curtis_bauer/index.shtml
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cas.umkc.edu/bkmk/interviews/bauerc.html
dailypalette.uiowa.edu/index.php?artwork=311
**g. martínez cabrera**

*g. martínez cabrera currently lives in San Francisco with his wife and her cat. He holds degrees from Columbia and Harvard Divinity School and has had journalism published in The San Francisco Bay Guardian, The Columbia Observer, and other on-line publications. His short fiction was featured on the public radio show, Voices, and has appeared in The Externalist, Verbsap, Cantarraville, The Broome Review, and Drunken Boat. Currently, he is working on a collection of short stories and a novel. He lives, electronically at www.g-martinezcabrera.com and occasionally blogs at www.taoofboo.com.**

Contrary to common belief, he is not a grumpy old man—YET.

**About the Work**

I used to drive I-5 between LA and San Francisco a lot when I was in my 20s, and like a lot of city dwellers, I never gave much thought to the people who lived in all the tiny towns in between. Sometimes I would get out and eat at some fast food place at a rest stop, and maybe there was an attractive girl behind the counter who caught my eye, but I never chatted because I was shy and because, sadly, she wasn’t real to me. I was too busy moving through, and she was standing still, a part of a community that I was too blind to see.

This blindness on my part was the first spark for “The Squirrel Man.” In the story, I wanted to think about the kind of town that many of us don’t think about at all, and I wanted to give the people who live there a voice and a person to listen to that voice. What I ended up with was a mysterious visitor paying attention to a town of people who had grown accustomed to being ignored.

I chose to write the story from the townspeople’s point of view because I wanted to explore how people—all people—come to be addicted to attention. I think a lot of us dismiss celebrity culture as unserious and ridiculous. But if you look at it in a different way and see all those reality show stars as more extreme versions of ourselves and our need to feel listened to, then celebrities become a little less removed from us and a lot less silly.

As for the style of the story, I was reading a lot of Steven Millhauser at the time, and I was purposely copying aspects of his technique: the unnamed narrator speaking for a group of people is one of the things Millhauser does often and well. I still am not sure why this voice gives me the creeps, but it does, and I thought it would be a good way to tell this story, which attempts to blend the fantastical with the real.

The only thing I would add here is a comment about the role of the fantastical in fiction. For some reason I find myself sometimes struggling with whether or not this kind of fiction is as valid artistically as fiction that deals with reality in a more straightforward way. In a world where “based on a true story” is a selling point, and where non-fiction often sells better than novels, the message seems to be that people don’t go to fiction to help them understand their world because they want “real” and “true to life” narratives. Fiction, so the argument goes, is play and imagination, and who has time for that with all the problems we face on a regular basis?

Now, if that’s true for “realist fiction,” then it would seem that stories that show something fantastical are even more out of touch with what people want and need. All of which leads me to...
want to make a case for fiction, and specifically for non-realist fiction that deals with what I will call the magical. Magic, here, should not be confused with Harry Potter or fantasy stories (though I like both). No, what I want in my stories is for a type of magic that is more subtle and internal. I want the fiction I read and write to create situations in which very typical, very human characters face something a little off from reality. The goal is to show how people truly are, and I would say that good fiction of this type might do this better than even the most reality-based book of non-fiction.

Reading fantastical fiction, when done well, should make a reader see things in her own world that she may have missed or taken for granted. The experience is akin to the person who almost dies in an accident and as a result, looks at the world anew. The extraordinary experience teaches us how to understand the ordinary day-to-day stuff of our lives. Admitting this might be dangerous for a writer with literary ambitions, but in a way I am trying to write stories that return the reader to another time when miracles were real. I don’t mean to say that they happened. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t, but the belief that miracles could happen at any moment made miracles part of people’s reality, and that openness made people more receptive to those experiences in their lives that may not be miraculous but that are extraordinary all the same. That’s the kind of logic I want as the foundation to my stories.

I’m not a religious person, but I believe that people are better off when they see their lives in terms that go beyond the mere physical and rational. It makes people more open and, arguably, more human. In short, I just want to write stories that make readers enter worlds that are not limited by what we usually call the “real.” You can call this kind of thinking spiritual. But I like magical better. As for my stories, you can call them anything you like.

g. martinez cabrera on the Web

www.locowriter.com
www.taoofboo.com
www.drunkenboat.com/db11/02fic/cabrera/index.php
www.verbsap.com/09winterfiction/cabrera.html
bbs.sfbg.com/2008/10/01/bend-sinister
Jonathan Cardew lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his wife and two daughters. He has had stories published in Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine and two editions of Sheffield Hallam University’s Best of... series. A collection of stories, Heal Yourself And Move, is forthcoming, if not coming soon.

About the Work

In his essay “A Story-teller’s Notebook,” Raymond Carver has this to say about penning a short story, “Get in, get out. Don’t linger. Go on.” This is, for me, the best piece of advice on short fiction writing; it is everything you need to know. A former mentor of mine, E.A. Markham, would say the same thing with different words—“Arrive late, leave early”. In Markham’s case, though, I expect he was referring to his own time management skills.

Whichever way, I hold to this principle as much as I can when I write.

“Falling Up” begins a couple of hours before the end, loops back and points to a wide open future. So far so good. I get in: “The day was like any other...and they were walking the estate.” I get out: “He would wait for that.” I don’t think I linger too much. Not everything is written down. I know much more about character, place and plot than I will let slip. And that’s where the editing plays its role—the rewriting, resizing, copying, cutting, pasting, and then cutting again of what doesn’t need to be written. This was all very much in evidence in the drafting of this story.

It began with the character: Jimbo.

And his problem: falling down.

And the gang: Si, Helly 1, Helly 2.

It suddenly had a title (a borrowed title, from the electronic music artist Theo Parrish).

It was something I was investing my time and energy in.

It had a future.

It had possibility.

But it didn’t happen for me. After a few pages, I put it away.

When I looked at it again a few months later, I was a little happier with the story. The main thing that stood out for me was the heron. It resonated, and meant that I could carry on. Without the line, “Stability was its number one advantage,” I don’t think it would have been worth my while. Of course, there were other things going for the story—the narrative was simple, the characters had their reasons for being, and the prose was clear in the most part - but there had to be a hook that went beyond plot and character. I’m not sure if hook is the right word in this instance, and I don’t think it matters. Because I finished the story. The heron was an image I had carried in my mind—and it was an image rooted in reality, as was the canal where Jimbo does his fishing, a stretch of the Sheffield canal between Shalesmoor and Attercliffe—and I carried it to the end, even if the heron is nowhere to be seen in that final section.
This is the point: *I did finish the story.*

Whatever gets you to finish a story, to finish it with purpose, to finish it strong—whether it is a heron or a bag of pretzels or a three-cornered table—is the important thing.

**Jonathan Cardew on the Web**

[wordpress.jonathancardew.com](http://wordpress.jonathancardew.com)
Mark DeCarteret

Mark DeCarteret's work has appeared in the anthologies American Poetry: The Next Generation (Carnegie Mellon Press), Brevity & Echo: Short Short Stories by Emerson College Alums (Rose Metal Press), New Pony: Collaborations & Responses (Horse Less Press), Places of Passage: Contemporary Catholic Poetry (Story Line Press), Thus Spake the Corpse: An Exquisite Corpse Reader (Black Sparrow Press) and Under the Legislature of Stars—62 New Hampshire Poets (Oyster River Press) which he also co-edited. This past April he was selected as the seventh Poet Laureate of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

About the Work

A few years back, I was given the gift of a feast-of-saints desk calendar by a friend, and figured there was just enough space for a haiku (I'd written a dozen or so sonnet-sized sagas already and felt the need to purge even further!). While syllabically they were faultless, suspicion-free, in most other ways they went against both their better natures. Lives were irreverently flipped through and crossed up, pilfered and fingered from a write-up not much larger than a pinhead. Miracles were claimed while their bunkmates slept off spiritual funks, tamed demons. And untimely deaths were mixed-n-matched--an oblate once deep-fried was now lobbed off a freighter into the sea, a devotee rife with boils was now felled by a mob, left to spoil in the sun.

But this wasn't mere lip service. Or verse-lite. I was trying to return these poor souls to their self-flagellated frames for a few glorious seconds where they weren't lousy with sin, seemingly marred. And instead were all desirous, full-sensed. Was trying to summon language from somewhere deep within the lungs. Draw up some words, rung-by-rung, until the bones sang back the flesh. And to be clever as all hell. Their fun-facts and trivia transformed into something both tactile and uncalled for, lit-from-within, blasted out from the silence of their tile-white tombs. All three hundred and sixty five of them defiled in the most innovative of fashions. In one failing voice.

Mark DeCarteret on the Web

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Segue 9: Fall 2010
Julie R. Enszer

Julie R. Enszer’s first book of poetry, Handmade Love, was published in 2010 by A Midsummer Night’s Press. Her chapbook, Sisterhood, was published in 2010 by Seven Kitchens Press. She has her MFA from the University of Maryland and currently is enrolled in the PhD program in Women’s Studies at the University of Maryland. Her poetry has previously been published in Iris: A Journal About Women, Room of One’s Own, Long Shot, the Web Del Sol Review, and Jewish Women’s Literary Annual. She is a regular book reviewer for Lambda Book Report and Calyx. You can read more of her work at www.JulieREnszer.com.

About the Work

I didn’t have a U.S. passport until I was thirty-five years old. Then, I decided that instead of just being a broad, I wanted to be a broad abroad. I took my wife to Paris for her fortieth birthday. Now, traveling to other countries is an itch that I must scratch every few years.

I had the good fortune of traveling to Asia two times for work. During the second trip, I tacked on four days in Bangkok. It was magical; I want to go back (though there are many other places I want to see first!) The genesis of “One Explanation” was the time in Bangkok, but as a poem it searched around for a while to find experiences besides the telephone call to give it a larger framework. The opening story about my friend and the confrontations with interracial couples on campus is a story that I’ve repeated often. I think about the story because it reminds me that one of the things I want to write about in my poetry is race and racism, and I want to find ways to do write about race and racism responsibly as a white woman.

Writing about race and racism are themes that I both struggle with and reach for in my writing. I believe that white people in the United States have to talk about race more, be accountable for racism and the systems of privileges that we get by being labeled white, and take accountability for the invisibility of whiteness, for whiteness being an unmarked category. So I have a political motivation in wanting to write about these issues, but a political motivation isn’t enough for poetry. It needs art and craft as well.

Much of the revision work of this poem stems from thinking about how to take on this issue artfully and employ the craft of poetry. For me part of the answer came from the answer of the town name in the final lines of the poem. I struggled with this poem on many levels, though. How do I tell the narrative in a way that it makes sense to readers? How do I compress the poem so that it isn’t overwhelmed by narrative and musicality can emerge? How do I deal with the very strong feelings in the poems about race and racism? The most difficult part of completing this poem was deciding to use “the N word” in it. It’s a word that makes me uncomfortable in every context that I hear it. For this reason, I don’t read this poem aloud when I do readings. I’m uncomfortable saying the word aloud and still have a degree of concern in using it in a poem, but it is authentic to me and so while I hold to the discomfort, I am also trying to reach for emotional intensity in the poem.

Elizabeth Bishop is a favorite poet of mine, though I don’t have her degree of emotional distance and remove in my own work. Still, particularly in a poem like “One Explanation,” I think about Bishop and her poems about travel in developing and revising my own work. I also return to the work of Adrienne Rich often for how she expresses her political commitments in her work; her
continuous commitment to her political consciousness in her writing is inspiring, particularly now when one can read volumes and volumes of her poetic output over the course of her lifetime. Rich’s recent essay “Poetry and Commitment” is always on my mind; I try to emulate her poetic sensibilities. Other poet’s whose work I look to for the attentions of art and craft are Jay Wright, Robert Hayden, C.K. Williams, and Audre Lorde. I know that I may never achieve the transcendence of Bishop, Rich, Wright, Hayden, Williams, and Lorde, but when I read them, I revel in being in their presence, and I want to honor their lives and their work.

Julie R. Enszer on the Web

www.lambdaliterary.org/interviews/03/31/julie-r-enszers-archival-instinct/


www.poetserv.org/SRR29/enszer.html

www.junctures.org/issues.php?issue=09&title=Voice&colour=rgb%28176,153,0%29

www.lesbianpoetryarchive.org/
Jeff Frawley

Jeff Frawley recently received an M.F.A. in fiction at New Mexico State University, where he now teaches writing. His fiction has appeared in Ellipsis and Timberline magazines. He was recently awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Hungary, where he will research and work on a novel.

About the Work

Like most of the stories I’ve written, this one blossomed from an image—a frog stuck, for some inexplicable reason, inside a common yet potentially dangerous kitchen appliance—rather than a situation or plot; and like most of my stories, this one was significantly reduced in size from one draft to the next, from forty pages down to ten. I often long to be the type of writer who possesses a full sense of story before sitting down to write, but I suppose I have, over time, learned to go with what works for me. The obvious question when considering the image that spawned this story was, So how did the frog get inside the blender? Over several drafts I found myself intrigued by and committed to the idea of two young brothers who collect reptiles and amphibians now jeopardizing the wellbeing of these exotic pets—an act of “playing God” some might say—in a bizarre behavior that is equal parts mourning, attempting to cope with death, and seeking irrational revenge against their father. Once this complex situation had sprung from that image the story began, as the cliché goes, to write itself.

Or, not exactly. Only a few drafts before this, “How the Natural World Holds Together,” while also having a different title, was over forty pages in length. The characters had names, the narrator access to characters’ thoughts and emotions. Much of my writing process, because so many of my early drafts are loose, unsightly behemoths, involves hacking out unnecessary, frivolous material. It is interesting to me that oftentimes this cut material contains most of a story’s narrative interiority, along with scenes meant to teach the reader (or, more likely, me the writer) the “point” of the story. Once I succumbed to this slash-and-burn revision with “How the Natural World…” I began to understand and embrace the removed, objective, unflinching narrative stance from which this story is told. This narrative stance, I now see, is not so dissimilar from someone staring, “Godlike,” through the glass walls of a terrarium upon some more unfortunate, suffering creature whose behaviors the person watching can attempt to rationalize yet can never truly understand. After many, many drafts I now realize this story is very much concerned with, given an event as tumultuous as death in the family, the irony inherent in “playing God”—that is, offering explanations, extending clemency, affording for suffering—when wisdom and omniscience are in fact very far away.

And this is in essence is my writing process: image spawns character situation, spawns story, spawns revision towards narrative stance, spawns preliminary understanding of theme and “aboutness,” spawns more revision. Lots of spawning. Like frogs in a blender.
Louis Gallo teaches at Radford University in Virginia. He was born and raised in New Orleans. His books include the poetry volumes Omens, The End of Hours, Halloween, The Fascination of Abomination, and The Truth Changes. His novel, Breakneck: A Katrina Fugue, and a poetic memoir of New Orleans, The Lord of Misrule, have been recently published.

About the Work

The two poems chosen for this issue of Segue are both autobiographical in the same sense that just about every work of art is autobiographical: the material must pass through the mind of the artist. Indeed, I do not believe in the empirical myth of objectivity. Nothing is objective as long as whatever we conceive and perceive must first filter through our individual brains. What the poet must do is fiddle with the materia prima and try to transform it into what may seem an objective piece in order that others may respond to it. In these two poems, both about my children, the initial inspiration was, call it what you may, paranoia over their welfare. These children came to me late in life and I have always been over-protective to an extreme degree.

In one case the initial inspiration came from seeing an afflicted boy at the school and immediately transferring the possibility to my own daughter; in the other, taking my very, very young child to the pediatrician. Both poems, however, try to say more, but I have no time to get into that here. Both attempt to transcend the specific and move into the more universal realm that every reader can appreciate. The passage from inspiration to execution is, for me, a matter of logistics and verbal pyrotechnics, that is, to lift the ordinary into a realm of, hopefully, beauty and eloquence. And this involves, simply, the right choice of words, metaphors, symbols, images. That’s the execution in a nutshell.

I believe that the poet’s job today is to help re-enchant a world that has become increasingly technological and “objective.” In the past, this problem did not exist and perhaps poetry had other functions, to teach and delight maybe. Teach and delight now involve the re-enchantment I mentioned. When I read poetry I want to reach a realm of magic and incantation and what I would call “holy” revelation. I want the poem to change reality or open up avenues in reality that we have collectively forgotten or have no time for anymore. To me all poems are spiritual and/or religious, for they seek something beyond what we are merely presented from day to day. And that beyond is the spiritual, however you define spiritual. So I hope my poems accomplish this either very simple or excruciatingly difficult feat.

Louis Gallo on the Web

www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/profile.php?id=31210696
Brenda Hammack teaches courses in Victorian literature, women’s literature, and creative writing at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in a variety of journals including Mudlark, Gargoyle, Caveat Lector, The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review, Arsenic Lobster, Steampunk Magazine, Word Riot, and Pedestal. She has also recently published literary criticism on Florence Marryat’s 1897 novel The Blood of the Vampire. Three of her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.
Derek Henderson lives in Salt Lake City, where he is pursuing a PhD in poetry at the University of Utah. His poems have recently appeared, or are soon to appear, in Witness, CutBank, Black Warrior Review, The Journal, Puerto del Sol and Cream City Review. Inconsequentia, a book-length poem co-written with Derek Pollard, is due out with BlazeVOX [Books] this winter.
David Laskowski

David Laskowski lives in Madison, WI and teaches at Edgewood College.

About the Work

I really wish I knew why I wrote, although, the truth is, I do not. In other words, although I know I enjoy writing and reading fiction, I am not sure I know why it is important and I am not sure I ever will. Yet, I still do it and I do not think, to the chagrin of my checking account, that I will ever stop.

Yet, it is because I do not that I wrote “In and Out,” and most likely why I write every story that I do. I think what I write is an attempt to discover in writing something meaningful. At the center of "In and Out" is the question of whether or not fiction, or literature, can be politically significant. Can it effect change?

To answer this question, I felt I needed to move past what might be considered the traditional short story which can be so often built on contrivances such as “Rowdy watched the prairie dogs run across the dusty gray gravel and felt at peace” or “Rowdy, like his father, liked his cigarettes unfiltered.” In other “words, I did not want to be bound to description. I wanted to feel free to speak to the story's theoretical concerns.

The biggest challenge in writing “In and Out” was walking the fine line, in the words of Spinal Tap's David St. Hubbins, between stupid and clever. In other words, is a talking dog absolutely necessary? I guess I decided that, in the end, like everything else in the story, it was, and probably because a talking dog was just as believable as fiction that could change the world.

David Laskowski on the Web

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cafeirreal.alicewhittenburg.com/laskowski.htm
forgejournal.com/forge/2010/04/01/the-short-history-of-the-short-story/
Claudine R. Moreau

Claudine R. Moreau lives in Burlington, NC where she teaches physics and astronomy to anyone willing to learn, where she runs for her life from the terrors of suburbia, and defies gravity and fatigue in equal parts daily. Her poetry has appeared in Astropoetica, The Bitter Oleander, The GW Review, and Arsenic Lobster. She has work forthcoming in Neon Magazine.

About the Work

Reading poetry often sparks ideas for me. If I’m ever feeling dry, I go to some of my favorite poets for inspiration. My poem in Seque, “Vietnam Vet with Dog, Ya Know the Rest” came from reading Dorianne Laux’s poem “Little Magnolia” in her book Facts About the Moon. In Laux’s poem a homeless man sets up his home each night between a wall of a laundromat and a broken fence. I was immediately reminded of a homeless man that I used to see quite often when I lived in the Washington, DC area. I would see him while commuting home on the bus, standing by the light at the end of the I-395 exit ramp. This homeless man seemed different to me. He recognized that in panhandling in the mecca of panhandlers that he needed to stand out—and stand out he did! He owned a huge German shepherd dog and carried a handmade sign that read “Vietnam Vet with Dog, Ya Know the Rest.” The enormous yellow stuffed bunny rabbit may be a figment of my own imagination, but for some reason I think he might have had one during Easter season one year. I was always intrigued with this man, he stood in that same spot for all 6 years that I lived in the DC area. I started wondering where this guy went to each night? Did he have a spot like Laux’s homeless man? And more importantly, what did I know about “the rest.” What in the heck was the rest? I realized that I truly didn’t know the rest or really much about how many Vietnam Vets became homeless. I began reading a bit more about what these vets have gone through.

When I first start on a poem, I write it down by hand on paper in a journal. Usually the writing sprawls all over the page with arrows and insertions and side notes, and it doesn’t really look much like a poem at first. My next step, which might be right away or days or weeks later, is to take those notes/seeds of the poem and type them on the my laptop, and giving the file a title. What I find is that the real structure of the poem begins to reveal itself, and I begin adding to and whittling from the handwritten material. Once the poem is all in the computer, I will usually print it out and then begin a hand editing and critiquing process. This poem was workshopped last summer with poet John Lane at the Wildacres Writers Workshop in the blue ridge mountains of North Carolina. I’ve never asked questions in poems before and wanted to be sure that I didn’t go overboard with them, nor did I want the questions to really have such obvious answers. I wanted to explore that place that this man went to each night like Laux’s homeless man recognizing that this place was theirs, their sanctuary, their solace no matter how different than my own.

I once heard someone say that poets never lose that childlike curiosity for the world. I can relate to that! It’s why I am a poet.
Claudine R. Moreau on the Web

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Rich Murphy has taught writing and literature for 24 years at Bradford College, Emmanuel College and now at Virginia Commonwealth University. His second collection of poems, Voyeur, was the 2008 Gival Press Poetry Award winner. Other credits include a book of poems, The Apple in the Monkey Tree, the chapbooks Great Grandfather, Family Secret, Phoems for Mobile Vices, and Hunting and Pecking, and poems and essays in hundreds of journals and refereed journals, including Reconfigurations: A Journal for Poetics Poetry / Literature and Culture and Journal of Ecocriticism. He lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts.

About the Work

Each one of the poems was written with the concept that each of the thinkers had in mind (Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre), and then I attempted to apply it in some way to today’s world, responding to the thinker’s idea. My recent poems have responded to poets, fiction writers, and thinkers so that I could compile a collection of poems that allowed me to correspond with these people. I have titled the collection “Stolen Goods.” I see each poem in the collection as a palimpsest, or a séance of sorts, or my entering conversations of culture. The challenge for me was to try to push beyond my understanding of their works to add my thinking on each of their ideas. I was pleased to merely allow a contemporary understanding, or suggestion of tone to stand in for many of my replies in the correspondence.

“Just Outside the Pied Cow” for instance is a response to Nietzsche’s introduction to Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The reader is introduced to how one becomes a child as an adult or becomes what Nietzsche called the “cosmic dancer.” The cosmic dancer has taken on his/her load as a camel might (as heavy as that may be), has become a lion to conquer the desert, and then has slain a dragon of “thou shall nots.” The idea is that the cosmic dancer knows the ‘how’ of living with the rules and roles placed upon him/her by society and knows how and when to play with and even break the rules for his/her own purposes of creating.

“The Cities in One Place” is responding to Freud’s idea that cities are layers of archeology before they are buried, that cities are many cities within the most current one. In his book Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud writes “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.” Here he explains that cities may be palimpsests also: a city rewriting itself. The word implies an unconscious communication or deliberate re-writing across time. The passage spooked me for decades. This idea was of interest to me because cities then become much like the palimpsest in writing. That idea pleases me because it also shows its relation to the shared language idea in contemporary thought.

“The Existentialist’s Judgment Day” uses Sartre’s “bad faith” guide post as one might Moses’ idea of bad faith in a contemporary neighborhood. Recognizing one’s total freedom seems an absurd responsibility to the everyday citizen busy making money and attempting to follow faithfully a religion’s rules. However, There are no excuses for Sartre for whom freedom is a responsibility—not a hooray word but a boo-woo word. The most difficult part of writing these poems is finding the metaphor that I can turn into irony. The “bad faith” idea was easy to write
about as soon as I connected it with organized religion. When I see the possibilities of irony through
the connection, I usually have little trouble writing.

While writing poetry that “echoes” and “corresponds” with earlier and contemporary
writers and thinkers, I approach writing poetry sensitive to metaphors that can be turned into
ironic language that might be used. From there I take the language seriously so that the writer
might have “fun” with it. Ironist poems drive concrete surfaces to address oblique possibility’s
express ways, giving direction to the distant relations to call attention to lost relations and family
resemblances.

Rich Murphy on the Web

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www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIkunkNA80k
www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=30700
clockwisecat.blogspot.com/
Lisa Norris

Lisa Norris’s book of stories, Toy Guns, won the 1999 Willa Cather Fiction Prize and was published by Helicon Nine Press. Most recently, her stories, essays and poems have been published in Fourth Genre (Fall 2007), Blueline XXXI, the South Dakota Review (Fall 2009), Segue (Fall 2007), Ascent (2010), and Smartish Pace (April 2010) as well as the anthology Kiss Tomorrow Hello: Notes from the Midlife Underground (Doubleday 2006). She is an assistant professor of English at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington.

About the Work

Memory inspired the essay, “The Danger is Hardly Greater,” written thirtysome years after the events it describes. I rearranged the piece more than once, looking for meaning and focus. Spilling the drink on Martin’s shirt—seemingly a minor event in memory—became a good way to dramatize character/situation. That became the story’s opening in some late draft (I don’t now recall how many drafts…many, I assure you).

I also struggled with the point of view, eventually deciding to stay closer to the 19-year-old Lisa than to the 50something self who was writing. Reproducing dialogue from so long ago of course required some invention. Many episodes from my “Rock Springs period” are left out, in order to maintain the essay’s focus. That’s always another tough decision to make—what to put in, what to leave out.

I think of myself first and foremost as a storyteller, so for me, both fiction and nonfiction writing are primarily joyful play with narrative. At its best, nonfiction gets me in touch with a wiser self who makes sense of her life in ways that sometimes surprise and delight the bumbler who’s doing the living.

Lisa Norris on the Web

www.lisanorris.us

www.cwu.edu/~english/Faculty/norris.html

readthebestwriting.com/?p=360

ccat.sas.upenn.edu/xconnect/v3/i2/Word/ln1.shtml

www.mid.muohio.edu/segue/vol6.htm
J.M. Parker

J.M. Parker is a researcher in narrative theory at the Institut des Sciences Humaines in Paris, and teaches as an Assistant Professor at a private university in Istanbul. He is currently working on a series of interlocking short stories, of which “The Gambler” is one, as well as a nonfiction volume on the image of foreign cities in American literature. His fiction has appeared in Frank, Gertrude, Harrington Fiction Quarterly and other journals.

About the Work

The material for this story comes from a period when I was taking a lot of notes about things that were happening around me—when a single phrase to describe some one event often shot through my head very clearly and got jotted down and stored – in many different computer files and notebooks that I carried around or worked on. We live so many narrative threads in our lives simultaneously: how to disentangle them? I trusted chronology to solve part of the problem. But chronology alone wasn’t enough. I decided to group my notes around characters.

So this story was supposed to be a portrait—one of a series of portraits that would ultimately fit together to tell a longer story. As I worked, I realized no single person one meets in life can really have his story amputated from all the others. I try. But, as someone who once read other of the stories from this collection said, “Wouldn’t it be nice if all the people you wrote about were just one person?” In a way, in fiction and in life, I believe they are. Don’t we, after all, in moments of laziness, or in moments of clarity, live the same story over and over with different people? This is partly what “The Gambler” is about, and this is why the characters in stories I write are so amorphous and so hard to pin down and tend to run over into each other.

People tell me when I explain a situation aloud I explain all the unnecessary details, leave out the most important parts, and finally neglect to say what I actually mean by telling it at all. There are gaps in this story. Leaving them there, not trying to break beyond the surface of the moments I recorded was one of the hardest parts of writing this piece. I trust the details themselves, the little moments of understanding, of fixation on an object, of a fleeting glimpse recorded on the spot, more than I could ever trust any sense one can pull out of them. One can pull any sense one likes out of an experience or a set of experiences to suit what one wants to see at the moment, and that bothers me, because the sense we make of things changes over time, and perhaps sense should change over time – the sense we make of our lives needs to be malleable in order for us to survive and develop and move on. And yet I like to think that these little moments of seeing are valuable in themselves and of themselves, just as they were. I like to hope that, even as our sense of our lives and their events changes, these little moments might remain fixed, pinned to the table like formaldehyded exhibits, protected from interpretation. That they not be fiddled with or have the dust scratched from their wings in all the moving around that we do with the events of our lives, in our minds, over a lifetime, to make sense of them, for the practical purposes we find for them. Like stones making a castle, I don’t mind if you lay them down and build on them, cement them together, bury them under a structure that rises… as long as you don’t chisel them, don’t fit them together so that they are fused together forever. I like the idea that if the whole thing were taken apart again, each stone, round river rock or chardy broken bit, could have the cement rubbed gently off and sit in your hands, exactly as it was before it became a part of any structure.
Of course this is nonsense, because I do edit, a lot (I tend toward long sentences, with paraphrases that simply will not do—or, no, it’s not even that: I don’t tend toward sentences at all. If left alone on the planet with a pen and notebook, I’m sure I’d never use another sentence again.). Editing is necessary, but I always feel like I’m running a delicate balance between making it legible and killing it. And I take enormously long breaks between rewritings (years).

They say the point of fiction is “making strange.” But if truth is stranger than fiction, then isn’t fiction the banalization of life? I often think writing follows the basic rule of French cooking: take something fresh, do something to it, then do something else to it. That’s art. But life was always better.

J.M. Parker on the Web

isle.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/extract/17/2/425

www.unco.edu/AE-Extra/2003/10/index.html

www.unco.edu/AE-Extra/2005/7/index.html
Tegan Echo Rieske

Tegan Echo Rieske lives in a moldy house in Indianapolis, Indiana, and spends most days, lately, procrastinating on her thesis. Her poetry has previously appeared in nidus, The Southeast Review, and Eclipse.

About the Work

The two poems here are part of a larger series I've been working on for a long time, almost eight years. My brother died before his 30th birthday, I lost my mind, and these poems are about that process—which doesn't just involve losing my sense of the world, but finding a different orientation. I'm really very obsessed with how humans perceive themselves on Earth, how we can so easily miss out on the billions of years that led to this particular organization. I have this impression that a lot of humans feel like hitchhikers on Earth, like we're just waiting around for the end so we can get out of these bodies already and get on with the jam in heaven or the afterlife or whatever, or maybe just be perfect energy instead of so fragile and animal and diseased. These poems are in some respects about how strange the artifice of all this is, our packaged cigarettes and our interstates and constant light pollution and the way we complain about everything, etc. I can imagine human evolution began with a complaint.

In some ways I have a terrible time writing poetry. What I like about the genre is that it provides a way to express something beyond language through words. Like music, it's the space between, the silence, which gives shape and meaning. Nevertheless, I'm really nitpicky with my word choices and line breaks. Obsessive, almost. What I strive for is good music and imagery and an overall sense of experience, but I know I can never be a good judge of my own work. I imagine poems like little rollercoasters or funhouses. I don't always need to make sense of a poem, as long as I can sense something happening, that underground movement.

The two poems here felt a bit more effortless than some of my other work, which isn't to say they haven't been through the most awful amount of revision. What I mean is that I had a clear feeling about the poems, that I wanted to express something about sense of alienation and finitude, about wanting to feel grounded in the world but afraid of what that might mean. It's not just about losing religion, but questioning this whole construct of humanity. That's something I constantly try to do in my poetry, interrogate what's been built up around us.

The link I've provided is another in the series, for those who may be interested.

Tegan Echo Rieske on the Web

www.pitt.edu/~nidus/archives/spring2003/toc.html
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 the author of two books of poetry, Down to the Quick (2007) and One Stands Guard, One Sleeps (2009) both published by Plain View Press, and a chapbook, A Siege of Raptors (2010) published by Finishing Line Press.

About the Work

The idea for “My nightmares are like that…” was generated in a course in ekphrastic poetry that I took this spring. One assignment was to write a poem about a painting we’d selected from the volume, 1001 Paintings You Need to See Before You Die. From the hundreds of paintings I could have selected, I chose The Empire of Light II by Rene Magritte, because years ago I was captivated by the poster of The Son of Man, also by Magritte, which hung on my son’s living room wall (that painting was not included in the volume). The juxtaposition of images in both works didn’t make any logical sense but made perfect sense when I let my imagination flow, and the wit of the art intrigued me. Of course, I often have endless running nightmares.

The first draft of the poem was written in one sitting, which was unusual because I tend to belabor words until they feel right, but for this poem, words flowed onto the page in one long breath. So for this poem the easiest part was the actual writing; in fact, I can’t say that there was a difficult part. The poem was critiqued once in class, suggestions were made about revising a few line breaks, and that was it. Hardly typical of the effort that goes into most of my poems, some of which I’ve worked on for years and I still can’t finish.

I really don’t know why some poems are easier to write than others. I usually map out a poem in my mind before I commit any of it to the page and sometimes what seemed fine in the abstract doesn’t translate to the page and I start over, or maybe if I’m lucky I can rescue a phrase or two. The idea and the actual words are only part of the process. I’m particular about how the poem sounds when read out loud and how it looks on the page. I write many drafts for most poems.

One of the challenges in my poetry, which is typically written in narrative verse, is not to overwrite, which comes naturally. I have had to develop a thick skin when it comes to losing those precious words and even stanzas I worked so hard to perfect. I participate in two critique groups and we always read poems out loud. What I had thought was perfectly clear now raises questions, and sometimes a poem just begs to be judiciously pruned. I’m fortunate to be surrounded with poets, who are also good readers.

Another challenge is of a different nature. The first materials I drew from for poetry, which I started to write in 1996, were the stories I’d heard as a social worker for several decades with the State of New Jersey. I’d worked with homeless families, abused and foster children, and those with mental health issues. Their stories were intriguing and I felt they needed to be told. Poetic form seemed the perfect way to do it, because I was especially influenced by two anthologies: Carolyn Forche’s, Against Forgetting, and Martin Espada’s Poetry Like Bread, both containing poems of political and social commentary and witness. I wanted to avoid sounding patronizing, but rather to communicate the humanity of those too often faced with awful situations and / or choices, as in Paul and Cheryl, where the young mother is dying and asks the social worker to raise her infant or The
Haunting of Alejandro, where a young man with full-blown AIDS impregnates his girlfriend, both poems included in my books. It was from these poems, and others like them, that I developed a real emotional commitment to poetry.

Nancy Scott on the Web

www.nancyscott.net

www.hippocketpress.org/canary/archive_by_author.php?id=58

www.chantarellesnotebook.com/scott2.html

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ravingdove.org/nancyscottwinter09-10
Shelle Stormoe

Shelle Barton Stormoe earned a MA in English Literature from Kansas State University and a MFA in Fiction Writing from Colorado State University. Her essays, interviews, book reviews, blog posts and journalism have appeared on The Writer’s Center Blog, River Teeth, Divide, The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Tales from the South, The Arkansas Times and World Ark Magazine. She won a 2005 Arkansas Arts Council Individual Artist Fellowship for the short story. She currently teaches Writing courses at the University of Central Arkansas. She lives in Little Rock with her husband.

About the Work

“Marguerite’s Monument” is a testament to being patient with a piece of writing, no matter how hopeless it may seem after the first draft. I started writing the essay as a MFA student, well before I was ready to finish it. Marguerite, the primary character in the essay, had died only a few months before. I felt a strong impulse to try to make sense of her story. I turned in a shorter version of the essay to a nonfiction workshop. Though it got generally positive feedback, the readers felt like there was something indefinable missing. No amount of revision seemed to turn it into something I felt did justice to Marguerite. I put the essay away in a file drawer.

It is now six years later and I am working on a completely separate project in which I write about the social pressures related to religion in a small Bible Belt town. This piece sparked a memory, and I started to think about Marguerite again. I dug up the old essay I'd written about her and reread it. I knew that it was time to finish it, and that I was ready to do it. The difference was a perspective I had no access to at the time I wrote the first draft. It painted Marguerite's history obsession as something bordering on deviant. From the outside, from a reporting perspective, it does appear that way. I realized that if I shifted the perspective to consider her motivations, she became much more human.

I stopped looking at Marguerite as an oddity that bordered on historical charlatan and started looking at her as a fellow writer, struggling with the right way to make the history of a backwater place interesting to the rest of the world. Marguerite wanted her stories to have emotional weight that went beyond relating the contents of historical documents. She wanted there to be a statement of some sort that turned little old Dover into the setting for grand triumphs. Like Marguerite, I do become a little obsessed with my subjects. I think all people who write nonfiction do that to do some degree. The subject, to the writer, seems infinitely important, even when it might not seem that way to others. How does a writer resolve that conflict? How does a writer give emotional weight to a story that might otherwise lack it? If you are Marguerite, you turn the stories into romances.

I also began to understand something about why we write history, even personal history, the way we do. The truth is complicated and never completely knowable. There is only closure to history’s stories when we are in a position of retrospect. Even then, closure is still entirely dependent on our points of view according to our own experience. History is interpretation. It is almost impossible to present historical facts in a way that entirely avoids objectifying someone or something.
The actually construction of “Marguerite's Monument” came sort of organically, but I think it accurately reflects the process I went through trying to understand Marguerite. It starts with an imagined scene, cobbled together as best I could from what I knew about the day the Sequoyah's salt pot was installed in Dover square. I started with this scene because it allowed me to immediately determine the urgency of the story. It's not about Sequoyah, it's not about how to write history, it's about Marguerite’s dreams. After I established that significance, I was able to step back and mimic the actual methods I used to understand that---asking people for gossip about her, researching Sequoyah, researching the importance of salt during his lifetime, going back to talk to Marguerite in person, realizing that what I found had nothing to do with Sequoyah at all.

Shelle Stormoe on the Web

Valerie Vogrin

Valerie Vogrin is the author of the novel Shebang (University Press of Mississippi, 2004). Her short stories have appeared in Ploughshares, AGNI, Zone 3, The Florida Review, Natural Bridge, Black Warrior Review, and elsewhere. She was recently awarded a Pushcart Prize, and the winning story will appear in Pushcart Prize XXXIV: Best of the Small Presses. She is an associate professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville where she also serves as prose editor of Sou’wester.

About the Work

This story was the result of an assignment in my Spring 2009 graduate workshop. The challenge I gave them was: “O inventor of fictions, now is the time for you to invent a fictional form, the short story equivalent of the sestina, the tango, the triple lutz, the still life with trout.”

Throughout the semester we examined the question of why dancers, figure skaters, visual artists, and, of course, poets, commonly work in forms (and continue to create new ones), questions of form for fiction writers boil down to questions of length—the difference between micro-fictions and flash fictions, etc.

I hoped that my students would come up with something that was more than an exercise—forms that would stand up to repetition, if not be revered in perpetuity. “Your goal,” I wrote, “is to invent a reproducible form that will nevertheless result in unique works of fiction. That is, if different writers undertake your form, the underpinnings of the form should be evident in each resulting story, but the stories should also be various.”

Once the students had completed their inventions, we exchanged forms. I followed the guidelines for one of my student’s forms, “Belazza e afflizione”—that is, beauty and affliction. She instructed that “unlike the classic story structure, the story will open at the point of climax and then descend into a darker downward spiral, at which point a moment of epiphany will occur. Then the rising action will take place, which will be the moment of transcendence.” It sounded to me like what she was asking me to do— and which I surely would be unable to do—was write The English Patient in 1,000 words.

I’m not actually sure I even did a very good job of following the instructions, but I was glad to have tried; this was a story I don’t think I would have otherwise written. I started with the worst thing I could think of and then had to figure out how to make this awful accident beautiful in any sense of the word—and in a way that wouldn’t diminish the awfulness. I worry that it’s a cruel story. But then, the world seems cruel in this way—the way it insists on forgiveness, on going on—with or without transcendence.

I must report that we didn’t really crack the case regarding form in fiction. At least a handful of the students’ inventions were worthy of further attention and served as valuable starting points, but as far as I can tell no one created the fictional equivalent of the sonnet.
Valerie Vogrin on the Web

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