



R2 THE RICE REVIEW

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A Brief Note from the Editors

Dear Reader,

The first time I heard of *R2* magazine, I smiled. “Typical,” I thought, “that a Rice literary journal should have an equation as a title.” *R2*, an editorial staff member told me, stands for R squared, after the two alliterated letters in *The Rice Review*. I felt a shade too nerdy asking the staff member why the title wasn’t instead *2R*, but soon discovered the reason easily enough on my own. A literary “Review” can drive the learning that happens at “Rice” to a higher scale, a greater order of magnitude—and vice versa. The fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry found in these pages traverse diverse disciplines of thought and creativity. They are works that celebrate, for example, the astronomical phenomena that lead to a human relationship, or the inventiveness and mutability of a formula. It is a notion well articulated in a poem *R2* once published called “MATH 321”: what you hold in your hands is “an exercise in translation.”

This year’s magazine includes not only Rice’s premier undergraduate creative writing, but also, for the first time in *R2*’s history, a selection of visual art. These pieces represent a wide range of styles and media, and were selected for both their individual qualities and ability to participate in conversation with written works. We hope that such an exchange between artistic forms will help *R2* to continue to flourish in the traditions of multiple departments and the university as a whole.

Of course, *R2* would exist only as long-lost MS Word files and poetic doodles in the margins of notebooks across campus if not for a fantastic network of administrative support. The *R2* staff relied on the generous guidance and assistance of multiple contributors to the magazine this year. We are very grateful for the Williams Fund for bolstering a culture of creative writing at Rice. We also appreciate Dean Nicolas Shumway as well as Cary Wolfe, Chair of the English Department, for fostering *R2*’s projects.

We’d particularly like to express gratitude to several members of the English Department faculty who served as unflagging mentors and occasional cheerleaders for *R2* this year. Marcia Carter was a voice of assurance in many a mini-crisis, always ready to advocate for student needs. Hannah Gamble, Rice’s Parks Fellow, lent her incisive judgment to creative decisions and helped us extend active events beyond Rice’s hedges. Marsha Recknagel and Kathleen Cambor donated their time and keen editorial pens to the hairy process of revising rough drafts. Finally, we’d like to thank the six professional authors who were interviewed for this magazine. Their comments offer insight and inspiration for readers who are currently trying to publish their work (or are still glancing timidly at their own literary ambitions, wondering if they should take the plunge).

Well, what are you waiting for? Read and enjoy!

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R2 THE RICE REVIEW

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Philology

Neil VanLandingham

If I said that our conversations
have something to do
with the way the creosote bush
ravels itself into the barbed wire
and around the sun-warped timbers
of a cattle fence, would you know
what I meant? Would the expression bring
to light just the wire-rust in its color or its feel,
pulled out from the grass, the blossoms, the tumbleweed shootout
in that movie we watched once about the Old West?
Could you really disregard the cows?
The animal habits that always graze in the distance of sense.
The map I gave you dragged along its own mystery
so that now all day you think not just about where you are
but also about cartography.
A tuft of hair caught in a barb soughs with the wind.

You will not love me, because

Philomena Bradford

there are 6 878 650 438 people in the world.

There are 6 878 650 481 people in the world,
and by the time you read this, more, so many
more that it may be impossible for your brain
to conceive of the quantity of the difference
in any other way than baby-sitting your new-born
nieces, Sublime & Imogen, during your sister's
date night with Mark, the accountant she married
in the name of love and unprotected sex.
You learn to keep the pacifiers clean over sister's
steak and potatoes, Mark's *two diet cokes, please?*

There are 6 878 651 118 people in the world,
and Janie, the poster-bride of over-active ovaries,
says *there are plenty of fish in the sea* after my
breakup with Dave of the *David&Sons* firm.
She burps her five month old on this coffee date and
I wonder

as we punch the ocean black and blue, depositing
slime in knuckle-to-surface contact, we fill our tanks
and speed to *Moe's Bar* and spread
our legs and stretch our legs to feel our legs,

fornicating in the light pollution
of the great city of,
in the beautiful state of,
in the grand ole country of,
And I wonder,
is there space still for us?

There are 6 878 653 304 people in the world,
and infertile I will not love you, because
I celebrate the biology of this womb
that will never allow such reproduction in me
for I know there is no space for the Ego of the plus one here
and no place for you in the name of love.



Becca Sagastegui, "Fountain Silhouette"

Lifespan

Anna Meriano

For his granddaughter, twenty-two and giddy with possibility, it was a deal-breaker.

“And whatever happened to that nice young man we met, Robert?” He asked her, “Your grandma didn’t scare him away, did she?” The old woman laughed from behind the kitchen counter and pulled the monster face that she used to make at her granddaughter when her daughter wasn’t looking. The girl just shook out her metallic pink hair and laughed her tinkling-bell laugh, the one she had bought with her Christmas money years ago. He could never get used to that new laugh.

“Oh, him,” she sighed, “What a waste of a month.”

“Dumped him already?” Maria asked, shaking her head as she put a soda down on a napkin and joined them at the table. “Why?”

Their granddaughter sipped the soda with a grateful smile and said, “Well, he was okay with all the bells and whistles and the superficial stuff, but it turns out he’s a traditionalist. Wants a lifespan and everything.” She frowned, and dark holo-thunderclouds appeared around her head, flashing silent lightning. “Too bad,” she muttered into her glass, but her sunny smile quickly returned and she added, “he was *hot*.”

Maria gasped and slapped her granddaughter’s hand playfully, scolding her. Daniel laughed with his wife and granddaughter, but for him the visit was ruined, eclipsed by the fear that was waiting in his stomach, waiting with smug certainty. He fingered the bump at the corner of his eyebrow, totally inconspicuous, painless, just like they had promised. “It’s ready whenever you are,” they had assured him, “Just give us a call.”

Maria walked their granddaughter to the door, kissed her cheeks and told her to be good. She closed the door before she could see her child enter the designated green patch of sidewalk where she would collapse like a corpse as her mind entered virtual space, ready to enter the identical body she had left at home. This body would be picked up by the trucks that came every morning; the tissue was recyclable.

Daniel didn’t much like seeing the empty bodies himself, but he had tried transferring his consciousness once, and it wasn’t the horrible experience that Maria insisted it must be. A moment of

darkness, a few minutes of dizziness that he'd been assured would disappear with practice, and he was halfway around the world. He had laughed like a child, delighted. Sometime while he wasn't looking, the world had become a magical place.

Maria saw it differently. To her it was too much, too fast. She watched the news reports with him and read every article he forwarded, but he couldn't convince her to love this futuristic present the way he did. "I could never live in a lab-grown body with a robot brain," she would laugh. "If I'm dead, I want the world to know it, not be fooled by an imposter with my thoughts."

She walked back to the kitchen now, her back stooped, her steps uneven. She was wearing down, withering more and more every day. She dumped the half-drunk soda into the sink, tossed the crumpled napkin away. She looked so frail, so human.

Daniel pushed his fears away, rubbing the bump on his eyebrow. It wasn't too late; she could still change her mind. She *would* change her mind, he was sure of it. She was washing the glass—rinsing it, drying it gently. She loved life too much to give up a chance to keep it. He loved her too much to let her. He would do more research; find a technique that would satisfy her doubts. New ways were always being developed, each more subtle than the last. He would find one that—

He saw her stop, place a hand to her head, frown. Shake her head, take another step toward the cabinet, pause. He saw her face contort into something unrecognizable. He saw the glass slip from her hand, but he would never remember hearing it shatter.

* * *

Hospitals were so old-fashioned. For the new generation, bodies were too temporary to cause problems; anything that went wrong was a job for programmers and engineers, not those blood-and-guts wackos. Hospitals had retreated into cozy corners where the very old could treat the even older, where bodies were still preserved for their own sake, and where people went either to give in to the times or to die.

"She's stable, but this brain won't be able to resume consciousness," the doctor told Daniel with practiced compassion. "It's still perfectly feasible to transfer her, if that's what the two of you wanted..."

Maybe he should have thought about the life they had shared, and how good it had been, and how lucky he was to have had her for that long. Maybe he should have remembered the terror in her eyes when he had come home with the implant that would facilitate his own transfer, should have recalled her voice trembling as she said, "Who could want such a thing?" Maybe he should have listened to the little Maria inside his head, telling him a thousand times in a thousand different ways exactly how she felt about this point. But he didn't. The voice of his fear was much louder.

"Of course," he said without a pause. "And I have my recording ready as well," he tapped his eyebrow. "Can you transfer us at the same time?"

"Oh, I can't do anything about that," the doctor smiled sadly, every line on his face whispering

age and decay, “I have to refer you to a local company. We only handle the mortal coil here.”

Daniel shivered, nodded stiffly, and took the number the doctor gave him without a smile. He made the call immediately, pulling up his phone the second the doctor left the room. The next day the hospital staff helped him transport Maria to the facility. The receptionist told him it could take up to twelve hours to complete a viable recording of Maria’s brain patterns, and that as soon as she was ready, they would call him in. His transfer, thanks to the recording device under his left eyebrow, would be instantaneous.

* * *

It was just like teleportation: everything melted down to a tiny pinpoint of darkness, then came crashing back, only different. His mind was now uploaded into the facility computer. He stood in the center of the clinical white (virtual!) room, barely registering the disembodied voice reminding him that he was welcome to take as much time as he needed here to grow accustomed to things, and that his new exterior was in the clinic ready for him to inhabit whenever he felt comfortable. Daniel looked down at the virtual version of that exterior and felt the unfamiliar flesh move as he grinned—the tan, the muscles, the youthful grace; every inch of it was so well engineered. He was flawless. He admired everything, took a few practice cartwheels, but he was eager to return to reality. Maria would be waiting for him, in a new body of her own. A second life, pure and perfectible, one that never had to end. He gave the command to leave cyberspace and watched the white room dissolve. And then he was there, in the clinic, in reality, already laughing.

“Daniel?”

He was in a cheerful, impersonal room with light blue walls and abstract artwork. A huge window showed that he was high above street level. There was a young woman sitting in a green-and-blue striped armchair in front of him. She was unfamiliar, neutral in all aspects, from her is-it-blonde-or-brown hair to her overly symmetrical face, and down to her perfectly shaped bare toes. Maria had terrible bunions.

“Maria.” He tried hard to keep the question out of his voice when he said her name. He wanted to run to her, to feel her in his arms and prove that she was still with him, but the foreign body made him shy. “How do you feel?”

It was strange to see the brand-new face make such a well-known expression. She eyed him as though he had just come home late and staggering. “Daniel, did I die?”

He didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. He shook his head violently, but Maria just sighed.

“Are we still in the computer right now?”

“No, no,” he said quickly, stammering as he always did under her glare, “We’re here—it’s the clinic on Riverhead and 14th; you’ve seen it. And I know it seems like—but nothing’s changed, really. It’s just the outside that’s new. I’m still—and you’re still—and I will always... Maria?”

She was on her feet. Walking to the window, staring out, the face that wasn't hers perfectly blank.

“Maria...”

She turned, walked toward him. He smiled hugely and held out his arms, but she stopped several feet away from him with the saddest eyes he had ever seen.

“I'm not Maria.”

The graceful body spun around, ran toward the window, and dove through it, glass shattering in slow motion while Daniel watched, frozen again. Going, going, going...gone.

* * *

The programmers made the suggestion immediately: a tiny modification in the code, the most basic de-bugging. He refused of course, enduring their patronizing smiles as they tried to change his mind. In the end, they agreed, and even called up one of their most charismatic care-providers to be in the room for Maria's second reincarnation. His speech about the glorious transhuman tradition, though, fell on a perfectly shaped pair of deaf ears; the second he turned his back, she was out the window again. Daniel never got to say a word to her.

“She needs time to adjust,” he told the programmers when they made their offer a second time. So they booted her up in the basement, protected from the dangers of plate-glass and concrete.

Daniel talked to her. She listened when he told her that she was herself, that everything that had made her was still alive in her new body. She disagreed. She listened when he told her he couldn't live without her. She disagreed. She listened when he told her that she owed it to herself to keep on living. She laughed outright.

The clinic talked to her. She smiled and nodded, allowed her eyes to show hope and her face to show acceptance. She was calm, polite—distant, but not desperate. They were fooled. They let her fill out the appropriate paperwork, let Daniel escort her to the lobby and outside. She threw herself in front of a truck one block from the building.

He hired a shrink. Maria's fifth life began on a leather couch with a round-faced old man who asked her how she felt about that. When he proclaimed her issues resolved, Daniel brought her home, hoping the familiar setting would have a soothing effect. She filled her brand-new body with every cleaning solution and over-the-counter drug she could find. This time she left a note, typed and left open on the refrigerator screen:

Daniel,
You know what I wanted. Please stop.
--M.

* * *

“Do it.”

He was back at the lab with a group of programmers. They were dressed casually, lounging in the meeting room with holo-boards in their laps, projecting screens that they fiddled with as they explained the simplicity of the modification. Daniel wished they would sit up straight, or shave, or wear the old white coats he remembered—anything that would have lent weight and gravity to the meeting. Instead they reminded him of his granddaughter, and he wondered for a moment how they could be so young. Then he looked down at his own body and remembered that youth was a fashion statement these days. He stared at his hands and tried to imagine the programmers as stern old scientists when he said, “Do it.”

So they did it. The code was rewritten, the changes were made, the body was manufactured and the brain was uploaded. New and Improved Maria hanged herself from the ceiling fan a week later.

The programmers apologized profusely and made a few more edits to the recording, certain that now everything would be perfect. So certain, in fact, that they forgot to keep her away from high windows. Watching the glass shatter as she dove—again—Daniel couldn’t even work up the horror he knew he should feel. The programmers got annoyed after that, making changes with furrowed brows and violent keystrokes. They assured Daniel even more definitively that his wife *would* be cured of her dangerous tendencies, not to worry. The anomaly went deeper than they had assumed, but they would eliminate all of it eventually. It was only a matter of time.

* * *

Three suicides later, Daniel sat on at the kitchen table next to the new body that housed the latest version of the woman he loved.

“I can’t believe you guys finally did it,” his granddaughter was saying, “I mean, it’s great; I’m so happy for you, but...it’s totally weird. It’s so...wow! I had no idea you were both going to come out so sexy!”

She glanced at the female body, expecting a response, but it was only staring into the cup of soda Daniel had placed in its hand, watching the bubbles rise. His granddaughter laughed nervously, bells chiming in the gaping silence. Daniel forced a smile; asked his granddaughter about her new job and let her gush for a while. They talked for several minutes before she asked the inevitable question.

“Grandma, how are you liking it? You haven’t really said much. Is everything ok?”

Daniel flinched, but the body looked up from its glass and smiled a perfect, vacant smile. “Everything is wonderful. Thank you, dear.” It turned to Daniel, and as hard as he searched he couldn’t find any hint of rebellion in its eyes. In a single gulp it finished the rest of its soda and placed the empty glass on the table, still smiling.

“I really am very happy.”



Sue Monk Kidd

Interview by Maggie Sulc

Sue Monk Kidd is a best-selling author and memoirist. Her novels include *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*, the first of which sold over 6 million copies and was adapted by Fox Searchlight into an award-winning feature film. Though Kidd began by writing nonfiction that explored theological and feminist themes, her interests turned to fiction after she enrolled in a graduate writing course at Emory University. Her newest book, *Traveling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story*, is a dual memoir co-authored with her daughter.

In an interview about *The Secret Life of Bees*, you said that answering the question, “What does she want?” helped you develop Lily’s character. Do you use this strategy often?

This is the seminal question for me as a novelist. When I am trying to understand my character, I ask, “What does my character want?” I was a little lost when I was first starting to write *The Secret Life of Bees* because I didn’t clearly understand that. And when you don’t clearly understand your characters’ motivations, the story can float away from you. One day I was trying to understand my story, and this question came to me. Suddenly it clicked in my head and I thought, “She wants her mother.” Everything then becomes in a way connected to that question and it moves that story. It lets us see into the character and understand her on all kinds of levels. And then that leads to other questions. “What does my character want?” but then you can ask, “Why does she want it?” and “Why can’t she have it?” And these are some simplistic questions, but in the process of answering them, I think you find the nuances, complexities, and ambiguities, which are all important for developing characters. I want my story to drive from my character. And this comes from the deepest impulse of her heart, from that particular question: “What do you want?”

Do you have any similar processes for nonfiction? How does it change when you go to memoir and you’re dealing with yourself as a character?

I don’t know how to describe myself as a writer sometimes. People will call me a novelist, and then they’ll call me a memoirist, and I just stick with writer for the most part. But with the nonfiction stories in particular, I want to write narrative. And so whether it’s the narrative of a character that I conjure up in my imagination, or the narrative of my own self, what is most fascinating to me is the narrative. They sound dramatically different, fiction and nonfiction, but both of them are about the narrative. When I first started writing, what drew me into writing was story, the spell that a story can cast over someone. You learn things you could never learn in any other way. You are more confined of course by facts and the truth of the

experience in memoir. So one reason I began to explore fiction was because I wanted to set my imagination free; I wanted to conjure things, too. And I found out the only difference for me in writing fiction and nonfiction is that you either stick to “It’s the facts, ma’am” or you let your imagination go. But it’s essentially story.

How was writing collaboratively in *Traveling with Pomegranates* different from working on your other novels and memoirs?

Collaborating with anyone on a book is daunting. It can also be very satisfying. Writing this book with Ann was probably the most complicated book I’ve ever tried to write, and yet I had this chance to work with her in this very intimate way. But it doubles everything. It’s much more complicated because you have to negotiate the twists and turns of collaborating and blending two visions. It’s a very interesting thing and I learned a lot. But I think the same reason that it’s the hardest book I’ve written is also the reason it’s the most gratifying. I wouldn’t go into that without your eyes open. Ann and I have a very congenial relationship. We never had the big fireworks in our mother-daughter relationship that some mothers and daughters have. But we wrote as honestly as we possible could about our relationship and the struggles that we did have. The only real friction we had in writing was because I’m so slow as a writer and she’s very fast. We had two very different styles, so you just have to take those things in stride.

The South seems to be a very important location for you, and *Traveling with Pomegranates* put you in a much different location: Europe. Was that a big change for you?

Place is very important in my work. I remember once I read something about Eudora Welty’s writing in which place is almost like a character. I thought that was the most incredible idea that an author could write about place in a way that the place itself rises to the level of a character. In order to do that, you have to write about a place both lovingly and subversively. And when I was writing *The Secret Life of Bees* that’s what I was always trying to do. I wanted to write about the South, its darkness and its light. By that, I mean I had to tell the absolute truth and talk about its tragedies and cruelties, its failures and its violence. But I also grew up in the South so I could write about its charm and its beauty and its humor. But what I realized when writing *Traveling with Pomegranates* was that it’s just place. Wherever we are, it’s how to engage that place. And while the South is deeply inside of me, I’ve found that even traveling in Europe, the places became catalytic to my experience. They called forth ideas and possibilities; they changed me. It’s not just the familiar place that is so embedded in you; it’s also the far-flung place that you just met. They can both become characters in your life.

Grassroot

Ross Arlen Tieken

I. Salvation

Driving out of Houston
is emancipation.
Sugarland yields to cotton-land
and the highway smooths and thins.
Watching the fields move in wind
is a bad idea going seventy.
That '*come here*' sway
calls the day to close
as the dome of grey breaks
in the distance, fades.
It's still a long drive. Usually
I stop on the way
for a Dr. Pepper with real sugar,
a gas station in Eagle Lake.

On the way down, or west,
My car crawling through towns
annoys the hell
out of me. But arriving, I see
that single stoplight,
And I've got to slow
down anyway. In reverence,
if nothing else.
I see Friday's,

think of poppyseed rolls
 and *real* kolaches,
 Welhausen park
 and remember all the days
 walking Ginny's dog, the vacant
 building that used to be Williford's
 where I would go
 to get limeades, but just
 on Wednesdays.

II. Sanctuary

I'm finally home hearing
 the tall grasses sweeping
 the sides of my car,
 the crunch of dirt roads,
 overjoyed that I'm far
 from my concrete 'home.'

Brother's got bigger, by a lot.
 and the sisters have certainly not
 gotten any smaller, their greeting
 threatens to break my back.
 German genes are breaking
 through! I can't help but laugh.

Things here haven't changed much,
 Mom says, seems to apologize, but
 that's exactly why I'm here.
 A turtle is a helluva lot simpler
 to catch than a whitetail deer.
 What do you think is hunted here?

III. Sunset

Hay and beer.
 The smell of my buddy's barn,

I'm tempted to ask, what
am I doing here?
These guys gave me hell—
I was different in school.
Oh well.
I'm handed a Shiner,
crickets are chirping,
and we sit on the tailgate
watching the sun tumble under
the water-tower and live-oaks.
Perdy, ain't it?
Fer shor.

In conversation, the first lines are devoted
to budding careers
and funny stories from college.
Midway, I notice
our beers are running out.
Our words turn
to what we miss.

'I miss the pastures,' says one.
'I miss nights out here at the barn.'
'Remember that time you bought
those cigarettes from Juan?'
'Yeah, and we drove on break
from marching band and smoked 'em.
We thought we were so damn cool.'
'We *were* so damn cool.'

A couple of us have stuck around
working on farms, in the garage
on tractors and horses and trucks.
It's hard to talk, but
we try, anyway.

A few more beers,
 my twang starts pokin' through the tweed
 and suddenly g's don't matter,
 'fire' becomes 'far,'
 and I'm *gettin' tard*.

We start missing
 each other and begin
 to wonder—why
 did we ever leave?
 Probably the dominos talking.
 And the music.
 Maybe the beer.

IV. Sunrise

In the morning, I'd usually
 have a headache, but somehow today
 I feel lighter.
 I look out the big window, see
 the hay blowing in autumn
 and the sun rising
 over the field.

While the rest
 of the world searches
 for something real,
 we've got it here,
 but we don't let on.

Perdy, ain't it?
Fer shor.



Mathison Ingham, "Work Unfinished"

Hurt

Jerome Ellsworth

1.

Nothing. Do you understand what nothing is? I think of nothing, and I think of carnage, and I understand what it is to be human.

2.

Her name is Carla. She is nothing. By which I mean, she is not real.

I have become convinced of this. There is no such person as Carla. I made her up. She is fictitious. She is my fake, pretend girlfriend, named Carla.

Don't judge me; it isn't sexual. People always think it's sexual, but Carla isn't that kind of girl. She's saving herself for marriage. She goes to church on Sundays. If I ever approached her like that she would probably break my arm. That's how she is.

All the same, she's mine. She's mine because she lives in my head.

3.

My name is Jerry. I am nothing. But I'm not nothing in the same way that Carla is nothing. Let me illustrate:

One of my professors in college once posed this question:

If a particle enters the earth, interacts with nothing—not even a single electron—and then exits the earth,

does it exist?

The answer was no, because nobody noticed it.

That is the sense in which I am nothing: If the universe had happened without me, you wouldn't have noticed. I hold influence over nothing but my imagination.

It's fortunate that Carla is a construction of my imagination.

4.

Carla and I broke televisions at Wal-Mart.

5.

Carla adopted a cat once. It was orange and chubby. Every so often, it refused to eat until she changed brands of cat food. It was a worthless hunter. I used to marvel as it sat still and meowed at mice while they freely explored Carla's apartment.

One of Carla's other friends and I once helped her move some furniture into that apartment. I forgot to close the door, though, and the cat ran away. Next week, we discovered that it had evidently found the boiler room. I saw it, and it was fried—literally fried—like a chicken; it didn't look like a cat anymore.

If Carla hadn't adopted it, the shelter would have put it down.

She cried over that thing for weeks.

6.

I held my face in my hands and rocked back and forth on my butt.

Before that I had tried to kiss her. I tried to kiss her, and she pushed me away.

Then I told her she was being a bad imaginary girlfriend, and she broke my nose, and that's why I was holding my face in my hands.

7.

Carla liked to help the poor. She volunteered at soup kitchens and bused tables and moved chairs and did laundry for the homeless. Sometimes she made me come along.

One time, an old bum with blond hair took me aside and he said:

I know you won't be able to do anything, but I just want you to know this: These people pretend to be Christian, but they aren't. They pretend to help us, but they don't really. They're not like they seem.

I nodded at him. I knew that already. It's simple. Ask yourself: If our society helps the homeless so much, why do they still need as much help as they ever did?

Carla helped the homeless nearly every week.

8.

Carla was going to go to business school. I was at her apartment, and I asked her if she wanted to break computers, and she said she couldn't do that anymore—she was going to business school. She was going to do something important with her life.

I held my head in my hands, and she went away to do something in her bedroom, and I started a fire in her microwave.

We are both nothing, I thought. A little bit of conflict isn't going to hurt anybody.

9.

When she broke my right pinky finger, I wondered how somebody could hurt me so much if she was pretend.

God damn her, I thought. She should have known better than that. I imagined her better than that.

10.

Carla left for business school, and I held my head in my good hand, and I meditated.

We were particles moving through the world, unnoticed and independent, except she had a trajectory that I hadn't given her. Eventually, she strayed from me, went off, and collided with whatever she felt like colliding with.

Now there is just one particle on Earth, interacting with nothing, and another that's having crazy, wild parties with Mars.

How could a figment of my imagination betray me like that?
Fuck it. I don't know. I just break things.

Sea Dreams

Lilly Yu

cornsilk yellow, seawater green,
full of dark star-point eyelash eyes.

he wants to touch her shoulders and kiss her clavicle
and ask her what she wants to drink –
pale green martinis, tall glasses of pink daiquiris
glistening with water vapor.
(she wants sparkling Perrier, the sunshine of lemon zest)

he wants to know what she wears to bed
(silky foam-pink nightgowns)
and how she always smells like gardenias, salt-water,
a mixture of green chlorine (from the kiddie pools,
in Jackie-O sunglasses and pale-pink lips, pearls,
eating pistachio ice cream under the white sun)

he wants to know if he can take her hand,
her sea shells for fingernails,
and grasp the small bones in her wrist,
the sun-dust on her fingertips, on her eyelids
above those wet star-point lashes.

he wants to ask if she will lead him by her hair,
yellow and fresh cornsilk green



Sasha West

Interview by Stephanie McLeod

Sasha West's poetry and reviews have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *American Poet*, *Margie*, *Born*, *Chelsea*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Callaloo*, *Third Coast*, *Forklift Ohio*, and elsewhere. She holds graduate degrees from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Houston; while attending the latter, she was awarded the Verlaine Prize for her dissertation. West served as editor of *Gulf Coast* for three years and is currently the journal's Board President. She taught creative writing courses at Rice University between 2007 and 2009.

You taught several creative writing workshop classes at Rice between 2007 and 2009. What did you learn from that experience? What have you been up to since then?

I think of a writing workshop as a laboratory experience for all involved. The basics of what makes writing great don't change, but my understanding of the nuances of great writing expands each time I teach. Every time a student submits work creates an opportunity to think anew about writing. Each poem we read asks us to approach anew the questions: what can poetry be? how is it made? Sometimes the problem-solving for a poem is apparent—the models or successful guides are near at hand—but sometimes to be useful to a poem, and thus its author, I must expand my ideas and imagination to meet it.

Since Rice, I've done other teaching—poetry workshops and some literature. I've also started editing books of poetry for friends and former students—which I love because you can have discussions on the level of the individual poem while thinking about what happens when poems accumulate into a larger structure. Now I'm working at the Texas Legislative Council editing legislation. That's fascinating because the world of legal and government language is so different from the worlds of the literary and visual arts. It is also one of the few places where language is still so exact and charged—adding a comma can change a law.

You've been involved with *Gulf Coast* for several years in different capacities. What have you learned from that experience? How does your work with *Gulf Coast* intersect with or inspire your own writing?

While I worked as an editor, I learned the most from the writers we were reading and selecting for publication. That job gives you a different sense of the zeitgeist among your contemporaries. It's the best way I know to get at a (mostly) uncurated, unmediated view of what writing looks like in America right now. I'd be obsessed with something—say, snowglobes—and then realize all of these other writers I did not know living in places I'd never been to were obsessed with the same thing. Sometimes I could see that common obsessions were arising from historical events or the influence of a particular writer, but sometimes they would be idiosyncratic and curious. That, and seeing how engagement in an interest in form is playing out nationwide, changed the way I felt in dialogue with my times. I understood more intuitively both the failings

and potential greatnesses in how we are writing now.

As Board President, I'm thinking a lot more about community and the general role (ethical, economic, and educational) that the arts can play in the lives of a nation's citizens. That doesn't feed as directly into the writing, but anything that gives you a practice of looking at the world in a different, larger way I have to believe affects and improves the work.

In your Introduction to Poetry Writing class here, you had some interesting suggestions on how to revise a poem. For example, you suggested cutting the lines apart and rearranging them to see if they fit together better in another way. What's your revision process like? Do you have any other suggestions for how to re-imagine an old poem?

It feels to me like every poem needs its own revision process. There's a sort of tyranny of form and shape that happens when the first draft of a poem is done: we start to recognize that poem as looking that way, and so it can be hard to make it something else—even if that new thing is better and more true to the impulse of the work. Sometimes a poem takes time, a slow turning in the head of what is possible for it, what else can exist in its imagined world. I'm always looking in drafts—my own and other people's—for places that the imagination can break back in and expand or deepen. Sometimes it helps most to read other writers who are trying to solve a similar problem. To some extent, every writer has to find his or her own best revision process in the same way we each have to find our own best writing practice.

Your poetry treats subjects as diverse as Greek mythology (“Odysseus,” “Orpheus and Eurydice”) and the thoughts of animals (“Zoology,” “The Mind of the Thoroughbred Racing”). Do you find yourself drawn to particular themes or images? From where do you get your inspiration?

Our obsessions are important as inspirations. Richard Hugo says he couldn't have written poetry were it not for the word “gray,” and reading his poems, you quickly see that's true. Animals are one of my obsessions; in fact, “Zoology” came out of my realizing that and deciding to try to get as many animals into a single poem as possible. I am generally most inspired by kernels gathered from the visual arts and reading in other subject areas. Right now, I'm going back and forth between Julian Jaynes's book on the breakdown of the bicameral mind and Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague*. The disciplines of psychology/philosophy and pathology seem unrelated, but this juxtaposition is making me see how the intrusion of a new form of consciousness into a culture or an individual can mimic or echo the intrusion of a disease into a body. Their descriptions sometimes are eerily parallel. I'm interested in things like that—ways myth can become meaningful to a modern age, bridging the gap between my mind and another's. The linguistic root of metaphor suggests the act of carrying something across. I guess that is the action I am always trying to perform on the world and myself in my poems.



Logan Beck, "Hunstville, TX (2009)"

Noble Savage

Ross Arlen Tieken

A Grandmother can be a Wise-Woman. She can be a Shaman or an explorer, and then she can be a guide to the Spirit World or the wilderness, depending upon your fancy. And then you can journey there alone and find magic there she never showed you, but probably saw for herself.

I call my grandmother Ginny, because I couldn't pronounce Granny as a child. Now everybody in the family, even my mother and girlfriend, call her that. A conventional title doesn't seem to fit her, and she's not a matriarch. We can't really figure out what she is, which is why I had to make up a name, I guess.

She moved down from Oregon to the sun-scorched prairies of Central South Texas to be closer to her hometown and her grandchildren. That was when she took up my religious education. Our family has roots going deep in Shiner, deeper than the grass-roots, deeper than the parched loam, deeper even than the caleche that chinks up fence-posts. My great-grandfather built our house, ran a bakery in town, and made concrete construction materials at an old tin building down our driveway. By the time I was born, the building was as shabby as an old man's favorite jacket, with the tin roof sliding off like patches and bits of concrete laying around. The chunks of concrete reminded me of the bone-yard where we dragged our dead cattle. Some of the pieces were useful, though, and we dragged them up to our house to border planters and fill in gaps in our sidewalk. About 100 yards away, in the pasture, lay an abandoned concrete staircase, too heavy to move. Who knows why it was there? The stairs seemed to lead to an invisible door, somehow hovering concealed in the shimmering layer of heat above the ground. The runners of tan bermuda grass grew over the bottom steps, making them seem like they grew right out of the pasture. But the top four steps stood proudly above the rolling fields, white-washed by the brightness of the sun, stark against the grey Texas sky, full of mountainous cumulus clouds. The steps were hollow on the inside, so they made the perfect hideout for me, the perfect cave. I avoided the heat by climbing under the stairs, which even at two o'clock in the middle of a July afternoon were as cool to the touch as the other side of the pillow when you wake up from a fever dream. In this cave, I was initiated into the Ginnaic mysteries.

She was one of those "New-Agers," a genuine Northwesterner. She would come out to the farm

with my grandpa, and while he talked about the cows with Dad, she would walk out into the pasture with me. She and I could spend hours out there among the tall grasses. She always looked at the ground when she walked, pausing occasionally to pick up a stick or shield her eyes to look at a vulture (she called them 'buzzards'). Then she'd smile in her funny way, her huge cheeks covering up her eyes. Hugging her was like stepping into a kitchen, with the smell of my grandpa's famous bread, and garlic, the most common ingredient in our family's cuisine. She had grey wispy hair that seemed like Navajo feathers when they picked up in the wind, or stood straight with static charge. She would say to me, "Tell me what this plant is," or, "This is how you catch a lizard." She made me try most every plant in the field until Mom was afraid I'd poison myself! She walked with me on the prairie for acres, showing me where the edge of our farm used to be. I would breathe in the sharp scent of wildflowers and cattle. I got to know every cicada by her side, and every pothole, and how every blade of grass tasted when you pulled the stalk and stuck it between your teeth. We'd make imaginary fires with rings of broken concrete and buffalo chips (really cow-patties), and dance around in a circle to call down rain, or sit around them "Indian-style" and she'd tell me Inuit fables while I interrupted with facts about my favorite dinosaurs.

I think the real exploration happened in my cave. During Easter-time, when the wildflowers covered the sides of the road, she and I picked spiderwort and Indian paintbrushes and bluebonnets and sun-wheels and wine-cups and other wildflowers. I crushed them up with two stones into a pale watery dye. I took off my shirt and hollered my rain song. While Ginny sat patiently outside, smiling knowingly (she always had that smile!), I stole into my cave and began to paint with the flowers. When I ran out of crushed-up dye, I would pick the flower and discard the rocks, pressing the petals against the cool grey stone, oozing the color. The hues would linger for a moment before evaporating. They left smudges, tinted shapes of flowers and lines and spirals. The shapes were crude, primitive, child-like, but I knew they were art. Not the kind you see in an art museum, but primitive art, cave art. That place became for me the very cave from which the first true human emerged with paint on his hands and Promethean fire in his eyes. The cave became sacred to him, like some massive earthy womb, and instead of a baby it bore a man, a human, an artist. When that man died, his family mourned, and burned his flesh away and rubbed his bones with red ochre. The red was the blood of the earth, the blood of birth, and they laid his scorched bones in the dark folds of the cave, surrounded by his phallic spears and umbilical swirls. The first human was returned to the womb of the Earth, covered in blood, as he had emerged.

I was born there, too, singing and whooping under the shocking sky and the dancing grass with this half-pagan grandmother of mine.

* * *

Seems to me the invisible door above the steps had led to a different world, or the same world, but for the first time, perhaps I was seeing it from the inside out. The initiation in my cave was the most natural thing in the world. Maybe that's the point. The land itself called up these impulses in me, and

Ginny helped me notice them. Ginny was a midwife, and helped me be born into that place. She was a Shaman, and I an acolyte. She beat a drum and sang an incantation that awakened something in me. The Spirit World had always been right next to me, and the door that led to Home was right there in my pasture. The holiest part of my world doesn't lie anywhere but right here, in my body dancing around my imaginary fire, napping under pecan trees, inhaling the must of horse trailers, letting my feet wander the rolling prairies, letting my mind wander the sky. That sky! God, it reached to forever, swallowing thunderheads and vultures and smoke from burning brush-piles. I let the vastness of that landscape stretch and echo my imagination.

When I go home now, I feel relieved. I am watered by the dry earth. Standing in the back pasture facing the west just as the sun is blazing the horizon, I feel roots break through the soles of my boots and crawl into the caleche. Even though the ground is dry as bone, I feel water shoot up through the roots, and pump itself into every vein.

When I go back to school, back to Houston, the roots don't break, but stretch and tense and thin. I think I study religion now because of what happened back then in Shiner. I am fascinated by paganisms, those ancient religions whose only heaven is the sky that the rain falls from, watering their fields of grain. All that is left of them are 'superstitions' and songs and romantic notions of Druids singing in stone circles. A scholar of paganism can never truly understand the heart of their rituals, because we are so far removed from the pagan's time, the heathen's culture. A scholar cannot make conclusions about anything that the physical evidence doesn't provide for, unless he wants to put himself at risk by delving into "theory." An easy question to answer as a scholar is, "What did pagans believe about soil?" An impossible question to answer as a scholar is, "How did it *feel* to be a pagan?" But that's the question that we "scholars" really want to answer. I couldn't say this in class. My fellow academics would look at me as if to ask, "What text are you taking *that* from?" After throwing book after book aside in frustration, in the middle of night, trying to escape this halogen-infested city, I realized that I can't study this question. But, just like when I ran out of prepared dye, I have to reach for a wildflower anyway. I've realized the question is imperative.

How did it feel to be a pagan? The stars are much closer to them, and the moon is a lamp hung just out of reach. The entire universe revolves around their known world. They live completely, without sectioning and labeling parts of their lives. No politics, no religion, no family, no economics, no career exists for them. All the spheres of their lives are part of one impulse, one dance, and every sacred space breathes the air of mystery. Each season is a terror and a wonder, and often both simultaneously. The eccentricities of nature, left unexplained, gather around them a magic of their own, and the pagans begin to see fairies and tree-spirits and water-nymphs. Even though each tribe is surrounded by untold leagues of open land, the land is never lonely. When the pagans must move, they come to the new place and sanctify it with a ritual, swathing the area in incense, creating order out of chaos, re-enacting the creation of the universe. That place becomes an invisible door into the Spirit World.

I don't know this because I read it from a book. Perhaps I know this because I lived that way,

too, on the Texas prairie. My cave has become the center of the universe, and no matter how hard I try, I can't imagine that the constellations are more than a stone's throw away. Houston is farther away than the moon.

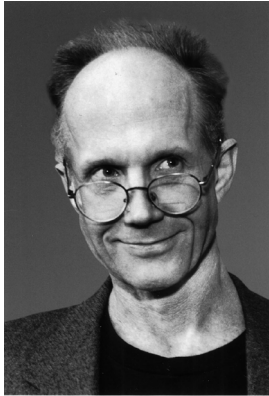
Everything is humming, but it's hard to notice, because the sound is as quiet and constant as the blood rushing through your ears. The steel and glass of the city covers it up, and the police car sirens and lurid colors of the billboards shout over its thrum. The closer I get to my cave, the louder the hum gets, and when I step inside, I realize that the hum is the rush of a hot breeze through tall grass, the sound of cows chewing and gates creaking, and the roar of the sun burning a hole in the grey Texas sky. Ginny made me listen to that music. Ginny showed me that I *belong* on the prairie. The grass and the sky call me home and when I'm there, the music sets me back into the rhythm of the seasons. The music and the incense of the land is something shared by all these fathers and mothers who run in my blood, even unto the very dawn of man. To my deep, deep roots. I come back to Houston with this swelling intuition in my bones, and having picked up the rhythm of my world once more, I become freshly aware of the tiny changes in myself that accompany the dance of the seasons, and inhale the books, a different holiness, with deeper understanding, a different *rhythm*.

I know how to be a pagan. I know that I need to go back whenever I stop hearing the music. The drumbeat of the grasshoppers, the incense of the prairie leave my cave in a state of permanent sanctity, and Ginny, the wise-woman who helped me hear what Texas wanted desperately to teach me, lives there, too. She lives there, in her yellow-brick house in town, and in the prairies, one hand on my cave, with the wind ruffling her hair, with her cheeky smile, with knowing pressed upon her aging eyes, with the stumbling clouds. With the red ochre and cattle.

The Dynamics of Song

Neil VanLandingham

Her bones were whittled to brittle slivers
wrapped in burlap and thrown into the rain
where they will wait on the curb for a bus
to never come, for such is the way of sadness.
Yet tonight knows the difference between you and her.
The unquenched firestorm of your laughter and the hard fast quake of your flesh,
as if whatever surfeit of greenness is in the grass
or whatever outpouring of the tree is in that oak that shades your window
has struck you like an incendiary bomb
and engulfed your hair, which, singeing and curling,
vaults forth in rising embers
like fireflies that dwindle upwards
into a birthing of stars.
How does she belong with you
in this fugue we name a life?



Tony Hoagland

Interview by Sunkyo Lee

Born in North Carolina in 1953, Tony Hoagland has published several collections of poetry that have won numerous honors. His works include *Unincorporated Persons of the Late Honda Dynasty*; *What Narcissism Means to Me*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Donkey Gospel*, winner of the James Laughlin Award; and *Sweet Ruin*, chosen for the 1992 Brittingham Prize in Poetry and winner of the Zacharis Award from Emerson College. He has also published *Real Sofistikashun*, a collection of craft essays about poetry. He currently teaches at the University of Houston and Warren Wilson College.

Often in your poems, it's hard to keep in mind that the narrator and the poet are not the same person.

In general, when you're writing, do you think of your speaker as a character as opposed to a rendition of yourself?

The author, narrator, and characters of a poem often weave in and out of each other's identities, in and out of fiction, performance, rhetoric, and frankness. Since Confessionalism, we think of any first-person speaker as being the author of the poem. Using that assumption with tonal quickness and sneakiness is one of the ways in which poetry can keep a reader interested and keep the conversation charged. Taking for granted that every person is actually a host of selves, not one fixed and consistent self, identity is less regulated and less neat a package than we suppose it to be. Each of us is actually a hotel full of conflicting voices, all of them trying to get the upper hand, and though we have some control of all those selves, it is not by any means total control.

In my poems I want the speaker to be alive to all the different internal selves. Those selves include rather mature, grownup figures, but also include wounded selves, angry selves, racist selves, sexist selves, assholes and saints, homosexual selves, and so on and on. Poetry can put our true chaos and conflicts on display, and de-pathologize or destigmatize some of those forbidden territories of the self—give them air and let other people (readers) feel relief that such anarchy, lunacy, and childishness is “normal,” and not the end of the world. Such poetry is called “dialectical” because it puts many possibilities of selving in active dialogue.

You said in one interview that you discovered poetry as a very troubled adolescent. Is there a specific poem among your work that you'd like to give to a troubled adolescent?

Some of those poems would be the following: “Dickhead,” “Beauty,” “Carnal Knowledge,” “Hearings,”

“Sweet Ruin,” “America,” “Oh Mercy.”

Mainly I want people, especially younger people, to know that failure is inevitable, complete confusion is to be expected, and no big deal. If you aren’t screwed up, you probably haven’t been paying attention. Each person has to fight her or his way to autonomy, understanding, and self-reliance. Most of us don’t grow up in a culture, or in families, with true elders, or with cultural resources which are necessary to teach us the secret things one must know to become a human being. In fact, not everybody gets to become a human being! A lot of us don’t quite make it, don’t manage to integrate depth and light, don’t learn to pay attention and be kind, to think for ourselves, how to say no, when to quit a job, how to love people who have failed us—or how to walk away from them. Not everyone is able to find something larger than themselves to live for. They don’t find something like poetry, or the right kind of work or friendships to nourish them. We’re surrounded by tragedy and cosmic humor.

A lot of people view your work as centered on the experience of being middle-class American. How do you feel about your work being discussed in these terms?

Is that a criticism? I don’t mind. An artist works with the data at hand. I don’t think writing about American life, or about consumerism, or privilege, or the anxieties of time and place is trivial, or unworthy of poetry. Should I write the poetry of an impoverished Bengali, or an anorexic teenager? There are many kinds of lives, and there are worlds within worlds, and a poem can hold them up for us. To write a good poem or to make a good chair, or to be skillful in an encounter with another person—none of these things are simple, they are all worthwhile and they all can be done with artfulness or grace, humor or empathy. I am happy to be able to make the poems I make, and I try to make them worthwhile, serious, and true for a reader. Other poets can write the other poems, the ones that are true for their places and readers. It’s a collective work in progress. No one does everything. If you think too hard, it might seem that nothing is worth doing; but it is important to be doing something, something difficult, and to do it with commitment.

Deer Season

Tim Williams

“Yeah, that fucking buck just hopped out right in the middle of the road, and that grill guard I put on there the other day wasn’t about to take no shit from anything less than a Mac. It’s a shame too. Just a little pussy four point. Couldn’t claim it if I wanted to. Had to throw the little fucker in the ditch. Well, what was left of him anyways.”

“Well that’s a damn shame, Dale. Spend a whole week on the lease and don’t get nothing to show for it.”

“Yeah, I guess I should start putting headlights and a horn on my bullets and slowing them down to about fifty-five if I want to actually kill something next year.”

Bill and Sam let out good laughs, and I feel pretty sharp about remembering that zinger from the Blue Collar Holiday Laughfest CD I’d listened to at the lease. I finish the rest of my beer and signal Sam for another. I can remember when I used to get drunk for fun.

I’m taking in everything behind the bar: the Lone Star beer light with its logo placed inside a neon outline of Texas, the two shelves of empty beer bottles that showcase Sam’s supply. Then I’m just staring into the four by ten foot mirror that hangs behind the center of the bar. At first I’m just watching myself; then I shift my focus so that I’m looking at nothing in particular, just letting everything behind the bar take up my whole field of vision as I think about nothing.

I space out until, like a hunter up high spotting the distant motion of an animal far below, my eyes dart to some movement in the mirror behind the bar. I look in time to see Mary Wilson and her cousin Julie walk in. Mary’s just as pretty as she was in high school; no, even prettier. She’s put on a little weight that’s filled her out nice. With a long purple scarf hanging from her neck over a sexy little black dress, she looks a little too New York for this place.

For the better part of the night, I’ve had the feeling that Clyde has been listening in on my conversation. With his size, spying is tough. He’s built like a bear, just like his dad and all his brothers, with a full grizzly beard, a red flannel long sleeve shirt, and a Semper Fi tattoo on his forearm, just in case you were curious how much beer he can drink. He was never in the Marines. Clyde went to high school with me and drinks beer at the same place as I do; in a town of four thousand, I guess you could say

we've met. Sitting by himself at the bar with none of his buddies to talk to, Clyde turns to me for sport.

"Hey, Dale. I got a problem I heard you could help me out with. Marlene's running out of closet space, and she needs somewhere to hang her hats."

I turn my head to look at Clyde as he drawls on. He keeps on talking while his body drunkenly sways, like he's slow dancing to some song I can't hear.

"I was going to run up to WalMart, but I figured it'd save me some time if I could just use one of your racks that you ain't going to mount."

He hiccups and that shit-eating grin comes to his face.

"Aw hell, never mind. I forgot she's got six hats. That's just two too many ain't it?!"

Clyde is slapping my back to make sure I know exactly how funny he thinks this is.

"Take your fucking hand off my back, Clyde."

Everyone's next planned words are sucked out of the backs of their throats and through the front of the bar as if a truck-sized vacuum had just been turned on outside. Clyde is the first to recover.

"Whoa, whoa! Just relax now, little Dale. We was all just having a good time. No need to lose your temper."

I don't even feel like putting up the effort with Clyde tonight, so I just walk away. As I look around for Mary, I spot something out of the ordinary. In between two of the pool tables, in the thin layer of dust and talcum powder covering the floor, a very peculiar set of tracks stretches to the front door. From the size and shape of the prints, it's clear that they belong to a deer, but the pattern and spacing are all off. They're too close together — and there's not enough of them.

What a funny sight that would be. There's no way, though. *A deer walking on his hind legs?* Impossible. It must be some new kind of novelty shoes one of the girls is wearing. FawnFeet for her, StagSlippers for him—I can see the infomercial already; rednecks will waste money on anything. As I'm about to bend down and examine the tracks more closely, a group of guys playing darts walk off towards the bar, and I see Mary behind them, sitting alone at a table. I'd rather talk to her than play Indian Tracker, so I stroll over and take the empty seat to her left.

"I didn't know angels drank beer."

"They do when you're the best looking thing this bar has got to offer," she mutters into her glass, smirking.

"Oh, now come on Mary; you don't have to lie to my face. I know Clyde's beard has cast a spell on you."

"Am I just that easy to read?" The joke loosens her up, and she turns her head to face me. "How you doing, Dale?"

"Alright, alright. Just the same ol' stuff— Wow. You look great tonight." The compliment just kind of comes out on its own. I can tell she's caught off guard, and to tell the truth, I am a little as well. Body language warming, she opens up her shoulders and turns in her seat until her entire body is facing mine.

“Well, thanks Dale. You always know how to make me smile. You know, you don’t look so bad yourself. When the light’s just right, that soap-faded engine grease makes it look like you’ve got a pretty sexy tan.”

“Stop, you’re going to make me blush.”

“Speaking of, I wanted to tell you thank you again for fixing that rattling noise my car kept making.”

“Don’t mention it. Your belt just had a little slack in it. It wasn’t anything. Really, it was an easy fix.”

“Yeah, but you know what they would have charged me if I had taken it to a shop. They would have taken one look at me and started blabbing about total engine failure, new transmission, all that crap. You really helped me out doing it for free.”

“Free? You didn’t get my invoice?”

“Ha-ha, shut up. But seriously, I owe you one. How can I pay you back? Hmm...” While she comes up with an answer, she does this thing where she looks off into the distance and runs her finger along the rim of her glass, and I wonder how someone hasn’t married her already. “Hmm, I know. How about you take me out dancing?”

I’m not sure if it’s because I know I can have her, or what, but something has changed. The pause has that extra second that turns the playfulness into embarrassment for her, and she tries to play it off.

“Just kidding, I just got my boots cleaned. I wouldn’t want you scuffing them all up with those two left hooves of yours.”

“I’ll be back in a second. I need to use the restroom.”

“Alrighty.”

I make my way past Julie and a couple of other games being played on the raggedy pool tables and take a right turn at the corner that separates the back section from the rest of the bar. I don’t really need to go to the bathroom, so to waste time I stop and look at some of the posters of Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and others on Sam’s Wall of Fame.

She’s not really that special. Sure, she’s got a look to her, but I mean there’s a lot more than that out there in the world. She’s not even the best looking in this town. We go out on a few dates; we make each other laugh a couple of times. One day we’ll be walking down the street and see some old couple holding hands on a bench, and she’ll lace her fingers through mine and give a squeeze that means a lot more than it seems, and it’ll be just perfect. Then how long? A few months? Maybe even a year or two? In the end we’re bound to get tired of each other.

How many women are out there that I’d miss out on if I got tied down to her? Millions. Sure, she’s funny. And she’s got that shiny brown hair and long natural body that makes any dress look perfect. But how many gorgeous bodies are out there that would put hers to shame? And how many women would understand me better and make me laugh more than her? I bet the number who could do both is

at least in the tens of thousands. I got to get out of this bar. When I feel enough time has passed, I make my way back to Mary.

“Mary, I’m going to take off. I’ll see you here tomorrow night?”

“What? You’re leaving? Uh. Alright, yeah tomorrow night sounds good.”

There’s no way I should still be here. With all these morons. Working at the Auto Zone. They make it seem like getting A’s in high school is a guaranteed ticket out of here. I aced every test they put in front of me. Why can’t they just give me more tests?

The temperature must have dropped at least fifteen degrees since I came into the bar, so I zip up my jacket and run to my truck. The heater takes forever to kick in. Some buzzing in my pocket lets me know I’ve got a message. Voicemail.

“Dale, it’s Meg. Got a call from Mom earlier—could hardly understand her she was crying so hard. She’s worried about you. You better not be fucking with her again. You’d think a person who says they’re *sooo* unhappy would try and avoid making other people feel like shit. Call me back.”

Fucking with her again? Yeah, I guess I was. All she had to do was just pick up her phone during one of the twenty-five rings before it went to voicemail. Call my own Mom, and I get the same voicemail recording everyone else gets.

“Hey y’all, you’ve reached Dana. Looks like I’m not near my phone but leave me a message, and I’ll get back to you just as soon as the good Lord allows. And if I don’t get back to you within the day, have a wonderful day and an even better tomorrow! God bless now.”

“I DIDN’T WANT IT TO END LIKE THIS MOM. I REALLY DIDN’T. I WISH SOMEONE COULD HAVE HELPED ME. I WISH AT LEAST ONE PERSON WOULD HAVE PICKED UP THE PHONE.” I couldn’t help but cough out a little chuckle after hanging up.

It’s tough being sad, man. Every time I talk with my family, I feel like I can’t make jokes. I try to crack my sister up, and she just stares at me.

“You must not be very depressed if you’re making all these jokes.”

“Hey Meg, just because you can’t swim doesn’t mean you can’t do some cool tricks jumping off the diving board.” And, hell, once you hit the water you might as well make some waves on the way down.

The truck is already warm enough for me to take off my jacket. All these Whataburger bags on the floorboard make damn fine insulation. The windows defog enough to make driving possible, so I do. Out of Sam’s gravel parking lot and onto the road: two lanes that cut through some of the thickest parts of the Davy Crockett National Forest. Beer joints like Sam’s, right on the county line that separates dry Houston county from its wet neighbors, are the only things that break up the wall of trees on either side. But the ride is quiet and peaceful, and I like that.

Not that I could ever do it. Suicide, you know. Guess I’ve always been too scared. When I think about it, I never think about the act, only the funeral. The church filled to the brim. So many people that they have to turn some away. All my buddies there. Everyone I went to school with, all my family.

The old postlady I used to flirt with when I checked my PO box. My high school English teacher, Mrs. Webb, with her Pentecostal dress all black. That cute Mexican girl that worked at the car insurance place. Everyone. All bawling their eyes out. Leaning on each other, crying on each other's shoulders. *Why? Didn't he know how much he was loved? Didn't he know how much we all needed him?* Coach Daniels, my high school football coach, gets up on stage to give a speech. *Dale was just a hell of a kid. Hell of a work ethic. Dale played football a lot like he played the game of life, with intensity and a will to win no matter what. That's why the JV Broncos are going to win district for Dale this year.* Applause. There's Clyde in the back, crying his eyes out, whimpering out sorry and shit.

The road is way too dark. If the county can't afford streetlights, they at least need to get some new reflective bumps down. I mean, I can't even see three car-lengths in front of me. To top it off, there's a god-awful smell like a wet dog mixed with something dead. Jesus Christ, it is rank. I must have passed by some roadkill, but the smell is damn strong, and it's staying with me. Of course, it might be one of those burger bags. No telling what's left in some of them. Whatever it is, worrying about it ain't going to make it go away.

To distract myself, I try to listen to the radio. The new all-terrain tires I put on are sweet, but I can't stand that hum they make going down the road; it drowns everything out. Have to get a better stereo. Maybe one of those Bose ones, like they got in the new GMs. I'd like to see the look on their faces down at Sam's if I came through with that machine.

"Yeah, Bose has quality product, but that kind of class might not mesh too well with your 4x4 backwoods aesthetic."

"Man, what do you know, you . . ."

Words do not usually escape me, but this particular situation has got me stumped. Sitting across the cab from me in my passenger seat is an adult male white tail buck. Back against the seat, hindquarters in the middle of the bottom cushion, left front hoof resting casually along the center console; if this is his first time sitting in a car, he's fooling me. The only thing different from a person are his legs. Not quite long enough to reach the floor, they just kind of hang off the edge and swing around real awkward.

Before any questions can get asked or answered, I unholster the snubnose under my jacket, and put three .38 rounds through his chest. Three thunderclaps and the sharp explosion of glass. The deer hunches over, bringing both hooves to his sternum in anguish before almost instantly popping back up, looking more than a little pissed off.

"Slow them down to fifty-five, right? Nice job blowing out your window, Dale. "

"This ain't happening. I don't even..."

"Yeah this is happening, and I'll tell you why. You murdered me, Dale. "

"I didn't me—"

"Keep your eyes on the road. You've done enough herd thinning lately."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Do you know how cold it is outside?"

“. . . pretty cold?”

“Yeah, Dale. Pretty cold is right.”

The deer takes a substantial pause before continuing.

“I want to tell you a story, Dale.”

“Oka—”

“Wasn’t an option, Dale. My entire family has been running around this part of the land for the entire fall, and now winter, just trying to stay alive. My two youngest daughters starved to death up near Tyler. You know why they starved? Because they couldn’t lead the entire herd, and I could, and I had to eat. I had to make that decision, Dale. I watched them get smaller and smaller and their skin start to sag off their bones, and when coyotes came I would drag them into the brush because they couldn’t run anymore.

“You want to know what I was doing when you swerved into that ditch? I was running back to my herd to let them know not to worry anymore. I had just found an abandoned farm with an entire field of wild oats. Enough to feed all of us.”

“Man I—”

“All of my sons were learning so quickly. My youngest boy just dropped his first velvet. After he rubbed them off, he picked them up with his mouth and brought them to me. Can you believe that? He was so proud of those antlers. My other boy learned last week how to tell if a deer stand was empty or not by looking to see if the latch on the door was engaged. One week! That took me three years to learn. Three years Dale! They were going to go so far. I was just a stepping stone to their mountains! I loved being around. I loved every minute of it. Every day I woke up surprised and grateful that I was still here and could still help out my own.”

As the road turns into the bridge over Edwards Creek, the deer’s body tenses up, and he stops, breaking eye contact completely.

“Dale, I didn’t visit you tonight just to share my story. I’m going to need one more swerve out of you. I need you to take us into the creek.”

“What are you talking about, man? There’s no way I’m driving my own truck into the creek.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to do it, Dale. That’s why I’m here. You just couldn’t see the beauty in it, could you? Every day you took all the possibility, shrank it down, twisted it and bent it until it made you feel right about feeling down. What you took for granted—the preciousness of this life—was everything for me, so do you realize how maddening it is to have everything that I cared so much about taken away by a selfish little shit like you?”

“Now, you can call what happens next revenge, or, like me, you can call it an equalizer, or— you know what, it doesn’t really matter what you call it, because either way this is happening.”

The highway hum is nothing compared to the screech you get out of those all-terrains when they’re turned horizontal going seventy. My new grill guard proved true against the guard rail. Forty feet and one splash.

I heard somewhere that there are three different types of death. The first is when all your organs stop working. The second is when you're buried. The third is at that point, somewhere down the line, when your name is finally spoken for the last time. It's a shame: spent my whole life worrying about the third one, and what do you know? They all happen at about the same damn time.



Kai Sheng, "Summer's Lemonade"

re: Animal Planet

Erika Kwee

there's a tear on my windowsill
that reminds me of a rip
I saw, on a bear
on television.
Through a slit in her side gushed
entrails,
shiny and pink like bubblegum
glistening
—inappropriately—
in the light,

bundled,
spilling like bubbling jewels
from her dead side.
She, in the rich wilderness,
me, in my quiet bed,
my fingers found their way
slipping silently under shirts
to examine the round
and the warm
and the soft-over-solid
giving flesh,

fingers spread wide,
pressing
and squeezing,

warm unmarked,
whole and clean.

But though I am unscathed,
I often think of that mama bear, jealous
of her negative space.



Marsha Recknagel

Interview by Amanda Mills

Marsha Recknagel received her Ph.D. from Rice University in 1984. In 1988 she was admitted to the Houston-Galveston Psychoanalytic Institute, where she studied psychoanalysis for several years. In 2001 she published the critically acclaimed memoir *If Nights Could Talk*. Marsha was named writer-in-residence at Rice University in 2002, where she is currently a creative writing instructor.

What impact do you think your study of psychoanalysis had on your writing?

One of my first jobs was in public relations at a large mental health institute (TRIMS) in the Texas Medical Center. There were dozens of patient care clinics as well as many labs and a locked ward with fifty patients. My first job there was to “count” the patients in the hospital and pass out the census to the social workers and doctors. I was terrible at this. I was then hired by the head of public relations as an editorial assistant, and I helped her write and publish the monthly newsletter. I can’t even describe the thrill when I first saw my name on the byline of my first feature article. I was in my twenties and felt as if I were in a movie: my notepad and pen in hand, my camera slung over my shoulder. I’d search out stories in the facility—interview new employees. There were hundreds of clinical trials in progress, cutting edge stuff—studies on addiction, Alzheimer’s, schizophrenia, hypnosis, domestic violence. But it was difficult to discover this rich material and then have to tone it down, put a positive spin on it. Once, I wrote a piece on a young man who was schizophrenic. He’d talked to me for hours. He was on one of the “new” drugs that TRIMS was testing, and his life was horrible, the side-effects almost as bad as the damn disease. But my editor said I couldn’t write *that* story. I had to write an upbeat story. I yearned to write something besides the heart-warming PR stories, but the four years there were invaluable. The compression of journalistic writing. The deadlines. The psychology. All of those came together to make me the writer I later became. I realized I could be eloquent about the human heart in a way I couldn’t in journalism or in psychological journal articles. I continued my interest in psychology by training at the Houston Psychoanalytic Institute. I wanted to learn about humans, to learn about myself, to bring all of this to my reading and writing of literature.

I want to know how a butler, a housewife, a clerk, a captain of a whaling ship, a retarded boy, a tomboy from a once wealthy and now “ruined” southern family behaves when faced with challenges, when required to make difficult decisions. How individuals grapple, wrestle, fail or triumph—how they behave under fire.

Through my own experience in therapy I learned to access my unconscious and discover the current of life being lived beneath the surface of my awareness. I follow my stories and then reread my early drafts to see what my unconscious revealed to me.

What is your advice for aspiring writers?

A career in writing is lonely—you don't get to hang out in the coffee room with your coworkers or go to five o'clock happy hour with coworkers. But when you connect with your writing—if you are fortunate to get your work out there—that's like a hundred happy hours.

What has been your most gratifying moment as a creative writing instructor?

There are too many to count. So I will give one to illustrate many. There was a young man—he was amiable, polite—and seemed to me to be out of his element in the workshop. Yet early in the semester I asked them to make a list, to begin with the line: "My parents taught me"

When it came his turn to read aloud, he began with "My mother taught me that I should give roses to my girlfriend." The list went on: "My mother taught me how to grow roses. She taught me about mulch, about black spot, about how much to water. My mother taught me never to give lingerie to a new girlfriend. Roses, she said. Give roses." The list went on in this way. His mother had died of cancer when he was fourteen. She'd been bedridden for awhile and had spent hours telling him what he'd need to know over the years about love and romance, tailoring the advice for the years when she'd be gone: advice for his high school and college years, what she would have told him all along the way about how to court, how to show his love. When he finished reading, the room was completely silent. It was one of those triumphant moments—for the student, for the other students, for me as a teacher and ultimately for his mother. The combination of the crafting and the material brought us to our knees. The way we all understood something that we couldn't even articulate, something that he had made us experience through his writing. It was magical and mystical and marvelous and it is what I want to do in my own stories and what I want to help my students achieve—to tap into that power.

“Be thankful you were born”

Philomena Bradford

“Be thankful you were born,”
she says, and I sip Diet coke from her outstretched hand
of wrinkled skin
of age and sweet soda pop sweat
and I wait for the Once upon a—for the—and then

For once upon a Universe,
 she begins, and pats her brow at the arch,
Conceived in Hydrogen’s stained-armpit stench
 In He, Helium’s gartered gasps
 in the Oxygen, the Carbon caress
fetal Earth suckled, he slept.

The galaxy bulge
in her fat pants for accelerated expansion
 four . five four
 billion
 she tells me, and I count on sticky fingers
 four five four
gestational years past-witnessed
and unborn Earth dreams, still
in this cosmic umbilical gravity.

Asleep, he imagines,
 I cover my eyes with sweaty palms
He imagines

to be born to be released from that origin
surfacing in mother's stale amniotic fluid
crowning and crying "To infinity & beyond!"
in his light-year of fantastical flight but
there is no end— no—
no prize to pregnancy in a womb
of solar flares and Cracker Jack constellations.
They say
all things conceived of the Big-Bang fertilization
like him, rotate statically in this—on this—

She snores now, and I slide from her lap
to the grassy ground. I lie, belly down on the Earth and
hug him and hold him and think I just may be him,
unborn in this Universe.



Mathison Ingham, "Dust"

The Helicopter Is Landing

Lilly Yu

propellers lash, papery cold October
and I am walking with the sheets of
plastic-wrap wind around my head,
where the loud half-cry, half-roar
bounces off the walls of these buildings, colliding
into my chest

Kit

Celeste Riepe

A roll of newspaper hovers above my head. I can't see it because my eyes are on my music, but I know it's there. And I don't like it. Holding the newspaper in his hand, my violin teacher is watching every bow, every fingering, every rest, waiting for a mistake.

As I play the A Major arpeggio in Kreutzer's sixth etude, he tenses for a strike. My shifting is clumsy, but all the notes land in tune. Breathing out through his nose in frustration, he waits for his next chance.

I shouldn't be here on Sunday. Sundays are for TV, climbing trees, and making pancakes. Right now, I should be at home with Da watching *Star Trek*, not taking lessons with Dr. Moretti at Indiana University. But Dr. Moretti had to travel to New York City for some international music conference, so I had to move my lesson from Wednesday to Sunday.

I told Da that I didn't want to drive to Bloomington on a Sunday afternoon. Wednesdays are for Bloomington. Sundays are for home. I go to the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University for violin lessons with Dr. Edmondo Moretti on Wednesdays at 6:30 p.m. On Sundays I stay home in Spencer. Da told me that I need to learn to manage change. I told him that I can manage change just fine, but he should cancel my lesson for the week, so it's not on Sunday. He promised me ice cream afterwards. I said no. Chocolate? No. A DQ Blizzard? No. A chocolate, Georgia Mud Fudge DQ Blizzard? Fine.

I'm sick and tired of playing etudes for Dr. Moretti. Scales up-down, up-down, up-down. String-crossings in-out, in-out, in-out. Etudes are just notes covering the page like they think they're music. That's why they sound so boring. I always catch Da checking his watch while Dr. Moretti and I work on Kreutzer.

I want to go home so I can visit Mom at River Hill Cemetery and play her my new piece, the Bach Violin Concerto in A minor. I also want to tell her that Da and I finally finished *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on Saturday, and we're going to start *Deep Space Nine* tonight. Da promised me that when I turn twelve—that's thirty-seven days from now—I can watch *Battlestar Galactica*. He says there's too much sex for an eleven-year-old girl. I don't have a problem with sex, but he does.

The last arpeggio is in C Major, and it's not going to stand in my way. I play the C on the E string with my first finger—the pointer—then shift up the fingerboard for an E. At this point, my wrist is shoved against the violin and my fingers are crammed together. I place my third finger down for the G then stretch my pinky as far as I can and hit the C dead-on.

Ha! I have gotten through the etude without Dr. Moretti swatting me. Serves him right for thinking that I'm too undisciplined when I practice. He will be so mad that I'm this talented that he will let me go home early.

Pulling my fourth finger away, I play the G again. I lift my second and third fingers. An E sounds. All I have next is a shift to second position for the final four notes. But the fingering's hard, and after twenty-five minutes of staring at black dots, I'm sick of concentrating. I move my thumb down the neck of the violin, but I don't go down far enough. Instead of a C-natural, I hit a C-sharp.

The stock market comes flying down on my head. I lift my bow from the string and swing my violin down from my shoulder.

"Don't touch me."

"Then don't play out of tune."

Dr. Moretti knows that I hate being touched, so he has devised what he calls the "Newspaper Game" as a way of making me focus more on what he wants me to practice. The game is simple. He stands with a newspaper over my head and whacks me whenever I make a mistake.

"Repeat the last two measures five times for intonation."

"No. I don't—"

"Kit," Da interrupts. "Do as he says."

Da is sitting on Dr. Moretti's piano bench with my lesson notebook in his hands. The Steinway behind him looks like a killer whale stuffed into a broom closet. Da's supposed to be taking notes on my technique, but I see that in addition to writing about bowings, he's been drawing pictures of tropical birds. Although Da works as a librarian for the Fine Arts Library at Indiana University, he's really an artist. He knows that I love toucans and parrots, and when I get older, I'm going to Costa Rica to live with them. We'll eat fruit together and spend the nights in trees.

"Kit," Da insists. I notice the parrots have speech bubbles with instructions about fingerings inside. Da catches me frowning at the birds and shuts the notebook.

"Fine," I say, lifting my violin onto my shoulder. I try to play the C Major arpeggio, but my fingers are so tight with anger that I can't play the notes in-tune.

"Start over," demands Dr. Moretti. He still has the newspaper in his hand, and I can tell he's itching to swat me. *I hate this. I hate this. I hate this!* I take a deep breath and exhale because Da says that it will help clear my mind when I'm angry. It doesn't make me feel any better. I can't play like this. Without looking at Da or Dr. Moretti, I walk over to my case, put my bow into its holder, set my violin in its green velvet, and slam the lid down.

"Kit," Da warns.

I open the door to Dr. Moretti's office and look out. Good, the hallway's empty.

"Kit!"

I get out of there as fast I can.

* * *

As I burst through the doors of the music building, I try as hard as I can not to cry, but I just can't hold it in. I know that if Dr. Moretti sees me, he'll think he's defeated me, and I can't stand that. I reckon I can hide my tears by ducking under the huge pillar fountain.

The water is cool even in September, but I sit down in it anyways. Why does Dr. Moretti torture me like this? If Mom were alive, she would never let Dr. Moretti swat me with a newspaper. I wish she were still here to teach me so bad. We used to play music games instead of doing exercises, and she let me do cool things like decorate my case with panda stickers. Whenever I got angry during lessons, she would sing songs from *Hank the Cowdog* to make me laugh. She was always careful not to upset me when she needed to adjust my fingers. I even let her hug me, which is something that I haven't let anyone else do.

Eventually, Dr. Moretti and Da discover me in the fountain. Rolling his eyes, Da squats down and extends his hand through the water.

"Come on, Kit. Let's go home." I don't want to take his hand. It's his fault that I'm here in the first place.

"Please, Kit. I promise we'll stop at Dairy Queen." Da smiles at me, his curly brown hair flattening as the fountain drips water onto his head. My eyes travel suspiciously from his face to his hand. Gingerly, I touch his palm with the tip of my middle finger then slide the rest of my hand along his skin. He slowly circles his fingers around mine and pulls me to my feet. I let go of his hand as soon as possible.

Dr. Moretti stands with my violin case. He walks over to me and bends down to where he is at eye level. I glare at him.

"Kit, you did a beautiful job today. Keep working on the intonation in the Kreutzer and make sure to practice your A minor scales for the Bach concerto. I know that practicing is not your favorite pastime, but you have such talent. Your mother would be proud of you." Dr. Moretti holds out my violin—which once belonged to my mother—as a peace offering. I snatch it from him and hug it to my chest. "Good luck practicing this week. I'll see you on Wednesday."

Dr. Moretti clasps Da's shoulder and leaves us standing next to the fountain. Da lifts his eyes towards the sky and sighs before he stretches his arm out and takes a bow.

"After you, my dear," he says. I bound in front of him, leaving a trail of puddles on the concrete.

* * *

As promised, Da takes me to Dairy Queen and orders me a small Georgia Mud Fudge Blizzard. I get bored while we wait, so I start adding up the numbers on the menus. Math is my favorite subject

in school because I get to work with numbers and not people. I figure out that you can buy all the Super Value Meals for \$47.11, but you can save money if you skip dinner and just buy all the desserts for \$19.68. But that's only if you get smalls. If you get mediums you have to pay \$21.48, and if you're feeling really, really hungry, you can have all larges for \$23.58, which is still cheaper than buying all of the Super Value Meals.

A teenager with a red visor brings out my Georgia Mud Fudge Blizzard. He tips over the Blizzard, but the ice cream refuses to fall out, which goes to show that the physics stuff taught at school is just a pack of lies. I grab the Blizzard from him and start shoveling ice cream into my mouth. Da fills a coke from the fountain, and I follow him to a booth.

Da watches me as the circle of chocolate around my mouth gets larger and larger. He sits with his left hand cupping his chin, his wedding ring reflecting the fluorescent light.

"Kit." I don't stop eating. "I want you to listen to me." I nod my head, still putting spoonfuls into my mouth. This is the best Georgia Mud Fudge Blizzard I've had in a long time.

"I want you to try harder with Dr. Moretti."

"I *am* trying hard."

"Yes, you are. But you need more self-control. He's here to help you learn. You need to respect that he bothers to take the time from his graduate studio to teach an eleven-year-old."

"He's only doing it because he was friends with Mom."

"Well, yes, that's true. He helped her get her doctorate and her teaching position at the university, but he's known you for a long time, too. He first met you as a baby at one of Ella's doctoral recitals."

The memories I have of Mom's performances are scattered here and there like pieces of a 3,000-piece jigsaw puzzle without the box lid, but I can picture her standing on stage at Indiana University, her green gown and blond hair swaying gracefully as she plays. My hair is the exact same color as hers, and I have sworn never to cut it.

"Da?"

"What, Kit?"

"Was Dr. Moretti in love with Mom?"

Da rolls his eyes and slaps his palm to his forehead. "This is what I get for letting you read Jane Austen."

I have to confess, I love, love, love Jane Austen. I've finished three of her novels, and I'm currently reading *Persuasion*. I've seen nearly all of the movies. *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightley is my favorite.

Da takes his hand away from his face and sighs. "No, Dr. Moretti was not in love with Mom, but he was a great admirer of hers. So when she died, he volunteered to teach you." I remember my first lesson with Dr. Moretti. I nearly bit his finger off when he tried to adjust my fine tuners.

"I guess it would make her happy if I were better to him," I mumble, playing with my chocolate

ice cream.

“Yes, it would make her very happy to see you studying with Dr. Moretti.”

“Ok. I promise I’ll practice.” Da makes circles with his hand to indicate he wants more from me. “Alright. *Alright*. I promise I’ll behave during lessons.”

I pout for a moment before returning to my Blizzard. I wish I could spend weekends wearing beautiful frocks and dancing with men in knickers like girls do in Jane Austen novels.

“Da?”

“What, Kit?” I twirl my spoon in my ice cream.

“When did you first meet Mom?”

“You really are in a Jane Austen phase, aren’t you?”

“So?”

“Alright,” Da says, crossing his arms and putting his elbows on the table. He leans in so that his eyes are the same height as mine. “I first met your mother at a performance of Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* at Indiana University. My friend dragged me to the concert because he needed credit for his music theory class.”

“Did you get to see Mom play?”

“No, Kit. *The Firebird’s* a ballet. Your mother was in the orchestra pit.”

“So how’d you see her?”

“Well, there was a reception afterwards.”

“And?”

I swear Da turns a shade pink. “And I was standing next to a table with chocolate cake, sipping a glass of wine, trying to figure out which plate had the biggest slice, when your mother turned around to talk to a friend and smacked me with her violin case. I managed to spill my entire glass of wine on her dress. I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t even bring myself to look at her face when I apologized. But she just laughed and told me not to worry about it since it was really her fault. She said that she had done far worse damage in high school when she dumped a cup of fruit punch on her best friend’s prom dress. Somehow we ended up relating a lot of embarrassing stories about high school to each other that night. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Then what?”

“I guess we became friends.” Da shrugs. “I saw her a lot at the library where I worked, and we would talk whenever we ran into each other. I had a huge crush on her, but I never had the courage to ask her out. She was a beautiful graduate student who was considered one of the most talented violinists at Indiana while I was a penniless undergraduate who stayed out all night and didn’t attend class much. But your mother never gave up on me. She started inviting me to go to performances with her and hang out with her friends. I think she knew that I was hopelessly in love with her but was too afraid to say anything. Finally, she lost patience and told me that she was going to call herself my girlfriend until I said otherwise.”

Da smiles then looks out the window. I wait for more but soon realize that that's all I'm going to get for today. We sit in silence until I am finished with my Georgia Mud Fudge Blizzard. I get up, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and throw the paper cup away. As we walk out of the Dairy Queen, Da reaches out and briefly touches my hair.

I read *Persuasion* as we drive from Bloomington to Spencer. People find it weird that I read books in the car without getting sick (the trick is not to look at anything except the page), but it's the only way I don't get bored during the thirty-minute commute. I don't know how Da can stand driving to Bloomington for work everyday. Maybe he just makes up stories in his head—that's what I do when I don't have books.

I only look up from *Persuasion* when we pass Spencer's domed courthouse. My hometown is named after Captain Spier Spencer, who died in the Battle of Tippecanoe. I once asked Da what the Battle of Tippecanoe was, and he told me it was just another massacre of Indians by white men. I wasn't that interested until he told me that an Indian chief cursed General William Henry Harrison after the battle, causing him to die during his term as president. Even better, the curse stayed in Washington for 120 years, killing off a president every five terms. Da said he wished it hadn't ended with Ronald Reagan.

I understand the Indian chiefs wanting to curse the whites, but I don't understand the whites wanting to have a place like Spencer. Spencer is just a boring small town in Central Indiana.

Mom was born and raised here, but Da's from Boston. His parents are immigrants from Dublin, though. That's why Da is Da to me. Not Dad or Father. Because of him, I have "Halligan" as a weird Irish last name. (I got my nickname, 'Kit,' from Mom because I yawned and curled up like a kitten when I was a baby.) Da moved to Indiana for his undergraduate degree in Studio Art, but he only moved to Spencer after he married Mom. Da doesn't like Spencer, but I don't think he wants to leave because Mom's buried here.

"Da?"

"Yes, Kit." Da and I usually visit Mom on Sundays, and I'm really worried that we won't have time after my lesson with Dr. Moretti.

"Can we see Mom? I brought my folding stand with me so that I can play the Bach A minor Concerto for her."

"That's where I was headed." Da drives us to River Hill Cemetery and parks the car along the side of the road.

"Let's get your mother some flowers, shall we?" I leap from the car to search in the grass, scaring grasshoppers into the air. I find some Black-eyed Susans and pull on their stems so hard that the roots come up. Da works harder than me and soon holds a huge bouquet of asters, sunflowers, sweet clover, and Queen Anne's lace. I add my flowers to his collection.

Da jerks his head towards the car. "Come on. Let's get your violin." I take my violin, stand, and music out of the car and follow Da to the end of the cemetery where Mom lies with the rest of the Morris family. "Ella Morris Halligan, November 17, 1973-April 5, 2008" is carved into the front of her

stone, but on the back are the lines that Da selected from the poem “Bright Star” by John Keats.

*Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite.*

I like to read the poem every time I come visit Mom because it reminds me of how Mom used to tape Keats to her mirror at home. I know Da loves the poem too. I can hear him muttering the words under his breath as I lay our bouquet on top of the dried flowers from last week.

We stand side-by-side in silence until Da looks down at me and says, “Well, I guess I’ll give you guys some mother-daughter time.” He walks over to a big pine tree and sits where he can keep an eye on me while he sketches in his notebook.

I set up my stand, take clothespins out of my bag, and pin the music to keep it from blowing away. I open my case and lift my mother’s violin into my arms.

Da gave me her violin last year for Christmas. He told me that Mom wanted me to have it, but he had been waiting until I got big enough. The emergency crews found it in the trunk of her car after she died a year ago. She was driving home to Spencer at night from a performance of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony when a drunk lost control of his truck and crashed into her.

I tune the violin and then play the first movement of the Bach Violin Concerto in A minor. My intonation’s not so great since I started the piece last week, and my shifting is terrible on the last page. I’m ashamed that I can’t play the piece better even though I practiced all week for her. Giving up, I put her violin back in its case then sit cross-legged on the grass beside her grave to give her the week’s news.

“So I didn’t have my lesson on Wednesday because Dr. Moretti was in New York City. We had it today, which made me angry because Sundays are for visiting you. It wasn’t such a great lesson because I got mad at him for whacking me with a newspaper. I really, really wish that you were still here to teach me. Da says that you always thought I had a great gift for music, but I’m worried that I’m not good enough to become a violinist like you when I grow up.

“Oh, by the way, Da and I finished *Star Trek: The Next Generation* last night. Captain Picard is my *favorite* character. We are going to start *Deep Space Nine* tonight, but I’ve got school tomorrow. Well, I’m pretty hungry right now, so I guess Da and I should go home. See you next week!”

I stand and pick up my violin. My feet have gone to sleep, so I have to hop around until the prickling stops. I fold my stand, pack up my music, and run over to Da.

“Are you ready to go home?” he asks, glancing up from his sketchbook. He must have been hard at work because his hands are covered in graphite.

“Yeah,” I shrug, looking at the drawing that Da’s been making. It’s a picture of me playing the violin for Mom and her underground relatives, my dress and blond hair blowing in the breeze.

* * *

The sun is setting by the time we get home. My house is old, wooden, and painted blue, and it’s

pretty much the only thing I love about Spencer. All the furniture downstairs is antique, including the rosewood piano in the living room. Da plays the piano a little bit, but he's really not a musician. He's good at playing chess, though. He's teaching me right now, but I haven't won a game yet.

Upstairs, Da's art has taken over the walls, floors, and ceilings. Angels guard the hallways, and there is a seashore in the bathroom. Inside my bedroom, he's painted a jungle with tigers, parrots, and monkeys. My absolute favorite room is his bedroom because it has a painting with a blue sky on the ceiling that fades into a sunset on the walls that fades into a starry night on the floor. From his room, I can see our wilting vegetable garden and the woods where I love to climb trees.

The attic is Da's studio where he keeps his canvases, brushes, and paints. He doesn't paint as much as he wants because he's busy with work at the library. I've asked him why he doesn't quit being a librarian so he can paint, but he says that we would be begging on the streets of Bloomington because his work isn't all that good. I think he's lying. Da's the greatest artist in Indiana.

Da gets mad a lot about living in such an old house, especially when it's cold outside and we can't get the furnace to work, but I know he loves it as much as I do. Da and Mom got our house from Mom's grandfather as a wedding present. They didn't have enough money to buy a nice place in Bloomington because Mom was still in graduate school and Da was just starting his master's in Library Science. My great-grandfather knew they needed his home since Mom was already pregnant with me. Besides, he was going to move into a nursing home, anyway.

Da gets dinner ready while I read more of *Persuasion*. Da's cooking has its good days and its bad days, but for the most part, it's better than Mom's. He takes our plates of pasta over to the TV in the living room, and we start *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. I fall asleep halfway through the second episode. He brings a blanket from upstairs for me because he knows I won't like it if he carries me to my room.

* * *

The next day is Monday, and Monday means school. I hate the other kids, and they hate me back. They think I'm weird because I can do fractions in my head, play the violin, and read novels like *Great Expectations*. The work at school is boring because it's too easy, and most teachers don't care about making us learn anything.

My morning is normal for fifth grade. I stare at the posters of famous dead poets in English, memorizing their dates of birth and death, not bothering to pay attention to Mrs. Rawling's lecture on *My Side of the Mountain*. It's a stupid book. I read it in second grade. In Science, Mr. Hubbard teaches us about the phases of water, but I learn more from watching the sink drip in the corner of the room.

U.S. History with Coach Edgar is awful. Instead of teaching, he puts his feet up on his desk and assigns us reading homework that no one bothers with. The other kids talk and giggle around me as I read *Persuasion* on top of my U.S. History textbook. I hate their noise. I want to go home and watch *Deep Space Nine*.

All of a sudden, I feel someone pull my hair. I ignore it at first because in my book, Louisa Musgrove has just fallen off the wall at Lyme. Soon I feel another tug.

“Don’t touch me.”

There is another pull. I whirl around to glare at the smirking, skinny boy sitting behind me. Andrew Gail’s in my other classes and thinks it’s funny when I get in trouble with my teachers.

“Don’t touch me.”

Andrew shrugs. The other boys next to me laugh. I feel my hair pulled in a different direction. The boy on my right has decided to join in.

“I said don’t touch me.”

Andrew yanks my hair again. I stand up in the aisle, breathing hard. Da keeps telling me to control myself when I’m angry, but this is *my* hair—my chest-length, blond hair that I got from my mother.

“I said don’t touch my hair!” Most of the class is staring at me, but I’m so mad that I don’t care. Coach Edgar moves his feet off his desk.

“Or what?” Andrew taunts. There is more laughter.

I snatch my U.S. History textbook from my desk and answer his question by swinging it at his face.

The girls scream. Blood is all over the floor, the desks, and Andrew Gail. I turn to run out the door, but Coach Edgar grabs me by the arm.

“Let go of me!” I scream at him, but he doesn’t loosen his grip.

“Annie,” he says to the little goody-two shoes of my class, “go next door to Mrs. Rawlings and tell her to watch over the class while I take care of Kit. Scott,” he nods towards a boy sitting next to Andrew, “take your friend over to the nurse. Make sure you come back right away, or I’ll give you detention.”

With that, Coach Edgar drags me, yowling and clawing, down the hallway to the principal’s office.

We find Principal Johnson talking with her secretary in the reception outside her office. When Mrs. Johnson sees me shrieking, crying, and pushing at Coach Edgar, she stops midsentence, puts her hands on her hips, and glares at Coach Edgar until he offers an explanation.

“Katherine Halligan attacked Andrew Gail,” Coach Edgar says. “She broke his nose with a textbook!”

“I see,” Mrs. Johnson says, her voice as flat as the soy bean fields Da and I pass on our way to Bloomington. “And where’s Andrew now?”

“I sent him to Nurse Beckett’s office, but I think he needs to go to the hospital in Bloomington.”

Mrs. Johnson turns to her secretary. “Diana, call Andrew Gail’s parents and explain what happened. Tell them that their son’s in the nurse’s care but needs to be driven to Bloomington. Also, call Brian Halligan and tell him to come here as soon as possible.”

Mrs. Johnson leans over to address me. “And why did you attack Andrew?”

“He touched my hair!” I cry. Mrs. Johnson narrows her eyes.

“Mark,” she says, straightening herself, “please return to your classroom. I’ll talk to you later once I’m done with Katherine. Katherine, come with me.”

I reluctantly follow her into her office and sit down on one of the maroon chairs in front of her desk. Putting my head in between my legs, I will Mrs. Johnson to leave me alone, but she kneels down in front of me.

“Oh, Kit,” Mrs. Johnson says, her tone softening. “Can you at least try to explain to me what happened?”

I try, but I can’t get through some parts of my story because I’m crying so hard. I tell her about my hair, Andrew, Dr. Moretti, Da, and Mom. When I start telling her about visiting Mom, she reaches out to touch my shoulder. I shrink back so hard that I nearly tip the chair over.

“I’m sorry, Kit. I forgot. No touching.” She looks sad. “You know your mother was the best friend I ever had. We grew up together here in Spencer, and we were roommates all through college at Indiana.”

“I know,” I hiccup. “She told me.”

There is a knock on the door.

“Yes?” Mrs. Johnson asks.

“It’s Brian Halligan,” says Da through the door.

Mrs. Johnson stands and opens the door. “Please come in.”

“Hi, Kelly,” Da says, shaking hands with Mrs. Johnson. “I’m sorry to make you wait.” Da takes a look at me then crosses his arms. He grips his arms so hard his knuckles turn white.

“Kit, would you mind waiting for us outside?” Mrs. Johnson asks. “Your father and I have a few things we need to talk about.”

“Ok,” I mumble, getting up from the chair and walking into the reception area. Mrs. Johnson pushes the door behind her, but it doesn’t close all the way. Looking around the reception, I notice that the secretary is no longer in the room. Curious, I sit on the floor next to the principal’s office and spy on Mrs. Johnson and Da through the crack in the doorway.

Once Mrs. Johnson takes a seat behind her desk, she folds her hands and confronts Da. “Well, Brian, breaking a kid’s nose is technically an assault, and I’m afraid that I’m going to have to give Kit in-school suspension for a few days as punishment. Do you understand that if this ever happens again, she may be forced into disciplinary education?”

“Yes, I do,” Da says, putting his elbows on the desk and leaning his head against his hands. “I’m so sorry for all of this. I don’t know what she was thinking.”

“I understand that she was provoked, however, Kit needs to exercise more self-control in the classroom. You know that last year a lot of her teachers excused her misbehavior because they could see that she was still suffering from Ella’s death, but it’s been a year, and her behavior’s getting worse not better. We started the semester three weeks ago, and already some of her teachers have been complaining that she won’t turn in assignments on time, she’ll read novels in class, and she’ll refuse to participate

in group assignments. And of course, they always mention how she hates being touched. Now I know that Kit was somewhat tactile defensive and socially withdrawn before Ella's death, but her blatant disobedience is something new. Have you taken her to a therapist recently?"

Da looks up at her and shakes his head. "No, I haven't. Ella and I took her to one when she was younger, but we stopped going when it looked like Kit was growing out of her issues."

"And why haven't you considered going back to one?"

"Because I'm not sure how much good it would do. Kit was difficult and incomppliant during sessions, and Ella generally made more progress doing activities with her at home."

"But Brian, you need to get her some help. There's no point in denying that her behavior is out-of-line. I don't want to be the one to put her into remedial education—she's too bright for that."

"Kelly..." Da covers his face and takes an unsteady breath. "I'll consider your suggestion." He pulls his hands over his face. "I—I think I need to take Kit home."

"Alright, our assistant principal will get into touch with you later this afternoon to discuss the details of Kit's suspension." Mrs. Johnson and Da get up from their seats. I quickly inch away from the door, cover my ears with my hands, and close my eyes shut.

The door opens, and Da crouches down in front of me. I glare at him.

"Kit, can you please get up?"

"No." *I'm not going to a therapist. There is nothing wrong with me.*

"Please Kit, let's go home." Da extends his hand towards me.

"No." *Why can't he just leave me alone?*

"Please Kit."

"No!"

Da tries to take my hand. I swat him away.

"Don't touch me."

"Alright. Fine. I won't touch you." Da stands up and wipes his hand against one eye and then the other.

"Kit," Mrs. Johnson says. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way. You can either leave with your father, or I can pick you up—yes, touch your body—and put you in the back of my SUV and haul you back to your house." Mrs. Johnson starts reaching down to grab my wrists. I realize that I've cornered myself, so I get up and follow Da out to the car.

Da drives us home, muttering to himself and making gestures with his free hand the whole time. I'm sitting in the backseat, so I don't understand what he's saying. But I can tell from the way he's acting that he's no longer sad. He is angry.

Da stops the car in front of our house. He opens his door, slams it, and walks over to my side. Grabbing me by the arms, he yanks me out of the car.

"How could you be so stupid?" he yells, shaking me.

I don't say anything I'm so surprised. Da *never* touches me like this. *Never.*

“You know better than this. You know better than to hurt someone like that, so *how could you be so stupid?*” He shakes me again, his grip hurting my arms.

“Let go!” I struggle, trying to free myself. “I don’t want you to touch me!”

Da swiftly drops me, and I crash to the ground. I stare up at him in shock. His face is red and white with anger.

“Goddammit, Kit! *Why not?*”

I cover my face and sob.

“Oh God,” he says, taking a few steps back from me. He pulls his hair with his hand. “Oh God. Kit, I’m so sorry.”

I don’t want to hear him apologize, so I run for the trees. I climb up as high as I can up a pine that shades the garden shed. I stay up there for hours, making up stories about dragons, princes and princess, and normal children who have friends. I wish I could talk to Mom, but then again, I wouldn’t want her to know the bad things I’ve done. Mostly I just sit in the pine and cry.

Da comes out and leaves food by the foot of the tree, but I don’t want to climb down. I watch the colors of the sky change from blue to yellow to orange to red to pink to violet. The moon appears, and it looks half-empty. Soon I’m hungry and getting cold. The fading twilight makes it difficult to see the limbs, but I manage to climb down to the ground. I find the plate of food and eat the turkey sandwich Da’s left me.

I’m shivering by the time I’m finished. Gazing up at the dark limbs, I realize that I don’t want to spend the night out here alone, so I go in the house with my plate and leave it in the sink. All the lights are out, which is strange because Da likes to stay up reading or watching TV. Wondering where he is, I climb upstairs to my room. I already have my hand on my doorknob before I hear a noise from his room.

His door is cracked, so I peek inside. Da is lying on his bed, sobbing. He doesn’t see me because his face is buried in his pillow, his hands gripping the edge so hard that his wedding ring bites into his finger.

My chest tightens. I have an idea, but I’m not sure it’ll work. Slipping into the room, I crawl onto the bed and lie down next to him, my face in front of his buried face. Da turns to look at me, his skin creased from the pillow, his eyes tired and red. Cautiously, I put one hand on his shoulder and the other on his back. Then I press my cheek against his and tighten my arms around him.

At first, Da doesn’t move. I begin to wonder if I’m making a mistake—maybe he doesn’t want me to hug him after all. Slowly, though, his arms encircle me. He brings me close to his chest and puts his face on my shoulder.

This is the only way I can think of to tell him how much I love him.



Nathan Keibler, "White Fang"

Amsterdamned

Miel Sundararajan

Thoughts.

. . . Thoughts.

Forget pennies, I need a pen for mine now—I'm fumbling, searching, uprooting crumpled receipts and their petty tallies, frantic to release these scattered phrases onto paper. If I don't, they'll be lost forever, set alight by an errant charge as one neuron shocks the next. Memory incinerated. Forever. Pennies never add up to much anyway.

That flame flickers into being before my eyes as Carla proffers her lighter. "Cigarette?" she drawls.

I prop the Marlboro between my lips and dip my head down, down, inhaling deeply as tip blackens against flame sparks against night. I'm getting too good at this. Beside me, Carla crushes a spent cigarette into the pavement with a swift jerk of her heel even as her fingers flip the pack open for a fresh one. She is dismissive; she is an expert.

Night is the tar of her studded leather jacket, the ebony of her straight, swinging hair, the scarred and beer-stained concrete of the steps on which we perch. Only our embers glow as we ash, inhale, ash again.

Her accent is dark too, in a way, a gravelly, sexy Spanish that only someone of her Buenos Aires roots can carry off. There is none of that north Spain lisp, no Venezuelan "j" polluting the double "l". She is full of surprises, revealing soon that she has a Master's in biophysics and will soon be beginning her Ph.D. in neural circuitry. My own half-finished degree seems laughable in comparison, and I let it drift down to litter the pavement alongside the trampled stubs of cigarettes.

It is my second night on the steps outside Bob's Youth Hostel and Carla has just arrived, another foreign face in the eclectic mix of international youth 'finding themselves' in the sex and drugs of Amsterdam. Rock and roll, unfortunately or not, was long ago replaced by house music and electronica, and the techno trance of Armin van Buuren and David Guetta is now the musical backdrop to cheap

wine and fat joints.

I've cased this joint, so to speak. Most are the grungy sort you'd expect at a budget youth hostel—moderately stoned, largely unwashed, and at the very heart of things, a little bit lost. On that last count, at least, I belong. Carla, however, with her sharp eyes and deft fingers, looks like she knows exactly where she's going. She glances at me as the others straighten slowly from their concrete perches, dusting off their jeans as they rally for another night in Leidseplein.

"We'll go too," Carla announces. "Just a moment."

She pulls out a planner stuffed with days and days of calendar dates—days that meant something, days she had traveled. Her neat, methodical script marches on and on in colored gel pen—perhaps the only girly giveaway about her—as she flips through to today. We met today. All those days and maybe this one would mean something to her too.

"Are you keeping a journal?" I ask.

"No, this is just for my thoughts," she replies. Ah. "I write poems sometimes . . . in English, in Spanish." She tilts her head as she speaks. Maybe there is a trace of that Basque lisp in there. "But most of the time I just throw them away."

She rips one sheet decisively from its binding, then crumples it with a resolute clench of the fist. The notebook disappears into her leather satchel as I blink at her, blankly.

Carla stands, stretches, strikes the steps one by one with her battered boots as she descends to the sidewalk.

"I go back and read them and they're shit, so I just . . ." she shrugs. Looks up at me. "Trash them."

The lighter comes to life once more, flames caressing the fleeing, curling corners of the tattered page in her hand. Then all is black again as her callused thumb flips off the catch.

Father Paul, M.D.

Joseph Allencherril

Father Paul, M.D.
drives a century of miles every day
in a point-A-to-point-B car as
safe as a button-up fly and green as the sea
(he can't tell the shade thanks to his mother's X chrome).

Some days he comes home
to fulfill his avocation
as Catholic carpenter
(he stains not only the woodwork,
but our carpets and wallpaper too).

And he wears his hairless halo
with pride (courtesy of his mother's X)—
it's his zucchetto, his dignity,
a relic of days when our
forehead-fathers lorded
over Kerala's backwaters with
love and charity.

Other days, he comes to give sermons on
his history and his plans in a language
where yesterday means tomorrow:

*If it wasn't for Him, you wouldn't
Sometimes I wonder how I
One day I want us to
Don't be like me, boy
I saw 10 patients pass on today
If I'm a burden at 100, I don't want any of that
You better not write about this*

In the background,
Mother Linda prepares manna in her precious
pots and pans as Brother Ronan
beats anapests of praise on
the Ludwigs upstairs, and gradually,
their harvest of percussion suffocates
Padre Paul's percussion of my state in life.

Laridae

Naomi Fa-Kaji

She stood balanced on the edge of oblivion, a gaping expanse of nothing before her. Swirling grey waves slammed against the bridge's pilings, causing her to sway on her perch. She tipped her head back and saw them, the seagulls, gliding up, up overhead. They seemed so effortless, so free. Black-tipped wings cut smooth arcs through the fog. Little dancers circled in a heavenly mobile, like the wooden one over the cradle so many years ago.

* * *

The room had always been sparsely furnished: a creaking wooden rocking chair swung in a steady rhythm by the little bassinet of canvas and steel tubing, and the only decorations were curling posters of impressionist work, confused jumbles of watery places and hazy figures. Curtains fluttered at the windows, ushering in ribbons of dusty sunlight that coiled and pooled on the floor, leeching the dregs of dye from an already-faded shag carpet. But oh, that mobile: that beautiful collection of wood and string, dangling from the sturdy rafters of the room.

She remembered how much she had wanted to touch those wooden figures, how much she had wanted to feel her fist close tight around one of those little birds. She wanted to feel the firm pressure of a curved wing-tip pushing into the soft flesh of her tiny hand, to know without a doubt that she owned it, if only for a second—that, for one moment, it was hers.

But no, they had found her on the rocking chair, balanced on the pitching platform, reaching—oh reaching—out toward the things she wanted so much, tiny fingers just a hairsbreadth away from grazing those beautiful grey wings.

No, they had told her, Don't. You'll wake the *baby*, the *baby*, the *baby*. And they had carried her away, a cry stuck in her throat, just moments away from tasting flight, from grasping freedom. They closed her little fists around air, around nothing. Shhhh. The *baby*, the *baby*, the *baby*.

They sat her down with glossy picture books and cheap plastic toys with lights and blaring noises and bright grinning faces. She didn't like all that sound and blinding color. The noises

shrieked—too loud. The colors merged into horrible blobs, filling her vision with leering faces. She stuffed her chubby hands against her ears and scrunched her eyes tight. Too much—make it stop, just make it stop.

They didn't understand. They offered her more plastic figurines, more garish color, more loud noises. She just wanted that mobile—the graceful birds, the cool grey color, the cracked, splintering wood. She longed for the old, old feel of something genuine.

* * *

She grew a bit older. The baby in the cradle was no longer a baby—she was a blond, blue-eyed little girl. Stella, they called her, Stella. Stella laughed out loud, a pleasing giggle that made them smile and coo. Stella loved the bright toys and the loud noises. Stella was dressed in ruffles and ribbons, her little ringlets neatly arranged, her dimples ever on display.

Slowly, they gave up trying to offer these things to her. Instead, they gave them to Stella. Stella, who responded the way she should, loved being held and fawned over, delighted in the noise and made so much of it herself. Unlike her, the one who shied from touch, and when things got to be too much, would cover her ears and shut her eyes and rock—like she once rocked, balanced on that old wooden chair—to rid herself of this loud, noisy world. Only that way could she find a place where she felt safe, where she felt in control.

She would sing to herself too. A wordless song—deep, arching, and soulful—like she imagined the seagulls would sing, so free and so high above the world, yet almost like they were crying, happy to be in the air, but a little sad to be off the earth. The tiniest part of her was always regretful that she couldn't be both in the sky and on land, that she couldn't ever have both.

* * *

More years passed and there was school. Horrible, horrible school where the other children were too noisy, always shouting, always yelling so that she had to keep her hands flat against her ears to try to block the noise. And the other children were always touching, always putting their dirty hands all over her desk and her chair, always were pushing and shoving, and she just wanted to be left alone and go in a corner and stand with air surrounding her, with nothing surrounding her, so that she didn't have to touch and feel their dirty, grimy bodies against her own.

They quickly figured out that she was different, and they were mean, the way children can be when faced with something they don't understand. They called her names and stole her lunch bag with the picture of seagulls on the front and dropped it in the mud. And then she couldn't get it because it was dirty, so dirty and grimy. But she wasn't hungry anyways so the lunch didn't matter to her, except that she was sad to see those beautiful seagulls all muddy and dirty, their beautiful open sky mixed up

with the dust of the earth so that it was no longer sky and they were stuck, unable to fly.

These things her mother didn't understand. Her mother didn't understand why she didn't pick up that lunch bag. It was so dirty, dirty, and she couldn't touch it. She just couldn't. Her mother yelled, but her mother often yelled. It was not because she didn't *love* her, no, not because of *that*, she always said. It was just *because*, just because why did she always have to be so *difficult* all the time? Couldn't she be like *Stella*, couldn't she be *normal* and make *friends* and not be so much *trouble*? Couldn't she just pick up the damn lunch bag, *goddammit*, this is really too much sometimes, why couldn't she just be *normal*? Her mom didn't do anything *wrong*, why did she have to have a child who was so *difficult*, so much *work*? But no, this didn't mean she didn't *love* her, sorry, sorry, mommy got mad, sorry it's just too *much* sometimes, you *know*? Just a lunch bag.

And then her mother would go off and talk on the phone for a long time with a person she always talked to when she was upset. Her mother paid a lot of money to talk to this person. Why would anyone want to pay to talk, she wondered, because why would you want to talk at all if you didn't have to?

She noticed that, as the days went on, her father was away more and more, and her mother was on the phone with that expensive person more and more, and her mother also smoked more and more. She worried for her mother, because she really did love her, and because she learned in school that cigarettes are really, really bad for you. They had shown pictures in school of horrible black things they had said were lungs. Could they really be lungs, like the pink pork-chop-shaped things in the picture books? They said those horrible black things were what your lungs looked like if you smoked a lot, and her mother smoked a lot, and she didn't want her mother to die. When she tried to tell her mother that the cigarettes would kill her, her mother sighed and said, *Honey*, I need *something* to help me out. *Lord knows* I love you, but you are a *handful* and mommy needs *something* to help her *deal* with you when you are *difficult*. If you could stop being *difficult*, mommy could stop *smoking*.

She tried for a while to not be difficult. She tried very hard, but it was all too much and too fast paced, and she needed something to control. Her mother caught her rocking and singing that song to herself, and she was back to smoking. The only good thing about it was that when she was smoking, her mother left her alone.

* * *

The only other time her mother left her alone was when her mother took Stella to the mall. At first her mother tried to take her too—she'd say, Come on, *honey*, we'll buy you some *cute* new clothes. Wouldn't you *like* that? It'll be *so much fun*, just us *girls* all *together*.

But Stella would whine and say, Do we *really* have to take *her*? What if she starts making noises again and *rocking*? What if people *saw*? That would be absolutely *awful*. That would absolutely be the most embarrassing thing in the *world*. It's bad enough that I have to be the same *school* as her. Plus, she

wouldn't *want* to go anyways.

Stella was right—she didn't want to go—and after a while, her mother stopped asking. From then on, it was always Stella-and-her-mom: Stella-and-her-mom going shopping, Stella-and-her-mom going to a movie, Stella-and-her-mom getting their hair done. It made her kind of sad that she couldn't be part of Stella-and-her-mom, but she told herself she didn't want to do those things anyways, so it was probably better this way.

* * *

She grew older, and her parents fought a lot more, and there was something about her father and another woman, not her mother. So there was more yelling, and her father moved out, and there were door slams, and she sat in her room and rocked and sang and realized that she was crying. Her mother said it wasn't her fault, but Stella said it was because she was such a *freak* and absolutely everyone in the whole entire *world* hated her. And Stella would ignore her at school or would tell people how she thought she absolutely *had* to be adopted because she was such an absolute *freak* and god, there really was absolutely *no way* that they ever could have been sisters, god, not *really*. This didn't bother her much because she was used to it, and she would just go off and be by herself and watch the seagulls high above the confines of her concrete school.

* * *

Then her father was back and demanding to see his daughters. The other woman had left him, and he was yelling and pounding on the door and saying that he wanted to see his dawtels, his lovery dawtels because they were jus as mush *his* as they were theyl moverr's and he had a ralight to see his own chilrren. And her mother was yelling that he was *drunk*, and there was *no way in hell* that she was going to let *him* near *her* children when he was acting like a *raving lunatic*. While Stella was putting on a concerned face and pouting on the phone with her friends, she was just in her room alone with the wall paper she had picked out, with light houses and shorelines and tiny black m's that were birds, her seagulls, trying to block it all out.

* * *

One day her mother said, *Girls*, it's time to see your *father*. And there he was, all smiling and in a suit and acting all well mannered and calling them *mademoiselles* and Stella all pink and blushing and laughing. She knew better, though, because she remembered, and how could her mother let them go home with a *raving lunatic*? So while Stella chatted about school and her friends, and especially her absolutely wonderful new *boyfriend* and could they *please* go somewhere fancy tonight, daddy, I would absolutely *love*

to go to a *fancy* restaurant, she just sat stony and silent in the back and she glared at her father because he was a liar and he had left and now here he was pretending to be their father again, but she knew better.

They did go to a fancy restaurant, but she refused to order, and when her father ordered for her, she didn't touch the food, she just looked out into the darkness outside of the window, and pictured the seagulls—where did they go at night?

The next day, after her father had dropped Stella off at the mall with her friends and a wad of cash, he came back to the house and smiled and said *How's my little girl!* She ignored him at first because, really, he had no right to be calling her that after everything he had done, though she really didn't know what all that was, but her mother said it a lot, *He's got some nerve* after everything he's *done*, so it must have been very, very bad.

And then he said *Oh, look, I got you something* I thought you would like, and he handed her a flat package covered in messily-taped red tissue paper. She looked at him because, since when did people just give you presents when it wasn't even your birthday or anything? But he said, *Go on, open it*, and he smiled but his eyes looked a tiny bit sad which confused her because, was he happy or sad? She couldn't tell but she felt bad for him because maybe he was sad, so she ripped open the paper and there was a large white book that said *BIRDS* in bright yellow writing, and even though she didn't like yellow she smiled because she did like birds. Then her father said, *Your mother told me that you liked birds*, so I got this book for you, and his voice sounded kind of funny like maybe he was going to cry or something which confused her, but she smiled a bit, at the book, because she was too confused looking at her father. She guessed he saw it because he seemed happier. She almost thought that maybe they could go back to how it used to be. It didn't use to be that great, but it wasn't that bad either.

Just then, a tall older boy walked in the door, and her father looked excited and said, *This is your stepbrother, Daniel*. She wondered how she could have thought of forgiving him since he had gone and left their family and started a new one while trying to still have the old one also. So she refused to look at either of them, even though she did sneak one quick peek at Daniel who looked like the people whom Stella was friends with. He was tall with brown hair and his lips parted to reveal glaring white teeth. Her father smiled and said, *We-ell, I'd better go get Stella; I'll leave you two to get to know each other*.

Daniel said, *Hey, you're nothing like your sister, are you?* But she ignored him because he was a fake sibling that her father had somehow connected with her, so she really felt no obligation to speak. And then Daniel said, *Your sister was right, you really are a freak*.

* * *

They started going to her father's house more often, and Daniel was usually there. She tried to stay away from him, but he was always around, getting in her way and muttering *freak* under his breath as she tried to get past him. He'd always bump into her, which she didn't like at all, and she'd try to

go somewhere to just be alone, but he'd always be nearby. Even when she would lock herself in the bathroom and run the water to drown out everything for a while so she could be alone, he'd always be waiting for her when she came out. Sometimes he would even knock on the door and say, Hey, *freak*, what's taking so long?

* * *

One day, when her father was out getting food for dinner and Stella was over at a friend's, she had the house to herself. She took the book her father had given her and sat down on the sofa to look again at the pages filled with those beautiful, beautiful birds.

Suddenly the door opened and Daniel was there, staring down at her, his white teeth gleaming. Hey there, *freak*, he said. She couldn't get around him, so she tried to ignore him, holding the book up to block him out. Hey! He said, knocking the book down, Look at me when I'm talking to you, *freak*. No guy is ever going to like you if you have your nose in a book all the time. I bet you've never even been kissed, have you, *freak*? She looked away and curled up small, trying to get as far from him as possible, hoping he would just go away, go away and leave her alone. You haven't, have you, *freak*? He asked, his voice getting louder, Huh, *freak*? Look at me! He reached out and grabbed her chin, C'mon, look at me, *freak*.

She didn't like his fingers on her skin, so she yanked herself away and ran up the stairs leading to the bedroom she was staying in and began singing that wordless song to herself, hoping that this horrid boy who was somehow her brother would go away, just go away. But he got angry and rushed up behind her and caught her on the stairs, and was yelling, Answer me, *freak*! What, are you mute too?

And she didn't like him touching her, and she was singing louder now and thrashing about, trying to get away, trying to get back to something she could control. But he got more angry and he hit her and shoved her against the wall. And then he was all over her, touching her all over, and she didn't like this, no, this couldn't be happening, and she tried to close her eyes and make it go away but he was everywhere and he was yelling and grunting and she couldn't get her hands up to her ears because he had them trapped, and she was slammed up against a wall and couldn't move and this was happening, no this could not be happening, no, no, and she tried to sing her song, but she wasn't loud enough, and he yelled SHUT UP, and put his dirty dirty hand over her mouth, and he was everywhere, and she couldn't get rid of him, no, no, she wanted to fly away, but she couldn't because she never learned how, never ever touched one of those birds and now she was trapped and she felt that song well up inside her, like that mournful song that the seagulls sing and they were mourning for her now, they were all crying for her because they were free up in the sky and they couldn't take her with them, no they couldn't do anything because she was stuck down on earth, oh god, she was stuck because she didn't know how to fly.

* * *

When he finally let her go, she ran. She didn't think, she just ran and ran and ran. And some people were yelling at her, Hey, girl, are you *alright*? And there were cars honking and it was all too much, so she just ran and ran and ran until the noise was gone, until it was all gone, and she was alone. Finally she stopped and looked around and found herself on a bridge somewhere, over a beautiful, beautiful expanse of open water. The sky was grey, and the water was grey, and if she squinted a bit, the horizon blurred, and then it was all grey—a whole world of grey, grey nothing. And she heard a familiar calling, like a calling from deep within. She looked up and saw them.

Without thinking, she stretched an arm out to them, grasping ineffectively at the graceful silhouettes, slowly circling out of view. She looked at her empty fist in dismay, thwarted once again, unable to understand why she could not hold this, why she could not make it her own.

She climbed up higher, wanting to be closer to the sky, to at last be able to reach out and touch them, to finally learn how to fly. She was almost high enough, her fingers almost grazing their wing tips, and she stretched on tiptoe, but still she could not quite reach them.

They cried and sang that beautiful haunting song, and she felt tears on her face because they were just out of reach, and she would be stuck here forever, ripped away from what she wanted most as she had been torn away from that cradle all those years ago.

They sang, and she heard them calling to her to come fly, to come fly with them, because it is so much better up here where no one can touch you, where no one can hurt you ever again. And she was reaching and reaching, balancing on the edge of the railing, and it was all so beautiful and just a bit too far, just a bit too much out of reach. They were calling to her to let go, let go, you will be free with us, they will hurt you down there, come be where you can never be hurt again. And she thought yes, yes, that is what I want. She opened her mouth and the song came pouring out, drifting up to them. Yes, yes, this was the connection she wanted all her life, this was the control, and she lifted her arms up to them and stepped off into that vast grey expanse.

In that moment, she learned how to fly.



Hannah Lee, "Sketches of Metropolitan"

Slip

Mohini Dasari

an eerie glow

(a halo?)

a crowd of milling, bustling hands
jittery, hungry voices

channa masala and hot naan
simmering

hi, i said—
the nerves in my fingers rattling
as i scooped out the hundredth serving
for another smiling styrofoam plate—

smiles were courteously presented,
two royalties in a court, were we?

what good is memory if you can't act or speak?

i let go
of the spoon, eyes wandering,
contents seeping,

the plate moves down the assembly line;

i let go, and somewhere in the clutter
of misplaced eyes and lips and words

he moved down too



Laura-Eve Engel

Interview by Maggie Sulc

Laura Eve Engel's work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Washington Square*, and elsewhere. Originally from Charlottesville, Virginia, she now lives in Houston, Texas, where she is the Reviews & Interviews Editor for *Gulf Coast*.

Why did you decide to enter an MFA program? What advice can you give to undergrads considering working on their craft at the graduate level?

Really, I just got lucky in college. Thanks to an incredible lady named Lisa Russ Spaar, U.Va. had an Area Program in Poetry Writing, which was more or less modeled after the two-year MFA program: our English major requirements were slightly less lit-heavy, and in place of literature we took seminars that were craft- and process-oriented; we took a lot of workshops; we produced a book-length thesis at the end. For me and my development as a writer, there's been nothing quite like being taken seriously by mentors and peers, and the Area Program was just the right combination of challenges and affirmations. I took it as a good sign that at the end of this two-year process I wanted to do it all over again.

As far as advice, I think some of the best I can offer is purely practical: the MFA is not a degree you have to pay for. When I was applying to programs, I made a list of the ones that would fund me and I only applied to those programs. I think it's also important that when you're applying to programs, you consider your position a powerful one. The process is all about figuring out which programs are right for you, which programs have a faculty and community that you can work with, ones that value your work rather than try to torque it into something else. Read the faculty's work, but also ask the students how those folks are as teachers. Trust your own intuition and be as honest with yourself as you can about what type of environment best helps you to grow.

In your poems, I noticed subtle but important differences in formatting that affect the way readers view the poems. Is formatting something you think about as you're writing? How important of a step is it within your larger process?

Form, like a lot of things about the writing process, is mysterious to me. I do a lot of experimenting, a lot of moving lines around the page, before I settle on something. I know I'm someone who's pleased by patterns,

so I often muscle something into tercets and then give myself permission to stop, because when something's a pattern, it's easy to mistake it for done. Lately, I've been returning to poems and trying to create disorder in them, just to see what it does. Often, I find that that's productive, to disrupt the order of a thing. When the language of the poem is lifted from its neat little package, whether it's tercets or couplets or some other organizing principle, aspects of the poem that appeared to be finished are exposed for their lack of integrity. Flaws in logic, flaws in sound, some other imprecision that was easy to dismiss when the form was making noises like the poem was complete.

What attracts you to writing poetry in particular, as opposed to other genres?

What attracted me to poetry initially was that I was one of those folks who thought it was impenetrable, and rather than being turned off by that, I was endlessly excited by it. To me, poems were these sonic landscapes we built to keep our secrets inside of. The first poems I ever wrote felt like acts of subversive journalism: subversive because they were indecipherable to anyone but myself and concerned things I'd never tell a soul, and journalistic because they still contained little notes to myself about what I'd seen or experienced, moments I wanted to record. I've also always been pursued by feeling that if I don't write things down in some form, I'm going to forget them, and then it'll be as if they never happened. "Allowing myself"—by not writing it down—to forget how a thing really happened has always, always seemed to me a kind of willful dishonesty, a trick a person might play on herself to make, by forgetting, the world into a series of best parts and good behavior, instead of all of it. I sometimes think I write to keep myself honest. It's probably safe to say my ideas about poetry have changed significantly since I was sixteen, but my love of a good sonic landscape hasn't changed, and it's one of the things that keeps me returning, again and again, to poetry. I'm very ear-driven.

How does working with young writers at the University of Virginia's Young Writers Workshop affect your writing or the way you look at writing in general?

Working at Young Writers affects everything about me as a human being. The sappiest, feeliest-mealiest things I'll ever say are the things I say about Young Writers. So in that totally holistic, a-person's-fulfilled-when-there-are-things-in-the-world-that-person-loves kind of way, YWW affects my writing simply by helping me to be a person. Practically speaking, when I'm working at YWW there's very little time to write, but the uninhibited creative atmosphere is so potent that it sticks with me long after I leave. I once told one of my suites that YWW is a place where you should ask yourself the question "What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail," because at YWW, failure isn't really possible. When I'm home, I remind myself of this as often as I can, to challenge myself to keep up with the folks who experiment and grow wildly with that level of uninhibition that's hard to maintain, and yet is important to keep trying.

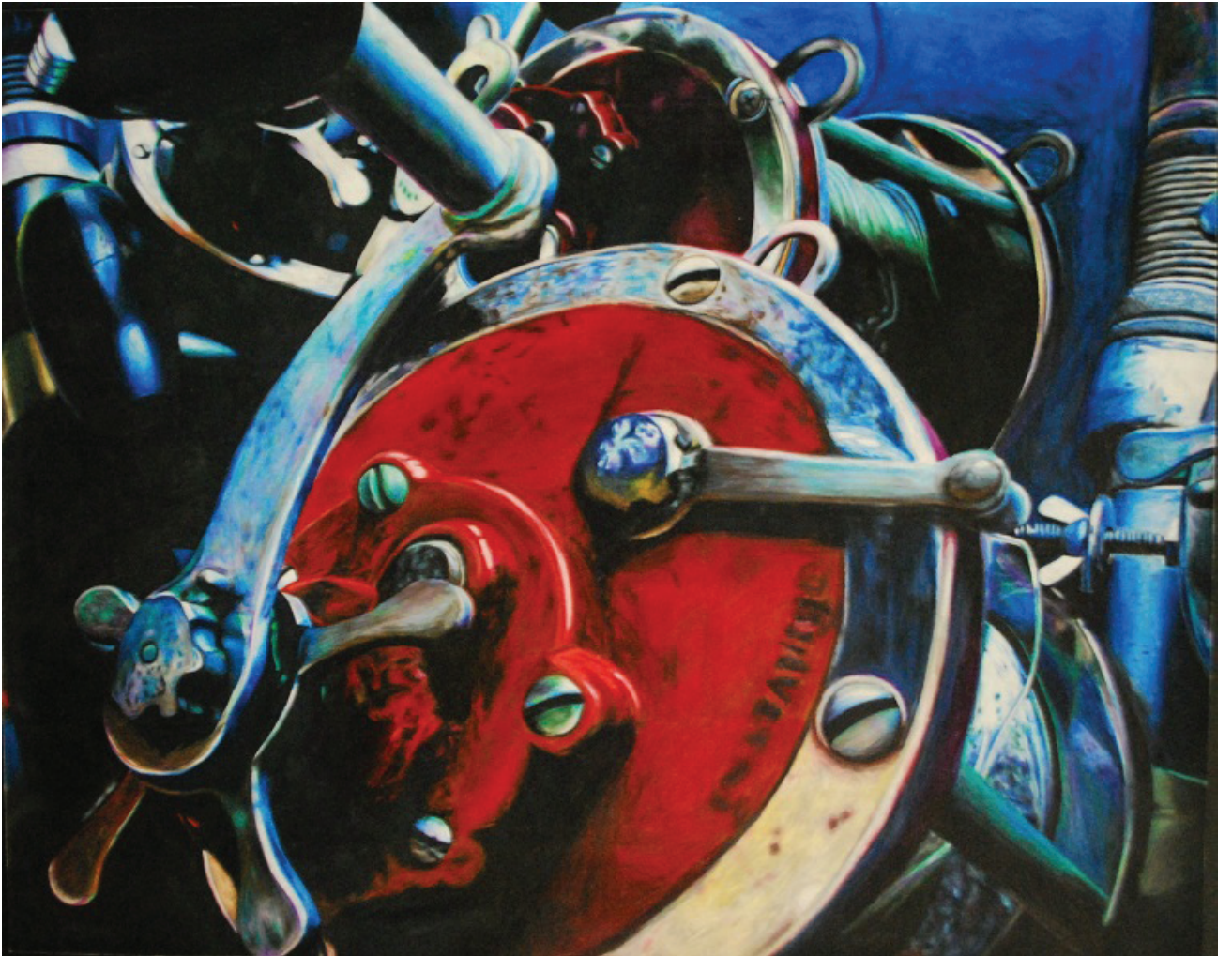
Ledge

Ross Arlen Tieken

Leather moans as I settle into my wing-back,
trembling from nicotine, caffeine.
My book is set pages down
to mark my place
in the middle of a chapter
I am too tired to finish. I lean
forward to stare

at Oriental rugs, mandalas spun
Around; this is Sheol.
Some shadow calls me to drop
into it. Is there a bottom? Because
all is roiling blackness and the beams
that hold my living room above
the damp earth, or at least

that is what I suppose.
My forehead furrows.
The rug is not moving,
there is no hole in the floor.
A voice from the kitchen calls.
I chuckle and answer,
I'm coming, honey.



Nathan Keibler, "Reels"

Escape

Jerome Ellsworth

Death—let me tell you about death. There’s a little man dressed in green. He drinks cheap American beer and he puts his hand on your shoulder and he patiently tells you every mistake you made in your life. Every little thing. Remember when you decided to major in economics because you were enchanted into believing that, if only the system worked better, you could clean up some appreciable portion of third-world poverty? That was wrong. You should have majored in film studies. It’s what you wanted to do all along. Remember when you asked Susie Something to the prom instead of Wanda Whatsits because Wanda was out of your league? That was wrong. She was out of your league, sure, but if you had stayed at home and eaten staples it would have been more fun than going with Susie. Remember when you wanted to read an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel and you picked *The Great Gatsby* because it’s the popular one that everybody reads? Wrong. *Tender is the Night* is so much better; ask anybody who has read both. Remember when you picked the chicken? The fish would have been the best fish you’d ever had.

And it goes on like that. It goes on like that for hundreds of thousands of years. It reminded me of my mother and how she always used to pick out all my little imperfections, and then sometimes she’d just put her hands on her hips and say, “Francis, you just can’t do anything right, can you?”

There is a dragon that waits behind a hill at the far end of my public park. If you asked me, “Why did Francis die?” I would answer that I died because I was careless and imperfect. If you asked a less enlightened observer the same question, however, they would probably point to a certain event in which that particular dragon knocked me from my rocket ship and caused me to drop several miles back to the earth. Now I know that the dragon is always there and always has been, waiting for me to slip up, so it can make me pay for it. But I’m okay with the dragon being there now, because I know about the celestials. If I do what they tell me, I will not make mistakes.

Here, let me tell you a story. Once upon a time, The Name created my soul in heaven, and I was perfect. By perfect, I mean that, in that state, I would have volunteered for Peace Corps and donated all my disposable income to charity and spent three days a week at a homeless shelter and all the rest of my free time I would have spent at church. That’s what I would have been like. But The Name found that

far too boring. I knew everything, so he touched me above the mouth and depressed my philtrum, and I forgot. But at that point I was just dumb, not evil—kind of like Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*. That wasn't good enough for him by a long shot though, so The Name tossed me carelessly from the firmament, and I collided with the spheres, and all of them together made me corrupt—one corruption from each planet. From Mars I learned violence; from Jupiter I learned greed, etc. As a final embarrassment, I was entombed in flesh upon the Earth, separated from my creator and subjected to the will of pretend little gods. Also, now I'm a total bastard. That, you could say, is my origin. I share it with a lot of people—even the President of the United States, and the Pope.

But did you know that there's a way to escape the corrupt filth that is the world? I figured that much out on my own.

I'm working on a project at the far end of the park, opposite the dragon's hill. Sometimes, when I'm not there—when I search around the neighborhood for more parts—the trolls come over and smash my project. I find it on the ground in as many pieces as I started with. There's a lady who jogs by from day to day. I try, periodically, to get her to watch it for me. She calls it "a pile of garbage" and she doesn't understand why I consider it important. That's okay. I mean, it's annoying as hell that I have to rebuild it every few days, but it's okay because I'm getting faster, and I think pretty soon I'll be able to get it right in one go—just a few days. I even had a promising, if naive, test flight once. I'll tell you about it momentarily.

Building a rocket is complicated. That's what the lady says. She says I can't build a rocket from things found around the block. I know that. I've read about it. You need to be able to emit some fluid with a force high enough to get your rocket off the ground. It's Newton's third law. You need some sort of reaction, like combustion. You need a nozzle. You need fuel. I respect what flesh-and-bone, earthbound engineers have come up with, but the celestials tell me there are other ways.

Gravity, they say, is just another form of ignorance. Gravity keeps us here, bound to flesh. You can know things to make yourself a little lighter—to make the earth's pull a little less absolute. There are prayers you can say. You can fast. It makes sense, really: the closer to God you are—the more pure—the less tied down you are. I am more pure now than I was as an infant. When I was meditating, I saw the prophet Elijah in a vision the other day. He told me, "Screw the lady. She's nothing like what you're becoming."

Why, then, do I need material to build my rocket at all? The celestials told me that too. They say, "as above, so below." Corrupted though the things of Earth are, they still originate from The Name. In every discarded tin can or lunch box or rotting pizza stuck to a round piece of cardboard, there is a little bit of the divine nature. We toss away divinity in a thousand different ways every day. I have to figure out how to put it back together, you see. When it is complete, and I am complete, then the lady will see that I'm right.

Here is what happened during my test flight. This was a few weeks ago, back when I was incomplete, and I was fallible, and I didn't have help from celestials. I worked by a different model, you

see. I did things I wouldn't have to anymore. I had invested any money I had in things that would make me higher. I had maybe one thousand of those little model rocket engines strapped together under my cab. D size. I mean, I know they only worked with small payloads, but I was a pretty small payload compared to a space shuttle or a commercial satellite. When I couldn't afford any more of those, I bought helium balloons; the trolls did so enjoy popping the balloons. They bothered me all day with their little acts of sabotage, but I finally got it rigged up properly. I figured out how to ignite all the rockets at once. It was just a button push. In retrospect, I made a lot of mistakes in the rocket's construction. Any fourteen-year-old could tell you that it wouldn't work. Ultimately, I think it was my hubris, more than any other flaw, that attracted the dragon.

As I pressed it, I remembered from my youth of building model rockets that those engines tended to burn for about five seconds. I think that's about how long mine was. I got pretty high up, for certain. It's my educated guess that with the engines and the balloons together, I reached at least the upper stratosphere.

That was the first time I had ever seen the dragon. At first it looked like a crow, but then it grew quickly into a huge red worm, with flaming wings. It bore its huge teeth to me in a sort of cruel smile, because it knew I wasn't ready yet. It caught up with me in only a moment, and with its mouth tore a chunk of sheet metal out of my cabin. Now off balance, my craft spun out of control, and I don't remember exactly what happened, but the little man in green told me later that I fell off, down onto the road, and I died.

Then the man told me, as I described earlier, everything I did wrong. He told me about all the little mistakes I made, and that was infuriating, but he told me about the celestials I could call. He told me that that, although the dragon killed me, I shouldn't hate it, because it served a necessary function in the process of refinement that would eventually allow my escape from the world.

Dying was an exceedingly painful experience. In the end, though the little man told me that if I repented of my connection with the earth, and if I looked to the celestials instead of myself or my memories of mother, then I would no longer have to make mistakes. He said, "try again; this time, you don't need to be a slave to gravity."

And soon (screw the lady) I'm going to make it.

Café Mimosa

Lilly Yu

Women who wore white satin coats with appliqué black roses carried toddlers with creamy skin dressed in pink skirts and glitter-covered shoes on their hips, their heads plastered with soft angel-red hair. They asked for almond cookies and green tea ice cream, maraschino cherries that seeped a poisonous red onto the avocado green. It was this same green that slowed in gobs of wasabi in little plastic trays, hideously hissing at your tongue when it accidentally brushed against the glossy grains of rice surrounding layers of raw pink salmon and the heaviness of stick-to-your-mouth cream cheese. Translucent sheets of wet ginger fell from the clumsy handling of their breakable wooden chopsticks onto their plates; the neon pink lights from their window seats reflected their facial features with the intensity of a wishing well, descending into their appliqué rose laps. They all asked for window seats, so they could be seen from the dirty street, drinking green tea and eating sushi with the pink light electrifying their faces, their hands, the clear whiteness of their water glasses.

* * *

“I want to get you guys out to see a movie or something, down at Baxter. Here, give me your number.” Lori, one of the servers, tore off the corner of the LEO newsweekly she was scanning for good shows and spelled my name with only one L. I gave it to her hesitantly – I was fourteen and Lori’s son was five years older than me. She folded the paper and tucked it into her cigarette carton and beamed. The perpetually swinging front door swung open and she got up, pulling her pen and pad of paper out of the front of her apron. “I got this one, don’t worry.” I shook my head slightly and returned to snapping snow peas.

* * *

Denae wrapped her nine-year-old arms around my shoulders like a warm shawl, soft and smooth like cocoa butter and the color of honey and chocolate. On nights when Brooke, one of my favorite servers,

couldn't find a babysitter, Denae would be sitting at the work table while her mom worked. Her thick blonde-tipped dreads bobbed as she puckered her lips and applied glittery pink Bonne Bell. She made me feel like I was nine again – grown up enough to wear Bonne Bell but not old enough for Revlon. She licked her fingers after swallowing the tempura roll the manager gave her for free, drinking Sprite from the flattened white ends of her clear straw. She batted her eyes and giggled. She asked Joe to change the station to the Disney Channel, and he would begrudgingly turn off his baseball games to preteen music videos but he could never say no. We watched Corbin Bleu and whispered about the cute boys, bad boys we wanted, boys with thick hair who could dance. At the end of the night, she would wrap her skinny arms around my waist and make me wish that Brooke wouldn't be able to get a babysitter next Saturday either.

* * *

One July evening, the thermostat broke and we simmered in the Kentucky evening heat. After glancing at his tables and seeing his customers sitting contently, Larry grabbed my hand. "Quick, follow me." We ran through the restaurant and its suffocating sweat. Through the kitchen where the cooks shouted and cackled, past the laundry room coughing out maroon napkins and mangling aprons, past the dirty storage hallway covered in bleach water and dirt. The door to the walk-in freezer was broken, but Larry picked up the heavy silver door off its broken hinges and we disappeared into its still coolness. Inside, tomatoes, green peppers, paper boxes full of lemons shone brightly. We couldn't stop laughing. I can still smell the scent of dirty carrots and raw meat.

* * *

There was an art to everything. In the corner by the sushi bar sink, I cut lemons by tips, tips, halves, quarters, and eighths. There was the sound of stacking glasses, cold ones in the front, hot ones back on the surface next to the sushi bar. The sound of polishing silverware and pushing it into perfect maroon rolls. I sat at the worker table and rolled tight clusters of hot silverware by knife, fork, and then spoon in triangles of maroon napkins. A delicious sound was made when I snapped green beans, when I tore off the ends of cold snow peas. The owner's son, Kevin, who worked the carry-out phones and cash registers, always packed my lemongrass noodles the way I like it. He didn't have to ask: chopsticks, soy sauce, sirachi, two fish sauces, and extra spring rolls. He never let me enter the bleach-covered kitchen floor—"you'll get the bottom of your pants dirty." Dishes broke amidst the perpetual swinging of the front door and the slam of the back. The owner screamed epitaphs in Vietnamese at the dishwasher, but Larry carried cokes to table #15 and I ran to the front door, ignoring the din behind.

* * *

It was 90 degrees that July night. As Brooke, Chris, Joe, and Larry all sat outside with me on the dirty patio chairs, waiting for my mother to pick me up at 11:30, Joe told us about this black orchid sake he had once in Los Angeles. Blue sake cups swirling with black and purple alcohol, the same way the night swirled with the silken grey smoke angels that twirled from his ashen cigarette. The acidic green glow of Burritos as Big as Your Head pulsed softly in response to the dark and warm vibrations of the restaurant behind us. The night hummed with the recession of energy. I was sticky, dirty, but completely at peace.



Nathan Keibler, "Mr. I"

Sublimation of Fact, Decomposition of Record

Russ Horres

Today at 15:51 in an organic lab,
I dissolved my last pen.

As I pressed hard into my notebook,
hoping to finally record
an 'I' that showed through
on carbon copy,
the utensil melted in my grip,

leaving nothing more than a gooey line
of sticky plastic on the page—
a sine wave,
charting a cyclic frustration.
Will this show through?

I wondered.

The man who oversees my work
has told me to press harder.
He has had enough trouble
with me already.

He is a "Leo," I am an Aries,
and we are not compatible,
as established in the literature
(see: Bigar, Jacqueline.

Houston Chronicle, Star Section:
Horoscopes, 2009).

But with such predictions laid out,
why could I not be warned today:
watch out (for acetone)!
or even: be careful
as you handle a delicate situation.

I thought to furtively discard my pen,
to destroy all evidence of its disintegration,
but where did it belong?
Was the plastic an acid or a base?
Was it bonded with halogens?

Where would I, if dissolved, belong?
Had I spent enough time in public pools
To be discarded and swim in solution
with the chlorines, the bromines,
the fluorines and the iodines?

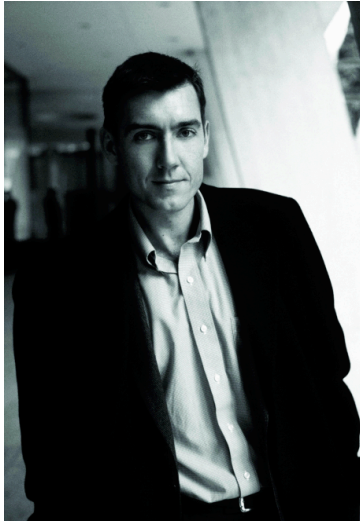
And, at the moment of my discarding,
will I have made enough impressions
to make the community wonder,
How is it that matter is
neither created *nor* destroyed,
Yet we must be
both created *and* destroyed?

Perhaps these questions are not empirical,
and our sciences can only reveal
a gestural picture of our experience,

name but not capture the things
that group us together or set us apart,
the private dissolutions,
the unrecorded I's and

the individual constellations.

Perhaps, then, those specifics
that define us precisely—
as Leo, as Aries,
as halogenated, non-halogenated
acidic or basic waste
—are the soul of the organic:
the significant figures
and theoretical answers
that our practical chemistry
always refuses to find.



Justin Cronin

Interview by David Velez

Justin Cronin lives and writes in Houston, where he also teaches courses in fiction writing at Rice University. In 2004, Cronin founded *R2* magazine. He has written three novels, the most recent of which--*The Passage*--was published in June of 2010 and is currently being adapted into a major motion picture. He is a recipient of the PEN/Hemingway Award, the Stephen Crane Prize, and the Whiting Writer's Award, and has been published in *StoryQuarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Washington Post*.

When and how did you decide you wanted to become a writer?

I never really “decided.” It was more a case of other ambitions and interests falling away. I went to graduate school for my MFA when I was 24, but even then I had no idea if I would keep writing.

What is your writing style like?

No one's ever asked me that before. It's just my voice.

Describe your writing process. Do you simply write an outline then begin writing, or do you have everything figured out before you start?

The Passage and its sequels all have pretty detailed playbooks. I like to know where I'm going before I start. Writing a novel is a lot like launching a missile. If you don't aim very carefully before you push the button you'll kill all your friends in Des Moines.

What tips would you give aspiring writers for writing a book series of this magnitude?

Practice, practice, practice.

How did you come up with the initial concept of the book?

My daughter helped me. She was eight years old at the time. We were playing a game called “Let’s Plot a Novel.” Every day after school when I went running, she’d come along on her bicycle. I really had no plans to write a book—we were just having fun. But after about three months, I realized I was onto a pretty good story.

***The Passage* is a lengthy and complex novel. How do you keep your story organized and on track?**

Most of it you simply have to hold in your head. But I also keep a lot of lists. I keep a large whiteboard on the wall of my office and when I’m writing a particularly complicated scene, say, one with many characters or some complicated physical action, I’ll design the scene first, blocking it like a scene from a play.

How often do you write? When do you usually do most of your writing?

Writing’s a job, and the first rule of any job is this: you must show up. I write five or six days a week, from nine to four, and then return to my office after dinner for a couple more hours. As I move deeper into a book this second shift gets longer. Sometimes I don’t go to bed until 4 a.m.

What are some of the ways you get past writer’s block?

I don’t really get writer’s block, but of course there are some days when you just don’t feel like doing it, or don’t write especially well. My advice: Take a walk, get some fresh air, play with the kids. It’ll pass.

The characters live and the events occur all across the United States. Did you have to do any traveling to write the novel?

Yes. I’d been to most of these places, and lived in several of them (Memphis, Philadelphia, Southern California) but I wanted to travel every mile the characters did. I actually drove most of it twice.

Were there any major overhauls of the plot or story during your writing? Did the book resemble your initial plot and story?

It followed the original design quite closely. There were small deviations, and I reconfigured a few of the characters. I ran into some problems of logic that forced me to reconsider a couple of sections. But in the main, the outline served as a very good roadmap.

Do you ever have moments when you come up with a great idea that you cannot use, because including it in the book would mean rewriting everything or changing your plot and story?

All the time. The greatest hazard writing a novel is falling in love with some idea that just seems to blow in from nowhere. Next thing you know, the book is going in completely the wrong direction, you're way overdue, the kids are hungry and crying . . . you get the idea.

Is there anything you would change about *The Passage*?

I could probably find something I'd change on every page. That always happens.

Every book has an issue or higher truth that the author means to address in their writing. What issue or higher truth is in *The Passage*?

Take care of the kids. Don't mortgage the future; it's theirs, not yours.

Now that you have moved on to writing the sequels, does your daughter still contribute to them?

She's fourteen now, with a busy teenage life, so no. My wife does, though. She's my first reader.

Ridley Scott purchased the movie rights to the novel way before you had even finished writing. You said in a previous interview that *The Passage* movie should be the director's vision of the tale, not yours. Are you ever afraid that the changes for the movie might distort your story?

This isn't really a concern. The people involved with the movie are all very, very smart. And I try not to worry about things I can't control.

How do you feel, and what do you say, when people say that one of the reasons *The Passage* is doing so well is because of the vampire-pop-culture-bandwagon that is prevalent right now?

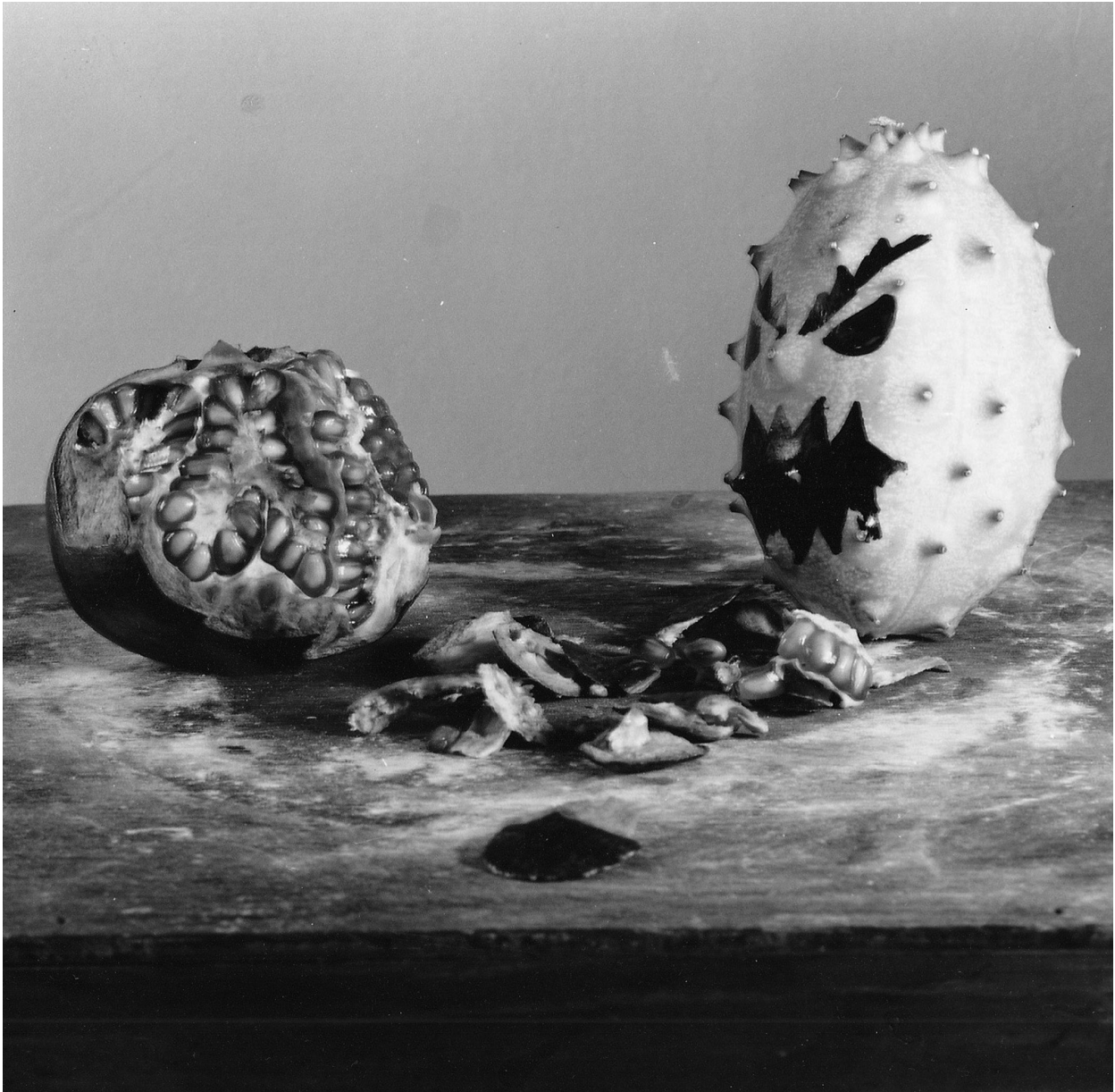
Fine with me. Though I don't really see *The Passage* as a vampire book strictly speaking. These are not your teenage daughter's vampires.

Does it feel strange not working at Rice anymore? Do you miss us?

At some point I'll be back. I do miss it, but in the meantime, it's a wonderful luxury to focus on my own work completely. I never really had the chance to do that before.

How does it make you feel that you started *R2* and it has now passed its fifth year?

Very proud. I can't really take any of the credit; it's the students'.



Heather Beaber, "Attack of the Horned Melon"

Some Sort of Twister Accident

Pawel Mikolajczyk

Gordon's newly renovated digs were the most impressive in town. The neat decorations, the meticulous symmetry, and the subtly varying earth tones all exhibited a level of sophistication which was truly remarkable given that he had terrible vision and had only mud and dirt to work with. His obsession with perfection was probably the main reason he was able to operate for so long without apprehension. Everything he did had an air of ingenuity and novelty, right down to the way he moved. His movement was less "slither" than it was "swagger". It's safe to say that if he wasn't so antisocial, and if earthworms weren't all hermaphrodites, Gordon would have the potential to be a bona fide lady killer rather than someone who just murders other earthworms.

Gordon never failed to eliminate a target. His methods were clever and effective but were often so shockingly slow and brutal that even the other assassins wanted nothing to do with him, though they rarely if ever found out exactly how his victims were dispatched. Crime scene investigators almost invariably reported what they had found simply as "the reason I'm quitting." Even though he was always able to cover his tracks and escape, he was never content with his execution. He obsessed over tiny flaws he perceived in his abilities and constantly critiqued every aspect of everything he did.

After several years of such self-loathing and isolation, he became his own worst enemy. He realized he would never be happy living this way, so one gray Tuesday when he was commissioned to assassinate a worm mob boss, he decided that this would be his last assignment. He would retire and lead a quiet life. Without this despicable career, he would have all the free time in the world: "I could build an addition for my house! Or be an interior decorator! Maybe I could just forget my past—I could finally stop hating myself!" His tiny worm brain swelled with the possibilities.

His last assignment would not be an easy one. The mob boss lived under a trashcan on the other side of the LardBurger parking lot, about 75 feet northwest of Gordon's residence. That day, Gordon slithered out up to the edge of the pavement. The trashcan in the distance was wiggling and warping from the rising heat. Attempting to drag himself across the hot asphalt would almost surely lead to a quick, sizzling death, but attempting to tunnel under it could be even worse. Gordon had just recently wriggled across a page of a discarded *National Geographic*, over an article about a team of submariners who suffered

agonizing suffocating deaths after they traveled under an ice sheet and could not find any way out. Even though he had subjected many of his victims to much worse, he shuddered at the prospect of having to experience something like this himself. After staring in the direction of the wiggling trashcan for a few more minutes, he decided he'd rather risk sizzling than suffocating. He'd have to MacGyver up some sort of protective mud suit to survive the heat of the journey. Feeling confident, he retired to his lair to get started.

He was half-done fashioning something that was supposed to be a mudbrella for shade when he heard thunder. As his home gradually filled up with rain, he rushed through the winding tunnels back towards the surface, both to test out the water resistance of his creation and to avoid drowning. He hoped to enjoy the warm steam wafting off the parking lot, but by the time he reached it, the steam was gone: the pavement was barely warm anymore. He thought for a moment. He looked at the now-non-wiggling trashcan, then back at his still-flooded house, then up at the sky. The sun was coming out. Not knowing when it would rain again, he decided this was his best chance to make it to the trashcan. It would have been more fun to attempt to brave the heat with a mud suit but by now his mudbrella was all but dissolved so he seriously questioned the integrity of his other MacGyvered garments. It was unlike him to leave without a plan in mind but the asphalt was getting warmer and he was very anxious to finish this job to get on with his dream life as an interior decorator. He took off.

The journey across the big peaceful lot lent itself surprisingly well to thinking of a diabolical murder plot, even if only the first half. His latest plan was particularly sinister:

“I'm going to find a botulism-ridden rusty can lid in the trashcan then use it to slice h—” He suddenly felt like he was flying, a feeling that he initially attributed to the satisfaction of coming up with a great plan. This feeling was actually the result of having been eaten by a crow. As he felt the crow's stomach acid slowly burn at his skin, he wondered whether being swallowed whole and being slowly dissolved is really a situation preferable to just getting chewed up.

“How could I have been so hasty? If only I had given myself the time to develop better dirt textiles so I could just make a proper mud suit and jus—”

The crow regurgitated him into a nest full of adorable but hungry offspring. Gordon was happy to be in one piece but his new found appreciation of his contiguity only made him feel worse when the chicks tore him in half. He was sure this spelled doom for him but somehow he survived, and in fact the other half of him also survived: one worm had become two. In the ensuing struggle to eat them both, the chicks rocked the nest back and forth, and in a gust of wind the nest fell out of the tree. Gordon and his other half both retreated into a rusty can nearby, careful to avoid getting cut by the botulism-ridden edges. They would hide here until the rain subsided.

Several hours passed before they peeked out of the can. The crow appeared distracted trying to decide whether it should disassemble the fallen nest and reassemble it back in the tree or if it should attempt to merely lift the thing whole. The latter option was obviously impossible but the crow didn't strike Gordon as the “giving up” type so he and his other half confidently went out into the open.

Luckily, the tree they fell from wasn't very far from his house so they hurriedly went back to it with the intent of discussing their situation.

But upon returning, they didn't discuss anything. They just sat across from each other silently in the still-damp living room. Gordon was already weary of his new roommate.

"Look at him, just sitting there, judging me. I'm gonna make sure he doesn't wake up tomorrow morning," he thought. He paused for a moment. "... Or maybe we can just talk about the best place to put that new ottoman."

This seemed like a better idea, so he approached his other half.

"How's it going? What do you think about that ottoman?" the two said in perfect unison, to the shock of both. They paused, then they moved in erratic ways in an attempt to break their accord but they could not—they just mirrored each other exactly. Gordon assumed this was some sort of elaborate trick. They paused again, before matter-of-factly and correctly telling each other, "You're gonna regret messing with me." For a while they stared at each other some more. Gordon's mind started to wander, eventually leading to a long-buried memory of this one time in middle school when his older friend was telling him about the treatment of worms on *Fear Factor*. As he gagged a little, he noticed that even this reaction was simultaneously being exhibited by the other hemi-worm. Gordon's tiny worm brain filled with fear as he realized he would have to figure out a way to defeat a foe who was literally thinking the same thoughts as he was.

"I can't risk being around this guy, but if I attempt to destroy him he will likewise destroy me. Maybe if I just leave him alone he'll leave me alone? But I hate living with this prick—he's gonna eat half my food! No, no, this isn't going to work . . . Maybe we can try to reattach ourselves!"

They tried; it didn't work.

For the next few days they coexisted without incident aside from spending every night awake, in fear. Gordon knew his twin was plotting against him at every turn, dreaming up the most cruel and unusual way to get rid of him.

"I can't let this happen. I'm going to sneak up to him one of these days and tie him in a knot so he can't move and let him rot away down here," he thought.

He knew that his other half was devising the same exact plan. Every little trick or clever twist he could work into his scheme would be matched and anticipated exactly by his opponent. He had to find something outside of his control. He looked back at the other half looking back at him on the far side of the room. He was starting to regret building such a perfectly symmetrical living space. He looked at the two tunnel openings leading from the room.

"It would be kind of nice knowing which is the out-hole and which is the in," they both said.

He was getting annoyed. He needed to devise some sort of plan to escape from himself as he tried to kill himself; he needed something that was in his control yet outside his grasp. He thought back to how he solved his previous dilemma.

"Maybe I can MacGyver up some sort of mud Rube Goldberg machine. There'll be lots of mud

marbles and mud slides and mud spinny bits, and I'll have a blast building it, and, in the end, it'll do something totally unpredictable to one of us, and somehow I'll use that to my advantage..."

But then he furrowed his worm brows as he recalled how well his previous mud engineering efforts went.

"Hrmm..."

He decided instead that nature could provide the entropy he needed.

"Next time it rains, I'll go outside and start my nefarious plan as soon as I'm struck by a rain drop."

One of the half-worms would be struck first and defeat the other. His chances of survival were only 50-50, but he was willing to take that risk; as he put it, "there isn't enough furniture for the both of us".

After several nights of drought, it finally started to drizzle, but it wasn't impressive.

"This hardly qualifies as rain; I could be out here for an hour before a single drop hits me,"

Gordon thought. He was growing more bored and hungry by the second, and the enchanting scent of French fries wafting over from the LardBurger wasn't making things any easier.

"Is that place even open at this hour?"

The restaurant wasn't but the drive-through was. A car on its way there drove through a puddle in the parking lot; Gordon could feel the splash of water against his body. "That counts," he thought. As he rushed back underground, he was simultaneously excited by the prospect of being able to defeat himself and irritated by the implications of his twin's inability to escape himself. His limited vision was useless in the darkness of the tunnels at night, but he eventually found his other half and immediately attempted to tie him into a particularly elaborate knot he had seen in a horror movie about fishing tackle. This was no small feat as Gordon lacked thumbs or other appendages, and thus had to use his entire body to twist and loop his victim onto himself. Making matters worse, like most non-humans, he had never actually tied a knot before, so he was pretty much just improvising. His victim seemed eerily calm as this happened.

Gordon finished his work to the distant roll of thunder. He was very impressed by the living knot—he figured its ornate curves might look perfect next to the mantel—but as he attempted to pull himself out of the loops he noticed that he was just as strung up in this wormy mess as his victim was.

"No problem," Gordon thought "I don't think I even tied this thing right; as soon as he relaxes, I'll be able to wriggle my way out."

But his twin would not relax. He just stared silently back at Gordon waiting for him to do the same. Realizing now he may have to spare his victim to save himself, Gordon decided to allow the other to do the wriggling, so he relaxed himself, but only to have the other follow suit. They remained motionless for a moment, then they both struggled some more, making no progress. As they continued to oscillate between writhing and relaxing in unison, it seemed like the knot was only getting tighter. Meanwhile, the rain was getting worse.

Boy with Torrential Rain on His Eyelids

Lilly Yu

boy with torrential rain on his eyelids last summer –
the tautness of his cheekbones shining in the dark water,
and all I could think was, how could someone look so peaceful while drowning?
I pulled him out from the bridge's ledge until he coughed the river from his lungs,
seeing different shapes in the water patterns –
a cluster of lotus leaves, watery angels.

the boy who was a wet bird,
his hair plastered to his skull in dark feathers –
I think the river ran in his veins when he spoke,
rushing out his throat, through his vocal cords.
his voice was the river running in the summer
against the pour of the monsoon,
along the early mornings and summer nights,
tickling the riverbed and down the waterfalls.

sometimes he held my hand as I climbed the ledge.
on monsoon days we took walks along the river –
he held the large black umbrella, white dots on the edge,
and it moved like a top as he spun it within his hands.
I could see the veins in his arm, moss-green, cerulean-blue,
his white cuticles like a riverbed during a summer drought.
we didn't wear rain boots but old sneakers,
and he caught the dragonflies that came with the flood,
releasing them above the dirty water.

when the rains started to disperse, the last shower rippling
circles into the river, covering the moss,
that morning, when the air was still lingering in his hair,
and the water dripped on grass-stalks,
he left, ascending as the river vaporized under the sun,
and I awoke to the sound of no rain and the smell of dry earth,
barely a puddle on the cement of the ground.

this summer I sit on the ledge,
the rain pelting the umbrella, sheltering my shoulders,
and I am looking for him again, rising from the river,
ready to pull him out of the water, onto the stone of the bridge,
feel the coldness of his torso underneath my hands,
ready to catch a glimpse of the bird-boy
who lived with the monsoon and fell in love with the river,
trying to take her by the waist and whisper his secret in her ear.

On Renouncing Philosophy in Favor of Spring

Neil VanLandingham

Whether you are a painting, one by Vermeer of course,
that hangs along the hall in the monastery of my mind,
or whether you are the one and only presence-of-the-real,
is nothing I care about anymore.

For now, you can just be the coagulation of sunlight
culled from the cups of wildflowers on Spring's first dawn,
or perhaps try on for a change the swift dress of the rain,
whose translucent speed shudders your leaves
with smells of earth and honeysuckle.

If you are a sun-warmed terrace,
then I am the wisteria enshrouding
your bricks with the longing of time,
so that now immersed in the happening of the world,
my body rouses into its own hunger, the hunger it owns,
and the monastery is undone.

Contributors' Notes

AUTHORS

JOSEPH ALLENCHERRIL started writing poetry in the 6th grade and has had a foot-long beard and a bushy mustache ever since.

PHILOMENA BRADFORD enjoyed watching pirated films, eating dark-chocolate-covered pomegranate seeds, and reading plays in the time she could have spent writing an ostentatious biography.

MOHINI DASARI is addicted to thinking.

JEROME ELLSWORTH shoots pool for Jesus; Jerome Ellsworth lives a life of crime.

NAOMI FA-KAJI is partial to rain boots, swing sets, and purple highlighters.

RUSS HORRES is a senior at Martel and a Biochemistry/German Studies double-major. He desperately wants to write all of his poems in German and about science, but if poetry is magnetism, then biochemistry is gravity, and he still needs a Theory of Everything to take things any further.

ERIKA KWEE has never intentionally watched Animal Planet. She prefers the real thing.

ANNA MERIANO is (probably) not a robot bent on the destruction of all humanity.

PAWEL MIKOLAJCZYK was a consolation prize given to the R2 fiction editor after he over-estimated the cost of a Black & Decker cordless power drill on “The Price is Right”. It was \$31.

CELESTE RIEPE isn't sure how to break the news to her parents that she's run away with her imagination. They eloped last semester during a CHEM 211 lecture and have spent the entire winter trying to conceive creative brainchildren.

MIEL SUNDARARAJAN loves roller coasters but detests Ferris wheels. They leave her hanging for far longer than she can handle.

ROSS ARLEN TIEKEN wishes they made a cologne that smells like he just smoked a pipe and cut down a Christmas tree. He hopes to spend his entire life singing and fighting (with a sword, naturally) toward his doom, existing always in suspended animation between Northern Europe and Southern United States (especially Texas, but that goes without sayin').

NEIL VANLANDINGHAM, wearing a satin bathrobe at midday in the supermarket, heady with the smell of wood smoke and animal urine, grabs your shoulder somewhere along the canned foods aisle, invites you to his freezer van for a raw deal on human meat.

TIM WILLIAMS can't sing or dance. I'm tired. Someone please walk in front of a bus unawares so I can throw you out of the way and martyr myself.

LILLY YU loves the color yellow and will marry a dog person.

ARTISTS

When **LOGAN BECK** was younger, he liked to take old VCR players and tape decks apart, all the way down to the tiniest screws, and lay the parts out on the floor of the garage. Then, using a hot glue gun, he would build objects by sticking the pieces back together. When what he was building resembled what he saw in his head, he would stop. He remembers thinking to himself after a particularly successful couple of hours, “Sweet, now I have a ray gun.” He thinks he was best then, with his ray gun made of broken down VCRs and strings of hot glue.

HEATHER BEABER is a biblioholic, a photoholic, and a kitten addict, but she can stop any time she wants to. She has five different five-year plans, one of which may or may not include running away to Australia. Applications are still open for the position of Scots muse. Kilt required.

MATHISON INGHAM was Editor-in-Chief of the yearbook *Lion's Roar* in high school. As a freshman now at Rice University, he is Photography Editor of the Thresher. Mathison is a Visual and Dramatic Arts: Photography major with a double in Psychology.

NATHAN KEIBLER is not an elf. He does not find baking enjoyable. He does not live in a tree.

HANNAH LEE is willing to play some Mozart on the piano upside down (back on the chair and arms crossed over her) for free Coffeehouse coffee, decent paintbrushes, and/or friendship. A ride to Dallas works too.

BECCA SAGASTEGUI spent more time than necessary choosing a title for her piece. She secretly wishes it were titled “Attack of the Space Beam”.

KAI SHENG may at first come across as a lost middle schooler or an Ice Climber on Rice campus, but she is in fact a five foot tall freshman at Will Rice College. She is always a great person to call up for a good time, especially if it involves raspberry cheesecake or an intellectual conversation about zonkeys.

About the Awards

R2's annual writing contests are sponsored by the George G. Williams Fund. The contests are juried by professional, non-Rice-affiliated judges. This year's judges were Kevin Tynan (creative nonfiction), Laura-Eve Engel (poetry), and Eric Ekstrand (fiction). Each of the recipients is awarded a monetary prize as well as recognition. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing endeavors.

R2 has been endowed by Bradley V. Husick '86 and Gail Clayton Husick '86. The journal will be made possible for the next five years by the current use funds from Sandy '86 and David Epstein and Family. Many thanks go out to the generous donors who support Rice's undergraduate creative writing.



2011 Awards

Fiction

1st prize: “Deer Season” by Tim Williams

2nd prize: “Lifespan” by Anna Meriano

Poetry

1st prize: “Philology” by Neil VanLandingham

2nd prize: “The Dynamics of Song” by Neil VanLandingham

Nonfiction

“Noble Savage” by Ross Arlen Tieken