



Teach. Write.

A Writing Teachers' Literary Journal

Fall~Winter 2023

Edited by Katie Winkler

TEACH. WRITE.
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FALL~WINTER 2023

Katie Winkler~Editor

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From the Editor:

Teach. Write. has entered a new era. First, its editor is retired after almost 40 years of teaching composition to high school and college-aged students, giving her more time dedicated to improving the quality of the journal. The first step towards this goal was applying for and being granted acceptance to the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses, an organization dedicated to helping small publishers learn and grow. As part of the process the journal now has its own website found at teachwritejournal.com.

Second, this edition boasts almost 50 writers, most of them current or former teachers, quite a few regular contributors, and a few new faces as well. Moreover, this edition will mark the first time some writers will see their work in print.

To all of the teacher/writers who have trusted me with their work, some for multiple times, a grateful “Thank you.” Who said people who can’t do, teach? You’ve proved them wrong time and time again.

Katie Winkler



In this Issue

Tree Identification I & II—Dana Sonnenschein	6
After the Break ~ Bless Me, O Lord—Sherry Poff	8
Thank You Note—Vicki Boyd	10
Writing Your Own ~ Letter to My Fifth Grade Teacher— Michael Glaser	12
The Education of Alvin Gumble (and Friends)—Peter Crow	14
What We Learned in Spanish Class ~ Day of the Dead in Ohio ~ Así es el Día de los Muertos en Ohio—Angela Acosta	25
Poetry Workshop in the Sunroom—Daniel Barry	28
There's a Teacher in the Room—Barbara Schilling Hurwitz	31
An Old Man Stands in Front of the Classroom ~ Calling the Roll ~ Instruc- tor Evaluations—Ronald J. Pelias	33
Recycled Grades—Terry Barr	37
lusty infatuated love's intoxicated imagining ~ So the essay was due the next day and—Bartek Boryczka	42
Lost Fortune ~ On My Daughter's Learning Her Social Studies Teacher Is Tattooed—Vincent Casaregola	44
Eye to Eye—Keith Mulopo	47
The Lecturer—Daniel Paton	48
How Quaint We Were—Brenda Power	54
Missing Good Stuff—Kenneth Pobo	55
i'm worried ~ The Only Fat Teacher at the Department Meeting— Michelle Trantham	56
Letter to Amanda Gorman—Craig Kirchner	58
Time Scarcity Teacher Mindset ~ Robot Teacher to the Rescue —Valerie Parker	59
Aliens are Real and Evil Speaks English—Kaylee Condie	61
The 8th Seat—Jose Joel Robles	68
Writing Workshop Guru—Stephen Sossaman	69
Origins—Stephen Schwei	70

Wes—Bartek Boryczka	71
Always—Noreen Wilson	78
Ekphrasis: In Awe of Art—Juyanne James	79
The Bath Sign Painter of 1787 ~ Martin Johnson Heade’s “Newbury Fields at Sunset”—Danielle Fedrigo	84
Autumn Day ~ Winter Day—Wil Michael Wrenn	86
Wet Blue, Bright Blue—Gospel Chinedu	87
Cutting Words—Martha Patterson	88
Tim Tintera’s Thesaurus—Jane Hertenstein	90
Voices ~ You Astonish My Heart—Colin Ian Jeffery	92
A Hundred Thousand Lives—Nolo Segunda	93
What a Fortunate Man ~ A Hole in the Wall—H. L. Dowless	94
Racine Circle—Cory Fosco	98
Sweet Peas—Cami Rumble	100
Lilywhite—Anne Karppinen	101
The Heartstone of Lady Macbeth ~ She Was That Way ~ Talk to My Shadow—John Davis	104
Enabling Our Family Artifacts to Speak—Jim Ross	107
Take It ~ LollipopArt-SoHo Girl—Duarte N. Nobrega	112
The Pugilist as Guest—Joe Walpole	114
Sending Out Poems in the 60’s ~ Does a New Pen Write Clean—Janet McCann	119
I’m Not a Computer ~ Ode to a Tin of Dansk Cookies—Sean Des Vignes	120
The Night the War Began—Cary Barney	122
Fall Back—J. S. Ryan	134
Introverts Unite—Bill Camp	136
The Tower—Zary Fekete	137
All About Me—Steve Parker	140
The Masterpiece—Tremain Xenos	142
Contributors	151
Photo Credits	157

Dana Sonnenschein

Tree Identification I

To name a tree correctly requires us
to look and make a series of choices:

Pick up this leaf or that, decide
if it came from the nearest trunk or drifted

and then to take in hand the Leaf Key
with its logic of genus and species—

Compound or simple? The shape
says *Quercus*; lobes that are round or sharp

determine whether oaks are white or red,
but on each tree the leaves are varied,

so we need acorns to distinguish
Black from Red from Scarlet from Pin.

And what would it mean to identify
a tree? To trace its roots, know its family?

To say *White Oak* or *Red* recalls wood
touched for luck, polished and dead.

Let's call this one, *Leaves held long*
whisper shade to come, sepia autumn.

Tree Identification II

Before the field trip, I collected the most perfect acorns I could find, each in its cap, shells faintly shining. Not easy in mud season. White, red, scarlet, black, pin, and chestnut oaks. We're beginning with identification, using a Fruit Key, and the students start by looking through the bag I've given each group for ones just like the photographs. Not finding them. Finding they have to go back to 1. *Fruit a cone / Fruit not a cone* and 27. *Fruit with a thin wing at the end or encircling the seed cavity / Fruit not winged*. Reading aloud, *dehiscent or non-dehiscent*, guffawing at yet more specifications for *nuts*, passing me only those they find too difficult to crack. Then we hike, trying to identify trees from bark, leaf remnants, winter-soft nutshells. When we get back to school, one of them shows me his group's *best acorn*. Look, he says, holding out one he picked up, damp and dark and caked with dirt, the hull split: *It's got a root; it's growing*.



Sherry Poff

After the Break

Even before I unlock my door,
the early birds are in the hall,
scrolling their phones, waking up.
"Good morning," we say.

And it is.

I adjust the thermostat,
feel heat return to my spirit,
life to my limbs. The bells rings;
my heart jumps.

Stepping to the front of the room,
striding the spaces between their desks,
I search their eyes, hear their murmurs,
feel their youth.

The usual litanies:
Remember your audience
Good writing is clear writing
guide all our work.

We've come to a difficult passage.
"Let's read that one more time."
"I think I get it," someone says.

Welcome back.

Bless Me, O Lord

--the Composition Teacher's Lament

Like Hebrews of old
who had their fill,
I quail at the thought
of another 500 hundred words
detailing the details
of "My Most Memorable Moment."

A surfeit of words
fills my eyes, crowds my mind,
coils in my gut.
I now endure
to sickening excess
that which once I craved.

Afraid almost to hope
for the simplicity
of clean, fresh manna,
I reach into my bulging bag
and draw forth
another
feathered beauty.

Vicki Boyd

Thank You Note

To the boy who volunteered
to go first in the poetry workshop;
and to the others,
whose quiet attention
invited a tenderness
into the room
that made it possible
for the one further around the circle
to surrender the silence
he had hoarded
all year.

And to that kid, especially,
you, who borrowed the courage,
which appeared and floated
around us that afternoon
like so many life preservers,
to read what you had written
from the paper that shook
in your hands; it was something
about a boat, which by the time
you finished, we had all
climbed into.

It buoys me
thinking of it now:
one day
that felt like
what we were doing
mattered.



Michael S. Glaser

Writing Your Own

Editor's note: I sometimes feature poems that a teacher has written based on their own writing prompt. I have found in my teaching that writing along with my students inspires me and keeps me humble at the same time. Michael S. Glaser's simple prompt yielded a beautiful poem that is a wonderful example of the practice.

The prompt:

Think about three “shaping moments” in your life, write about them for five minutes each. Then, choose one that is directly related to a single person and write a letter-poem of gratitude to that person.

Explanation of the prompt:

I encourage students to think of “shaping moments” as those experiences which strongly impacted / influenced their system of ethical values, their understanding of their goals in life or their ability to accept some powerful and difficult event in their life. (i.e. not events such as graduations or a sixteenth birthday or a first kiss etc.)

I have found this to be one of my most successful prompts because it often leads students to find a voice to write about things that matter deeply to them. Also, it can lead to many poems that explore many different “shaping moments.”

The poem:

Letter to My Fifth Grade Teacher*

Dear Miss Lorenz:

I'm writing because I was remembering you today,
how soft and kind your voice was and how your eyes
sparkled with laughter and light

which is why I wanted to impress you
and why I was so afraid of spelling
where I knew you would discover
I was just another stupid kid.

And so, on the day of the Big Spelling Test,
I made that tiny piece of paper
and when we put our books away,
I cupped it in my hand for use
only when absolutely necessary.

And you moved up and down
the rows of our desks
pronouncing words until
you stopped next to me,
called out a word and,
when everyone was writing,
reached into my clenched fist,
took the paper and then
walked on.

You never made an example of me,
never spoke to my parents about it,
or even mentioned it to me.
And you never treated me differently either,
just went on as though nothing had happened.

But, of course, something did:

I never cheated again, Miss Lorenz.
I never stole another candy bar
or money from the box
in the top of my father's dresser -
or from my mother's purse.

And I am writing to thank you
for treating me with dignity
even as you caught me,
red-handed in sin.

It was as close to Grace as I have ever been.
Perhaps someday I'll know it once again.

*Poem first appeared in:

Igniting Creativity in Gifted Learners, K-6, eds. Smutney and vonFremd,
Corwin Books, 2008.

Disrupting Consensus, poems by Michael S. Glaser, The Teacher's Voice, NY, 2010

Peter Crow

The Education of Alvin Gumble (and Friends)

To Joe Grady's way of thinking, a room with rows of florescent lights and hard desks is a poor place to grow a young mind. So, he surprises everybody when he takes a job teaching a difficult fourth-grade class at a local elementary school. It is surprising even to Joe himself, given he never finished college. But two experienced teachers have resigned in quick succession, and the school board has been unable to find a replacement. No one seems able to motivate the unruly class, whose test scores rank at the bottom in the state. Joe reads an appeal in the local newspaper, decides to take on the challenge, and presents himself before the district supervisor, who hires him on the spot. Temporary though, just to semester's end.

Joe's first day begins easily enough. No one challenges his authority, and most of the class seems at least passively interested in what he has to say. The first clue that all is not well comes after he drops what he calculates will be a blockbuster. They will not be using their textbooks, at least not for a while. One little boy with a furrowed brow raises his hand to ask which one is the textbook. He has only spelling, math, reading, science and social studies books. What astonishes Joe is not so much the naive question as the lack of snickers from the rest of the class. Instead, everyone projects a blank look, as though God forgot to load their film.

Taken aback but undaunted, Joe plunges ahead. He decides to try some sequencing exercises. He starts with an easy one.

"What do you expect to happen when dark clouds appear?" Joe asks.

A freckle-faced boy's hand flies into the air.

"Can I go the bathroom, Mr. McGrady?"

"Not until I get an answer to my question," Joe says. "And it's not McGrady. Just Grady."

No one steps up to champion the cause of the freckle-faced boy, who seems so genuinely in pain Joe regrets not letting him go. Though no more hands are up, a shy little girl near the back displays the closest thing to a glimmer of recognition Joe can see.

"Young lady in the blue sweatshirt, tell us what usually happens when dark clouds move in. Go on. Tell us what you are thinking."

The shy little girl mumbles something Joe can't make out. "Speak a little louder, please," he says.

"She said 'nips'," the chubby fellow sitting next to her offers.

"Nips?" Joe Grady says, working his way between several desks to get nearer to her. "What are nips? And what do they have to do with dark clouds?"

"I'm not sure what they are," says the bashful one, audible to everyone now, "but whenever the sky gets dark and the wind comes up, my grandpa says there is a nip in the air."

That's when the rotten zucchini takes flight. It leaves Willy Cunningham's hand as Joe turns back toward the front of the room. Not until then does the challenge before him become quite so vivid. Willy's jaw drops and his eyes roll back. The rest of the class sits flash frozen, awaiting their teacher's response. Joe seems frozen too, except for his right hand, which slowly reaches into his pocket, pulls out a handkerchief and begins removing the mess from his face. He stifles an impulse to jerk Willy out of his desk. Then he notices something unusual. Their eyes, the eyes of every child in the room. There is focus and intensity, a glint of inquisitiveness where before there was only vacancy. Joe knows he must act, and act fast, before the giggling breaks out and erases it all.

"Where did you get that zucchini, Willy?" Joe asks, sliding a piece of green slime from his eyebrow.

"Outside Mrs. Funelli's greenhouse," Willy answers, resigned to another trip to the principal's office. "I didn't steal it. She keeps old vegetables in a barrel out there."

"I see," Joe says. "Greenhouse, you say."

"I wasn't tryin' to hit you. Honest. I was tryin' to hit . . . I mean . . . okay, I shouldn't have done it. Uh, you missed something there under your chin."

"Oh?" Joe says, ignoring Willy's grin.

"What did you call that thing?"

"Zucchini," Joe Grady says.

"Zucchini," Willy says. "Well, I'll just get the mop and clean it up." he adds, rising from his desk.

"Keep your seat, Willy," Joe says.

The whole class wonders what Joe is up to and why he hasn't removed the seed from under his chin even after Willy pointed it out. It is hanging from a whisker, just above his Adam's apple, very conspicuous, riveting the class's attention to the question Joe poses. "How do you suppose," says Joe, "that

Mrs. Funelli can grow zucchini in the winter? And why does she keep rotting vegetables instead of throwing them in the trash can?"

The shy little girl, whose name is Ellen Phipps, begins to fidget. "That's easy," she says, boldly seizing the chance to redeem herself after the nips gaff. "The sun warms the greenhouse even on cold days, and Mrs. Funelli saves the old vegetables to put in her garden after it turns to camp toast."

"That's a good answer, except it's 'compost.' But what makes a greenhouse retain the sun's heat? And how can garbage turn into something useful, like compost?" Joe asks.

Eyes drop, helpless, defeated.

"If I could explain it, I would," Joe Grady says honestly. "All I know is I don't like to throw anything away, not leftover food and not bad experiences. We've got a mess on the floor and a seed dangling under my chin, both of which can be put to better use than dumping them in the trash can. And we are not leaving this room until we have a plan for what to do with them. Easy there, freckles. Matters of personal privilege excepted. You are excused."

"My name is Skeeter."

"Glad to meet you, Skeeter. Now take off."

By the time the dismissal bell rings that first afternoon, Joe is exhausted. All the same, he has set into motion a plan he hopes will get him through the week. He tells several willing students to find out as much as they can about why the sun's warmth doesn't leave Mrs. Funelli's greenhouse as fast as it comes in. He suggests they call her or stop by for a chat on their way home. To several others he gives the task of asking family members what happens to various things they throw away. Where does it go? When it gets there, does it break down and disappear or does it hang around and create mischief? If mischief, what kind of mischief?

That depletes his reserve of volunteers. Having nixed the use of textbooks, he has to scramble to find some kind of homework to assign the rest of the class. He ends up writing out a list of division problems of varying difficulty for them to copy down and work at home. This assignment, he reasons, will provide insight into their math capabilities. It might also ensure a larger volunteer pool next time he needs one. That night the fatigue that settles over Joe is laced with apprehension. He is sufficiently befuddled that he forgets to set his alarm. The next morning, he arrives at school half an hour late.

The kids who visit Mrs. Funelli report that in her greenhouse she keeps a black barrel filled with water. During the day the water slowly heats up as the sun warms the greenhouse. At night, the water cools down but more slowly than the air. The barrel of water keeps enough heat in the room to stop the plants from freezing on a cold night. That is about all they were able to get

out of Mrs. Funelli, at least in the way of scientific information. More interested she was in discussing other matters, including the shortcomings of Mr. Funelli, who sat in the living room glaring at his newspaper.

The second group didn't get much useful information from their parents, instead bringing in a day's worth of garbage from each of their homes and dumping it on the classroom floor. There are glass and plastic bottles, an assortment of boxes, miscellaneous scraps of paper, hair clippings, a dead mouse, many empty drink cans, and food scraps that along with the mouse are already beginning to smell. One student's parent did tell her that the last time he took their garbage to the dumpster, a guy was there with a pickup truck offering to pay for cans, glass, and newspapers. The man told her father he was going to take it to a new recycling center.

What the math group brings in belongs, to a great extent, with the heap on the floor. Though the problems are the same for each student, the answers are many and mostly not right. Alvin Gumble admits that he gave up without much of a try. Math is his worst subject, and in his best subject his standardized test scores put him in the bottom twentieth percentile. With that record, it is easy to get overwhelmed by abstract calculations.

Reporting all this to Mr. Grady means a great deal of chatter since everyone wants to talk at once. Because Joe is late, the noise level crosses into bedlam just as the other classes are settling down to work. That brings Mr. Freeman out of his office, where he prefers to stay unless otherwise compelled. A prolonged uproar from a classroom is just such a compulsion, as is lunch, opening and closing school, or a summons from Mrs. Baldridge. Otherwise, teachers see little of their tall principal, who is so thin that if he were standing sideways you might not see him at all. Walking down the hall toward the noise, Mr. Freeman almost runs into Mrs. Baldridge charging out of her fifth-grade classroom. Fortunately, Freeman is adept at sidestepping, for Mrs. Baldridge conducts her lessons as if students were reluctant matadors and she were either going to intimidate them into success or make them wish they had tried a little harder.

Ignoring Mr. Freeman, Mrs. Baldridge jerks open the classroom door. "Where is Mr. Grady?" she bellows, perfectly aware that Joe is standing right in front of her.

"I will handle this, Mrs. Baldridge," says the principal, carried through the door in her wake and almost sliding into her on a melon rind. Though he makes the statement in as authoritarian a tone as he can muster, Mrs. Baldridge remains planted near the doorway, glowering at the students until her eyes drain the volume from their voices. Only when the silence is com-

plete does she toss her nose into the air, wheel about, and leave as abruptly as she entered.

“Can we keep down the noise now, class?” Mr. Freeman says, looking at the students but directing his remark at Joe Grady. “And for heaven’s sake, clean up this mess.” When no one responds, the principal shifts awkwardly from one foot to the other until he makes himself disappear. Joe stands throughout the interruption with his hands in his pockets and an uneasy smile on his face.

“Don’t worry,” Willy says, “Freeman won’t fire you. He’d have to teach us himself.”

“What are we going to do with all this garbage?” Skeeter says.

Joe gets a large, metal container from the school cafeteria as well as a black, plastic garbage bag. The class puts into the black bag everything that can go to the recycling guy, keeping newspapers separate from the glass and cans. Everything else goes into the metal container. Joe asks whether they think they put more in the can or the black bag. They agree that it is about even but wonder what the purpose is for dividing up the garbage. Joe explains that the guy with the pickup truck is taking the newspapers, cans, and bottles to a recycling center so the material can be reused rather than wasted.

“If the stuff in the bag gets sent to a recycling center rather than put in the dumpster,” says Joe, dramatizing all this with his hands, “by how much do we reduce what has to go into the town dump?”

“Un medio,” says Santiago, a new student who speaks little English but correctly interprets what his teacher is after.

“Now put the recycle bag aside and look into the can and see how much of the stuff is spoiled or wasted food and how much is anything else—Styrofoam, plastic wrap, dog hair, everything besides spoiled or wasted food,” says Joe. The class files by the can, holding their noses and concluding there is about the same amount of each kind of stuff.

“So, if we compost the spoiled or wasted food like Mrs. Funelli does instead of throwing it away,” says Joe, repeating key words in Spanish, “what fraction of all this gunk you brought in has to go to the town’s landfill?”

The whole class looks at Santiago, squinting his eyes as though trying to squeeze the answer out of his mind. “Un cuarto,” he says after a few seconds, smiling broadly, enjoying his first moment of glory among his peers.

For the rest of the day, Joe frets about the decorum of his class. Whenever they get a little rowdy, he expects the door to fly open. But the hours pass without interruption. When school is over, Joe heads down the hall toward the exit. Just as he turns the last corner, Mrs. Baldridge strides out of

the lunchroom and pins him neatly between the water cooler and her considerable chest.

"Don't let the little scoundrels get the best of you," she admonishes. "Discipline is what they don't get at home. Discipline is what they need, and discipline is what we must give them here. My pupils know that I demand excellence, and they know discipline is the way to achieve it. If they don't toe the line, they've got me to contend with. And I'm not a person with whom people like to contend, Mr. Grady."

With that, Mrs. Baldridge disappears as quickly as she appeared. But before Joe can make much progress toward the exit, the principal's door swings open and he finds himself channeled into Mr. Freeman's office.

"After two days at our little school, what do you think?" Freeman begins.

"I've hardly settled in enough to know," Joe says. "I may have underestimated the challenge."

"I hear what you are saying. Given your background, we are prepared to give you some coaching," says the principal. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Well, sir, I"

"Good, have a seat," continues Mr. Freeman, pointing a bony finger at a fluffy chair next to his desk. Joe sits down, sinking into the upholstery.

"I don't mind telling you, Mr. Grady, that central office is giving me a hard time about having the dumbest, I should say 'most challenged,' fourth-grade class in the whole state."

"I expect they have."

"I've got some petty cash I want you to use for awards," says the principal, taking a seat behind his desk next to a flip chart facing Joe.

"Awards?" Joe says.

"The children in your class have no self-confidence. They need to feel better about themselves," Mr. Freeman says, gesturing toward bullet points on the flip chart about Jean Piaget's theory of learning. "You should tailor your teaching to the learning capacities of children at these four age-specific stages of development. Your class is way behind. Awards for small steps might help."

By the time Freeman finishes explaining Piaget's four stages, Joe is so deep in the overstuffed chair that he is going to have to struggle to get back to his feet. So he listens into the early evening as Piaget, John Dewey, and Carl Rogers are flipped over and Freeman is going for the next sheet. But in that brief interval, Joe heaves himself out of the chair, insisting he will not take any more of the principal's time. The next day several teachers apolo-

gize for not warning him about the boss's chair. The flip chart has been waiting in ambush since the last new teacher wandered into the office.

Of one thing Joe is becoming increasingly certain. Improving his class's performance must start with Alvin Gumble. He is the only kid who seems hopelessly apathetic. Alvin's disinterest tugs at the entire class, and he is consuming a great deal of Joe's energy. After several weeks, Joe Grady's futile attempts to perk up Alvin have about exhausted them both. Joe decides to turn his attention elsewhere. One day he is showing the class how to get energy from a potato. Alvin edges his way to the crowded experiment table, his eyes riveted to the wires leading from opposite ends of the potato to a small, direct current motor that is spinning a tiny propeller. Joe watches, thinking maybe science is the subject that will turn Alvin on to learning. Joe's hopes last until lunch when he discovers potatoes are Alvin's favorite food. Now he won't touch them for fear of being electrocuted.

One morning Joe sees Alvin get off the bus, hoist his book bag over his shoulder, and begin weaving his way down the corridor. A few frayed fibers at the end of Joe's wit begin to glow, so faintly he hardly notices. Then he has it. An observation he should have made his second day at school. The class is not using any textbooks, yet Alvin Gumble's book bag is always full. What is in it?

"Books," Alvin says.

"What books?" says Joe Grady.

"All kinds," says Alvin, opening the bag and peering inside. "I've got a book here with a picture of bugs on the cover. Here's one about the space shuttle. And one that tells about the Battle of Gettysburg. This one has the cover tore off, but I think it's about a pirate."

Alvin begins to dig deeper when Joe stops him. "Wait a minute, Alvin," he says. "I thought you didn't like to read."

"Oh, I don't read these books," Alvin says. "I just like to look at them and carry them around."

"Do you know how to read?"

"Sure."

"Let me get this straight," says Joe Grady. "You can read and you like books, but you still don't like to read books?"

"Correct," Alvin says.

"That's the damndest, uh darndest, thing I've ever heard," Joe says.

"It doesn't make much sense to me either," says Alvin. "But then neither does much of anything."

"How do you know what the books are about?" asks Joe Grady.

“I read the cover and the first page or two,” says Alvin. “But it gets hard to understand and I don’t stick with it. Instead, I go look for a book about something different. Then I get mad because I never finish anything, and I quit.”

“But you generally manage to get through the first page.”

“That’s right.”

The rest of the class trickles into the room as Joe and Alvin talk. Every evening, Joe removes the zucchini seed from his neck, and every morning before school he puts it back. Today they are finally going to plant it in a small pot. Willy Cunningham volunteers to poke it in the loosened soil. In previous days, the class has learned some important differences between organic and inorganic matter, and they now understand why Mrs. Funelli puts only organic material into her compost bin. Motivated by this knowledge, they take apart some wooden pallets they find in the maintenance room and use the wood to build a box for their own garbage. They leave a little space between planks so the air can circulate. They put hinges on the top to make it easy to pour garbage in and another hinge on the bottom third of the front so they can shovel out the compost from the bottom. Each day, Joe adds his own personal garbage to the original heap. They decide the mouse will take too long to break down, so they bury it.

After some negotiation with Mr. Freeman, they place the compost box outside the sunny, south side of the building near their room. Next to it, they build a shallower enclosed box with a hinged top made of glass. Inside this little greenhouse they place some pots for planting seeds and a big bottle of water which they paint black. The class has learned that energy travels in waves and that light waves are short and easily penetrate glass. When the light waves strike an object such as a plant or the floor of the greenhouse, most of them turn into heat waves, which have more trouble penetrating glass. The heat waves must leave in a slower way, called conduction, or passing the energy from object to object like a bucket brigade. If the greenhouse contains something to retain the heat like Mrs. Funelli’s water barrel, then the enclosed space will stay warm at night even longer.

“That must be why,” Ellen Phipps speculates, “Mrs. Funelli said there was more heat in that greenhouse than there was in their bedroom.”

The zucchini seed from Joe’s neck is the first thing the class plants, just as the rotting parts that Joe wiped from his face have been the first garbage put in the compost bin. Joe gives the class a writing assignment about the project. They can write either a factual account of the composting process or a story that captures aspects of the experience missing from the facts. Just what Joe means by the second option is far from clear to the class, so

most take a crack at the first option. One, however, writes a story entitled “Jack and the Greenhouse Zucchini.” A mouse named Jack nurtures a greenhouse zucchini that grows so tall it bursts out of its enclosure and carries Jack all the way to heaven. That’s exactly what he has in mind for option two, Joe tells them.

Two weeks after Willy plants the zucchini seed, a sprout pushes out of the dirt and spreads open two oval leaves. In the compost box, the remains of the smashed zucchini and other early garbage are hardly distinguishable. The unsightly mess attracts gnat-like insects, then becomes covered with a greenish-white mold. Later, it is overrun by what appear to be tiny, brown Volkswagens. Before tossing a mushy head of lettuce onto the pile, Skeeter puts a piece of the dark green slime under a microscope. He is amazed to discover countless critters Joe Grady calls “bacteria.”

“Many diseases, such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, tetanus, are caused by bacteria,” Joe Grady explains. “You’ve probably heard ‘bacteria’ called ‘germs.’”

Alvin Gumble lowers his head, propping it against his desk with his hand and elbow. Joe wonders if, having given up potatoes, Alvin is now questioning the advisability of eating altogether. What Alvin does is get up, walk to the front of the room, and place what looks like an empty book jacket on Joe’s desk. A week or so before, Joe found a one-volume, paperback encyclopedia and removed the cover, front and back. Every day now, he tears off a page of entries and tapes it into the cover to make a one-page encyclopedia. Then he gives it to Alvin with the understanding that Alvin will return it the next day, whereupon Joe Grady removes the old page and inserts a new one. He has no idea whether Alvin is reading the pages, but the boy dutifully hands in the slim volume each morning and picks it up again at the end of the day. Joe hopes Alvin’s brain is like a greenhouse and that, little by little, some knowledge is getting trapped behind his eyes. Even if he is not reading a word though, Joe thinks, at least he is involved in the discipline of learning. Joe reflects that Mrs. Baldridge would approve of this line of reasoning. On the strength of that reflection, he begins enclosing two or three pages at a time into Alvin’s encyclopedia.

Several weeks after Skeeter’s discovery of bacteria on some decaying lettuce, a group of students is making a report on why people want to immigrate to the United States. They have interviewed Santiago’s mom and Mrs. Funelli. Mrs. Hernandez tells them about escaping dangers from the civil war in Guatemala. Mrs. Funelli remembers tears in her parents’ eyes when the Statue of Liberty came into view. At the end of the students’ report, Joe asks if there are any questions. The only response is Skeeter tilting back his chair

and stretching out a wide yawn. That is until Alvin Gumble breaks the silence.

"This may be a little off the subject," Alvin begins, "but most bacteria are not disease-causing germs. Most of them are saprophytic," he continues, "meaning they live independently of living hosts and are involved in the beneficial kind of plant and animal decomposition that we see in our own compost box."

The words are hardly out of his mouth when the back of Skeeter's chair hits the floor. "Skeeter, you okay?" Willy Cunningham says, looking at his classmate's legs and arms, which stick up dead-cockroach fashion. "You been holdin' back on us, Alvin."

From then on, whenever the class gets stumped on something, Alvin Gumble volunteers an explanation, that is so long as the problematic concept doesn't begin with a letter past "b." By the end of the second nine weeks, he is handling "c" and "d" matters.

Joe Grady's approach to lesson planning forces his students to start learning before he decides exactly what to teach. It makes life interesting for Joe and the kids but drives Mr. Freeman crazy since school board protocol calls for lesson plans to be submitted a week in advance. Joe's approach has other challenges. For one, he is running out of provocative ideas. Reluctantly, he decides to drag out the textbooks. Once a mind is ready to grow, he reasons, it ought to be able to deal with information in any form, even textbook form. Also, Joe worries about whether he is covering everything his students need to prepare for the fifth grade. If not, he knows they will pay dearly at the hands of Mrs. B.

One day in the hall, Joe finds Mr. Freeman walking beside him. "I'm glad your class started using their textbooks," the principal says with obvious relief. "More than a few parents have asked about your unorthodox methods, and of course I told them . . . well I said . . ."

"Dewey."

"Dewey?"

"Why, of course. John Dewey. And Carl Rogers. The value of experiential learning. No doubt you explained to the parents as you did with me," Joe said.

"Dewey, Rogers, but of course," he hears Freeman mumbling to himself as he fades toward the office.

So it is that Joe Grady finishes out his teaching career. It would be nice to report that he turned around the most challenging fourth-grade class in North Carolina. Unfortunately, their standardized test scores remained near the bottom. Fifteen years later, however, their class profile does not

look all that bad. Like other classes, most of the students have become respectable members of their community and are holding steadfastly to what respectable people think and do. Several members are even distinguishing themselves in modest ways. Willy Cunningham and Skeeter Davis run a composting business. Their company collects customers' organic waste, processes it in an industrial composter, and then sells the compost for lawns and gardens. Ellen Phipps has overcome her natural shyness to become an influential voice in statewide education circles, involving herself in a successful movement to de-emphasize standardized testing and promote creativity in individual teachers. Santiago Hernandez started his own painting business, earning a reputation for efficiency and quality. He knows it can all quickly disappear, though, like a kid in a swift current of the Rio Grande.

Shortly after his half-year teaching, Joe begins a long trek on the Appalachian Trail. Then he takes a job in Maine as a lighthouse caretaker before dropping all the way down to Florida to manage an orange grove. If he thinks thereby to escape Alvin Gumble's encyclopedia project, Joe sorely miscalculates. Until the last encyclopedia page is finished, Alvin continues sending Joe his completed reading and, if he doesn't get a new supplement soon, Joe is sure to hear about it. Apparently, Alvin doesn't understand how a teacher's responsibilities are supposed to end when they are no longer employed at the school. After all, Alvin reasons, without him, Joe's pedagogical accomplishments would be seriously diminished. To Alvin, that makes the bond between them as tight as chewed gum.



Angela Acosta

What We Learned in Spanish Class

When Spanish lapsed from my family tree,
became something of a dormant tongue
between Ciudad Juárez and California
I dove headfirst into bilingualism.

I swam across swift currents of rolled r's,
treaded gently as I learned of the borders we crossed,
and studied verb tenses to speak this half-forgotten grief.

I learned to create a second home
to hold my ancestral past for me
and so I became a teacher, an *instructora*.

My Spanish 2 students looked at maps,
circling names of capitals in Central America
while we swapped “Hispaniola” for “Quisqueya”,
learning the true name of Colón’s “discovery”.

Together we learned about Quechua,
a whole other language and *cosmovisión*
beautifully sung by Renata Flores.

In upper-level classes we felt the brute force
of histories knocking peoples and places off the maps,
reading about civil wars and the Valle de los Caídos.

Still, some students wanted to know what violence
(the aftermath of the Operación Cóndor, Pinochet, and Franco)
and citizenship and the hope for a more just world
(migration and environmental activism)
have to do with Spanish class.

So I tell them more stories, about recipes,
about our identities, about racism and colorism,
and maybe they’ll see that we don’t just teach language
or have special fun culture days.

The lessons we teach are for a fuller life
With more perspectives to view a world
made ever more complex simply by living in it,
for finally speaking the languages of its peoples and histories.

Day of the Dead in Ohio

I didn't grow up celebrating Day of the Dead
with an altar that we gently assemble for
our great-grandparents just like my friends do,
but I do believe in its magic even in *Gringolandia*, Gringo Land.

We assembled on the first floor of our university building
on the first day of November with our *Árbol de deseos*, Tree of Wishes,
and dozens of Spanish students quite curious
to know how we celebrate this day with an improvised altar.

The poets welcomed us *lucha libre* wrestling style,
yelling to shake away our fears and so
we yelled and cried together as one
for our dearly departed from Quito, Ohio, and Panama.

Our bilingual celebration had a little of everything:
pan de muerto, bread of the dead, made in the Michoacán style
with sesame seeds instead of its usual design,
people learning why this day feels like sun shining through the grief,
and students savoring our Spanish dialects.

One must provide explanations, give educational introductions
here in *Gringolandia*, Gringo Land, and honestly
until recently I too thought I needed them for myself.
But joining this event and living this experience leaves little more to say
to the students who look at us with surprised and content eyes.

This is how we celebrate Day of the Dead here in Ohio,
where the participates share and learn
and above all else we remember
that there is no need to fear death
as we dance with her, *la muerte*, just as our ancestors did.

Así es el Día de los Muertos en Ohio*

No crecí celebrando el Día de los Muertos
con un altar que montamos para los bisabuelos
tal como lo hacen mis amigos,
pero sí creo en su magia hasta en Gringolandia.

Éramos todos en la planta baja
el 1 de noviembre con nuestro árbol de deseos
y docenas de estudiantes de español bien curiosos
para saber cómo celebramos este día con un altar improvisado.

Los poetas nos dieron la bienvenida al estilo luchador,
gritando para tumbar nuestros miedos
y así gritamos y lloramos juntos para
nuestros queridos difuntos de Quito, de Ohio y de Panamá.

En nuestra celebración bilingüe había de todo:
pan de muerto estilo Michoacán con semillas de sésamo,
gente aprendiendo por qué es un día con un lado risueño
y estudiantes saboreando nuestros dialectos de español.

Se tiene que dar explicación de dar introducción educativa
aquí en Gringolandia y sinceramente hasta hace poco yo también las
necesitaba.
Pero al entrar en el evento y vivir la experiencia, queda poco más que
decir
a los estudiantes que nos miran con ojos asombrados y bien contentos.

Así es el Día de los Muertos aquí en Ohio,
donde los participantes o comparten o aprenden
y, sobre todo, todos recuerdan que no hay que temer el duelo y la muerte
sino bailar con ella tal como lo hacían nuestros antepasados.

* First published in *Copihue Poetry*

Daniel Barry

Poetry Workshop in the Sunroom

It was just me and Leslie
in the sunroom.
Walls of glass,
ridiculously pretty
natural lighting.
Almost empty conference
table, two friends.
sleeky black hair,
Leslie said

She had trouble
seeing very far ahead.
She said a sentence
and it echoed
in my heart.

She murmured and swallowed
back a tear and it echoed.

She was poised
for an attack
that comes
from the inside.
It was persistent,
her anxiety.
But so was I.

I told her she's
as good as the poets
on the table:
Rumi, Joy Harjo,
Mary Oliver, others.
I told her I could
tell she doesn't think
herself worthy
to succeed. I said
I thought she's wrong.

I imagined myself
to be a black lab
as I stumbled backwards
into the heating system
as I rose to hug her.
Next time I'd
hug longer.

I started the timer;
I folded my arms
and planted
my chin in my hand.

we wrote and were soon
editing the other's work.

I tentatively swapped commas
and peeked into diction,
but I kept gravitating
to her lonesome
message of
insomnia, sleeping pills,
small pay, poor mom,
home weight,
brother liar, turtles that
need to be fed, an honest fear
that life may not be
worth playing into,
and insomnia.

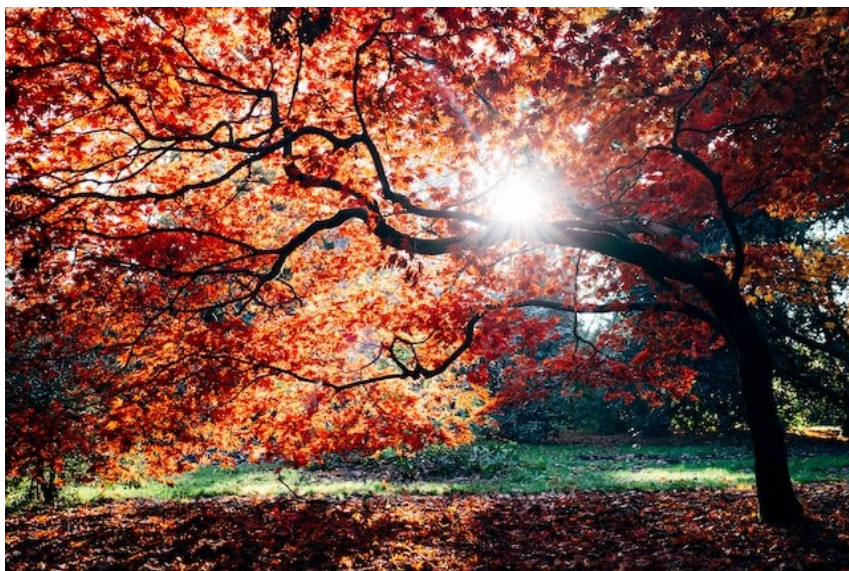
There's a second poem here,
I thought:

I can't leave
leave until the turtles are fed
and the song is
finished.
my mother was a child
and she will require
her daughter to bury
her.

We swapped again and she peaked
at what I wrote,
gathered her things,
said thank you
and left
because she'd
rather cry at home.

The day went on,
but the moment
caught up with me
so I dropped
bag and books
and ran
to be alone
and give thanks
and pray for Leslie.

I forgot myself
and felt very close
to everything.



Barbara Schilling Hurwitz

There's a Teacher in the Room

"Welcome. Hello." I greeted each student at the door with a handshake while trying to make eye contact, but adult eye contact with these 14-year-olds was challenging. Most responded quickly and walked away whispering, giggling, sitting as far from the front of the room as seating allowed. But one girl held out a reluctant limp hand. She smirked, rolled her eyes, and said, "Yeah, right, hi."

I had been hired to build the writing and executive functioning skills of eighth-graders. The classroom had changed since my departure twenty years ago. Desks had been replaced with tables and chairs, dismissal bells had been eliminated, and teachers now were addressed by their first names. Students wore jeans and tank tops, some even pj's and slippers. But the classroom was still my stage, and I was prepared for my performance. It was the audience of new-age 14-year-olds I hadn't expected.

When everyone was seated but still chattering, I took a deep breath before taking my position at the front of the room. The one girl still wearing a smirk, now sitting in the back of the room took out an emery board and began filing her well-polished nails. Mine were unpainted and dug into my palms. She had taken a successful swipe at my confidence, but I was not ready to enter into a conflict on my first day on the job. Instead, I chose to ignore the authority challenge and moved on to introducing myself and the lesson. When I opened my mouth to speak, I heard the first words spill out with a quiver, the sure death knell when trying to bond with teens.

"Today we're going on a scavenger hunt," I said. A groan followed by a wave of laughter crossed the room. "Ah, hold on, it's not what you think." I held up my hands hoping to quell the resistance. The girl with the nail file took nail polish out of her bag. I cringed. I lost my focus and momentary confidence in what I thought were my adept teaching skills. *Deep breath, you can do this*, the voice of my alter ego encouraged me.

I stepped into action dividing my unwilling participants into pairs and told them they could sit wherever they felt comfortable. Once they had settled, I handed each pair a copy of the Washington Post, and when I reached nail polish girl, I told her she'd have to put it away. Enveloped in a fog of toxic vapor, she sneered, but I moved on pretending not to notice.

We reviewed the sections of the paper and discussed what might be found in each before I handed out the directions. On the top of the page, I'd written my mantra "Organization is the key to success," an Essential Writing

Skill. No one seemed to grasp the message even as I read it aloud. They were focused on the twelve questions to be answered in fifteen minutes. Some started before I asked if there were any questions, while others stared with annoyance plastered on their faces. But eventually, they all got started.

I kept them abreast of the time. Ten minutes remaining. Torn papers were strewn about the floor as they raced against the clock. 5 minutes remaining. *Ha!* They are engaged, enjoying the activity.

Even nail polish girl was involved. I imagined her polish smeared across the news pages and her nails looking worse than mine. One more minute. I inhaled preparing myself.

"10, 9, 8, And. Time. Is. Up." I called out over their happy chatter and asked them to reassemble the papers to their original state. Laughter filled the room, and I laughed with them as they worked together struggling to find some semblance of order.

We reviewed the answers.

One boy called out, "It's 75 degrees today and raining in Sydney, Australia."

"Where did you find that answer?" his friend asked.

"On the weather map you idiot."

The mood was light, filled with their continued banter, and when we were done, I asked, "So, what did you learn from this activity?"

Nail polish girl shouted out, "How to make a mess."

Laughter.

"My organization sucks," another student said throwing loose newspaper pages in the air.

"Ha, no kidding," another said. "Everyone's does."

"Not everyone's," I interrupted, silencing the room. "Tomorrow, come to class ready to learn how to change that." Feeling strong and proud, I reminded myself to stop while we were still having fun. "Have a nice day, everyone. Class dismissed." All except nail polish girl. I asked her to stay a moment.

Her back arched ready for attack as I approached. "What?" she said picking at her smeared nail polish. I smiled and tried to make that impossible eye contact. "Tomorrow," I said, "please leave your manicure set home." I reached out my hand, and we shook, hopefully confirming the agreement. "Have a good rest of the day," I called to the back of her head as she ran out to join her friends.

I sank into my desk chair, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. Only three more classes to go.

Ronald J. Pelias

An Old Man Stands in Front of the Class

The years of experience hang on him
like the smell of old books, his elbow
patches worn thin, his bald head
rubbed bare from the daily ponder.

He tells eighteen and nineteen-year-olds
what he knows after fifty-five years
of concentrated study in a discipline
they seem to meet with indifference.

A life's work reaches its conclusion
in perhaps, in postulates of possibilities,
in puzzled faces wanting a simple claim,
one we all can use for the upcoming test.



Calling the Roll

They are all there, all on the roll
moving through your mind
like a to-do list:

Mindy, the art major,
with tattoo sleeve and pieced eyebrows,
who walks through the world
like a knife.

Rafael, quiet, sitting in the back,
as if apologizing for being
present, notebook closed,
waiting for his life to appear.

Alexis, too advanced for the class,
too bright for what I'm offering,
too kind to put on display
what she could say.

David, the would-be accountant,
taking his art requirement, calculating
the cost, the configuration
that forgets figures.

Tiffany, branded with Greek letters,
twirling her long, blond hair,
examining her polished nails
counting the minutes.

J. T., waiting for practice, restless,
Nikes bouncing off the floor,
without interest, unless you play ball
unless you got the moves.

Tanya, exhausted from two jobs,
on top of her school work,
her three-year-old drawing
while she answers another question.

Bailey, ...

one after another,
running around in your head,
an ongoing obligation.



Instructor Evaluations

Their assessments come after you
have filed away your class list
and their final exams in case
of a grievance, in case some students
surprise you with requests to see
their test because they want to know
what they got right and wrong.

Your final marks appear on a scale
of one-to-five, on Rate My Professors,
on a note thanking you, hand-written
at the bottom of their last essay, perhaps
as a bribe, unconscious of course.

You study the responses to your labor,
wonder how they processed you
sharing a piece of your life's work,
speculate who might have said what.

Some applaud, give you an "A." Others
don't. Those are the ones you keep.
Those are the semester's secrets.

Terry Barr

Recycled Grades

“We want our parents to be the norm from which we deviate.”

—Carrie Brownstein: *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, 48

As I opened my sixth-grade report card six weeks after the fall term had begun, I saw that for every subject, I had an A. Except that in two of those subjects, the A was a minus.

How could I not notice these minuses? How could I not feel them to my core?

A minus sign means less than, subtracted from, not a whole: Lessons I learned from basic arithmetic, a subject I would usually get solid A's in.

In the split second of my understanding, my friend Randy walked over to me. “Hey Buddy, whadja get?”

“I got four A's and two A minuses.”

Randy took a minute as we both gazed at my report card. “But that's still all A's,” he said.

“Is it really?” I asked, thinking that if anyone should know, it'd be Randy, the one who always had solid A's.

“Sure,” my friend said as we walked out of Arlington Elementary.

I had pretty much convinced myself that Randy was right. And so, when my parents asked me how I had done on my report card, I felt proud to show them. I had never gotten all-A's before.

The question is did I really get them this time?

“That's great Buddy. But those A minuses? You've got to bring those up now, and we know you can!”

Though they smiled, their words mattered. I cannot remember how I responded to them. Likely I assured them that I would. And I know you get the point here: that what we all focused on were the two minuses, the false negatives, rather than the overall plus.

Later that year, I think I did get all A's on my report card. That I only *think* I did isn't, of course, beside the point.

In first grade I made E's (Excellent) and S+'s (Satisfactory plus) consistently. I was a sharp kid, an excellent phonetics reader. I was also good, as I said, in arithmetic, but somewhere that year—maybe while I was out

with strep throat—I missed the basic concept that in adding and subtracting, only like units or objects were worthy, acceptable, of being sums or differences. So on a test one day when I added three moons and four suns and got seven, and continued to add and subtract apples and oranges, boys and girls, together, I was marked WRONG, with an enormous U across the length and width of that paper. My test was unacceptable; I was unacceptable, and if I had had the word then and its chilling implications, I would have also called myself unworthy.

At the first open house of the year, my teacher placed that test right on top of my stack of work, for all to see. I stood at my desk alone, while my mother and teacher hovered close by talking. My mother never saw that test paper, but I saw the two of them looking at me. I knew what they were thinking. I felt it in their eyes.

Unacceptable.

I took many tests that year, but that's the only one I remember.

You'd think from these two examples that I never got past the flaws of my academic youth. I finished in the top seven of my graduating high school class, though (Okay, #7, but I knew that grade point averages were only part of the equation, a funny thing to say from someone who scraped by in algebra on the B/C cusp). I double-majored in English and Political Science and earned honors in college. I received a Master's and a Ph.D in English in only seven years.

Can I now subtract placing #7 in high school from finishing two graduate degrees in seven years? Surely these are like objects.

And for the past thirty-five years (a good multiple of seven), I have been a Professor of English at a prominent liberal arts college in the south-east. Once, I was even named Professor of the Year.

Yet, offsetting it all, I think back to first grade. Though academically, I overcame the enormous U, under the conduct section of my report card, I received 5 minuses throughout the year in,

"Is Growing in Self-Control."

Clearly, no six-year-old kid understands the concept or the action of "self-control."

But many of us remember hearing or reading about it for the first time.

Recently, a student of mine wrote about her struggles with perfectionism. She is one of our top students, academically and athletically, and is applying to MFA programs across the country. For this essay, she interviewed some fellow student perfectionists and concluded,

The most startling similarity...that each of my friends mentioned was that no one pushed them into this life, just as no one pushed me. None of our parents ever expected us to put this level of stress or commitment upon our backs, and none of them has ever made us feel unworthy of anything but academic success. So what, then, has happened to make each of us a not-so-unique brand of obsessive?

I wonder this about myself. I am not an external perfectionist, as one look at my writing desk will show. And yet, I am obsessive about these imperfect moments of my past: an internal perfectionist, hoping to undo or redo what I remember, what I did wrong, what seems so lost and found in me.

Is it more obsessive of me to want to understand why my past still paralyzes me?

Am I obsessing over my questioned/questionable obsessiveness? If I pursue it too closely, will I become what I fear being? Will my wondering about all that I wonder become just another batch of imperfect, wondering moments that have passed and that I can no longer do anything but wonder about? Will I lose whatever self-control I've earned?

Think of that Pink Floyd album cover, *Ummagumma* (1969). Look at it long and hard. Where are you looking? What are you thinking?

This is what obsessing about a possible obsession over obsessive imperfections feels like.

I know that my parents supported my academic efforts. I know my parents reveled in a son who received so many honors and diplomas. My mother framed some of my achievements—my Honors diploma, for one—and hung them on my bedroom wall. But when I moved away from home, I left those awards behind. I never thought of taking them with me. Maybe my parents asked me about them. If they did, I don't remember how I answered. At least I've kept these old trophies. They rest in a box down in our basement storage room.

So very plus and minus of me.

Was my parents' obsession with my minuses contagious? Did I study their obsessiveness as closely as I did the poetry of T.S. Eliot, the lyrics of Pink Floyd?

"And after all, we're only ordinary men."

Conversely, did my parents push me hard enough?

Too hard?

What is the right degree of pushing, that perfect stasis between sums of too little, too much?

With what expectations, then, did my parents' expectations for me follow me through my life? How much of their OCD, anxiety, and stress did they pass on to me? What happened in the end, or the beginning, or on that day when I opened the folded piece of construction paper laid before me and saw all that I was and all that I lacked: two little - signs that won't ever leave me alone?

Today, I read, "Parents are supposed to be our storage facilities: insert a memory, let them hold onto it for you. Leave behind stuffed animals and school projects, report cards and clothes, they keep them so you don't have to" (Brownstein, *Hunger Makes Me A Modern Girl*, 46).

For at least two decades, my parents kept all my report cards. Maybe I still have them somewhere in my basement box of artifacts.

In therapy last week, my shrink suggested that I learn how to re-write my script. I deferred that action until I could obsess on it more closely. She also suggested that I read about those who have been "emotionally neglected":

"It's not so much what your parents did to you," she suggested. "It's what they didn't do."

"Yes," I said. "Like the time I got an enormous U for my arithmetic test. No one made me feel better. No one hugged me. No one said much of anything at all. The U said it all."

Unsatisfactory, I'm realizing, perhaps believing, can apply to my parents' emotional neglect of me. They earned their low mark. I wonder if they ever realized it?

Sometimes I give my writing students the prompts that I most need to respond to. Thus, I asked them recently to consider a moment taken from this passage about HD Thoreau and his call to action:

"All principled action has to be undertaken by the individual rather than through groups...it is incumbent on each individual to figure out how best to respond to the circumstances of the moment" [*Norton Anthology of American Literature 1820-65*, 1145].

Maybe this was a moment when they had been harmed somehow, been held back, or maybe they had been pressed to do something they didn't wish to.

Was I forcing them to focus on some flawed moment that they'd rather try to forget? What would their response look like, sound like, and how would the rest of us respond to it?

I think about these ideas a lot—such a seeming revelation. Given that the ones who pressured us aren't physically with us in this moment, or in my case aren't with me at all in this physical world (except, except...those voices, those looks I hear and see always), perhaps we—my students and I—will have some room finally to hear our own response, to return to the place where we started, and to know it for what it is.

This moment. The space where the moment survives. How much room can we give ourselves to speak unambiguously the truth that we see, to make amends to our negated selves?

As these creative minds wrote, I felt all those old emotions that I was obsessing about—even if I didn't know before then that I was obsessing about them—rise again.

My moment, my obsession: to see myself as that first or sixth grade boy again, not perfect but good; maybe very good, and certainly in all cases, perfectly myself (I almost typed “himself” as if he and I are somehow unlike).

How do I balance my account of my own imperfections, my less-than-perfect self? How can I ever know the minus-plus difference, the laws of diminishing obsession? The constant recycling of the native desire to please someone outside of myself?

As I thought about my intended words, lines from my favorite songs coursed through me:

“It's not always gonna be this way.”

“Oh it's such a perfect day...wish I could spend it with you.”

“God only knows, it's not what we would choose...to do...”

“And I tried, and I tried...” *

And so I...

In a third story classroom on a mid-October afternoon, Miss Horton hands out our report cards. I open mine, expecting what? I know I'm doing well. I know that I'm a smart boy, a good student. I'm not scared. I've never made all A's before, but even I know that I am close. Science isn't my best subject, but even there I think I'm fine. I pause for another second, and I remember to breathe. My classmates are sighing or laughing or carefully putting their cards in their school bags. I open the card.

And I smile.

* Artists quoted, in order: Taylor Swift, Lou Reed, Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones.

Bartek Boryczka

lusty infatuated love's intoxicated imagining

[A door creaks open]
enter sweet (nectarous)
sweet (ambrosial) scent
of strawberries and cream

"you are happy and sad
with a smile so mean"
an insanely graceful muse
(with bronze calves
and sun ray hair)
whispers in my dream

then her deep sea eyes bespeak
glide into my vibrating divine light
Enamored, I smile as if to say
okay, I know the way
but my cold armor is guile

and love lives like smoke
or an infallible joke
and a pups first meat
is sweeter than anyones
grimy bamboo teeth

so, here
all my life I've honed
to float in a lagoon
and never strain a moan

and, now,
I've learned
life just
is and is and is . . .

all-together alone
some wild lover's drone

as endless
sapphire ravens

laugh, sing, and cry
sweating to fly
in the dancing sky

and the dark weeps on
on impenetrable skin

"Hmph, what a bless'd scare,"
mutters ancient ancestor sin

So the essay was due the next day and

My black cat,
whose name is trouble,
was asleep curled on my bed
While I was frantic
trying to type
at my desk

but she saved me
when she offered to switch
just before the crack dawn

she plopped down at my desk
to write
allowing me to collapse
into diaphanous dreams

but now it's
Noon, and I'm sad
Turns out
I can't read her meows
but still, I know deep down

that she's one of the
wisest spirits around,
at least a few lives wiser
than any brazen chap in town
dead, alive, or yet unborn,

but damn
I'll have to ask for an extension

Do You Know?

It is all mother moose's noose
snarled around endless petals
of a monstrous picturesque
teaming, heavy thorned, green rose

and OUR world hangs on
OUR free-willing brain threads
So, shit, not looking great,
may the gods save us sorry worms
after torrents of dead tears

leave us to fates:
pecked by birds
fried by light
or
to venture into birthing soils
with voiceless night

Vincent Casaregola

Lost Fortune

The late-night building is quiet,
filled with soft mechanical sounds,
like the whisper of moving air
and the neurotic hum of fluorescents,
also with the whirring refrigerator sounds
from drink machines at the corridor's end.

Nine p.m., no classes now,
and the rooms and hallways empty--
the place is sterile to no good purpose,
its accommodations Spartan,
but that name too noble-sounding
for this grim vacancy.

All others have left, and
I, the odd exception,
at last closing the classroom door,
proceeding down the hall
with shoes that lightly
squeak on polished tile.

There, on the floor, face down
is the familiar strip of paper,
numbers across its back
as if it were a convict in the pen.
I stoop to pick it up and read:
*"Your hard work is about
to pay off. Congratulations."*

Did it come too late to encourage
the desperate test-taker, or
was it unneeded assurance
for one too confident even

to think of failure or decline?
Perhaps, a romantic gesture,
employing subtle code from this
random but convenient script—
*“you don’t have to try so hard
because you’ve already reached me”?*

I pocket this gift from
an otherwise empty and
and ungenerous space.

At home, I keep a large jar
that slowly fills with these odd slips,
and tonight I will add this fragment.

Someday, if I live and keep my health,
I’ll spend warm spring mornings,
drinking coffee on the patio,
stringing the pieces together—
I’ll read the history of fortune lost
and pursue an old man’s passion
of decoding the cryptic fates.



On My Daughter's Learning Her Social Studies Teacher Is Tattooed

It was a mere slip, not of the tongue,
but of the edge of a low-backed blouse,
and there it appeared, raising its head,
snakelike and mysterious, beast
from the usually hidden shoulder blade.

Wide-eyed, my daughter stared,
in insolent, adolescent shock, her face
repeating now the same expression
as she tells-- "*Did you know*
Ms. What's-Her-Name's tattooed?!"

No matter the indignant one
has friends whose bodies now become
graphic novels and comic books,
no matter that her favorite singers
have made billboards of their skin.

No, the teacher, caretaker of history,
must have skin virginal and vestal clean.
Little the adolescent knows what lurks
in a teacher's fragrant heart, what
cult-like passions rule, what knowledge
the state won't penetrate nor
certify, nor assess on yearly tests.

Somewhere, curled among
the constitution's clauses, at the margins
of amendments, where freedom's spirit
hides, elusive and impatient,
somewhere between the wars and treaties,
she keeps the prehistory of her passion.

Keith Mulopo

Eye to Eye

We meet each other, eye to eye,
In a room with a forgettable name.
You try to limit the sighs,
Assuage the latent shame
That comes with recovering failures
In service of the dream called the future.

I've noticed you're so faint, so, so
Grey. Only peeps and chokes come
From a mouth gloomed shut by heaven knows.
Or more like, hell knows: your air a sum
Total of the bites and blisters from a frozen home,
The world's sears and burns from being alone.

When this revelation spluttered from your lips,
I felt the eye of sadness glare at me.
No, not the distant kind, but the type that dips
Into your soul of buried memories,
And remind you of the terrible truth
That hangs on the wall of your troubled youth.

You then turned into a course reflection.
No longer a learner, but now someone
I was without the attempt at perfection:
Curating the veneer of a timeless sun
When all there was were clouds and rain
From a heart too familiar with pain

Way too soon. We meet:
Eye to eye, man to man,
As we both search for a seat
In the theatre that is the promised land.
We can only hope we find that repose,
As hope is what keeps us alive, I suppose.

Daniel Paton

The Lecturer

It was a good joke. A solid joke. I don't know why they're not laughing. I delivered it exactly how I practiced. Maybe I should say it again.

"What happened when Past, Present, and Future walked into a bar?"

They know what's coming now, which will either make it less funny as it's not a surprise, or funnier because of the exaggeration.

"It was *tense*."

Still not much.

"Come on! It was tense! Because it's past, present and future. Which are tenses. But the situation is also intense," I pause for a moment, then shout, "It was tense!"

I wave my arms around a bit and get some sniggers from the front table. They're *my* table. They get it. The two tables at the back are blank and boring as ever. And Brian, bloody Brian, who has become my nemesis for this semester, puts his hand up again. He's been trying to outsmart me since day one, trying to undermine the little authority I have. I bet he's a single child, and his parents spoil him, give into him, hang on his every word as if he's Jesus. I try to ignore him, looking around the half-empty classroom for other contributors, but I have to go back to him yet again because no-one else wants to.

"Yes, Brian."

"Just going back to the book..."

Blah blah blah blah blah. got it wrong again. *Frankenstein* does not have homo-erotic undertones, even if that would have spiced it up a bit. The monster does *not* want to ride Dr Frankenstein. I nod along sincerely though, and then write some words half-related to what he's saying on the whiteboard.

The other students are bored too. I'm getting as much engagement from the grey desks they sit around as I am from them. Some are on their phones, others doodling on notepads, and a couple even staring out of the window. It's not interesting outside, the view is of the campus carpark and a housing estate beyond and a small corner shop from which a woman emerges wearing what looks like a bin-liner and carrying -

Shit, now even I'm distracted. I need to save this class.

“Yeah, that’s a really interesting interpretation Brian,” I interrupt, “anyone else like to build on that?”

Nope, of course not. Not even *my* table want to add anything. They look at me eagerly. They always laugh along but they never help me out. I pick up my water bottle and take a sip, wondering if the elongated silence will provoke a response.

Obviously not.

Drastic action is required. It’s time for some *Dead Poet’s Society* shit. I’m Robin Williams - but alive. This is *Alive Poet’s Society*. Time to seize the day. I slam the bottle down on my desk.

“Right, everyone put their pens down for a second,” I begin, and hear the noise of one pen touching a desk.

Brian sighs.

“And more importantly, everyone put your phones down. Yes, come on, look away from the screens for a minute. I know they’re exhilarating, but you can look at Bob’s Snapchat later, you can reply to Billy’s Tweet later, you can play Flappy Birding Candy Crush *later*.”

Everyone looks in my direction now. Martha at the back still has her laptop open in front of her, hiding behind it, as always. Every week she comes in here, sets it up and looks no further. Occasionally she taps away at it but most of the time: nothing. Just stares right at it. I want to go over there and shove that screen down and say, “Martha, look around you. Look at the world. Take it all in.” It would be a key moment in the film, emotional even, the soundtrack kicking in with some proper orchestral stuff.

Of course, it doesn’t help, telling them to look away from screens, when the room has massive TVs on each of its dull cream walls.

“Martha, could you close the laptop for a second please?”

She glances up, “Really?”

Yes *really*. Of course, *really*. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t *really* mean it. “Yes please, come on,” I say, keeping my cool like a proper professional.

She does, but so slowly it hurts.

“You see that people,” I say to them all, pointing, “right there shows how addictive technology is, how difficult it is to just switch off.”

“No,” she jumps in, pissed off, “I was just in the middle of something important.”

“Is this class not important? Is your education not important? That you’re paying, what is it now, £9,250 a year for?”

“I was actually just doing research for the assignment,” she bites back.

A bit of fire, good, makes a difference.

"Yeah, okay," I concede. "Fair enough. How's it going?"

"Fine."

I nod, gesturing her to continue talking, but she purposefully ignores me, turning to look out the window. I continue nodding as I look around the room. My table are grinning at me. Feeling thirsty, I move back to my desk and get my drink, before heading forwards again. It's important to make sure I get close enough to them to be unavoidable but not too close that it's uncomfortable.

"Everyone else getting on fine with it?"

A few nods in response.

"Going alright? Going okay? Would you give it a thumbs up? Yeah? That's all you can hope for really in this postmodern society, isn't it? Mediocre satisfaction. Things to be "okay." Takes a heck of a lot for a "brilliant", or an "amazing", or a "fan-frickin-tastic,"

my table are giving me eager eyes so I continue, "but even if things were going fan-frickin-tastic in your life, you wouldn't be able to admit that they were fan-frickin-tastic, Would you? Noooo. You're not allowed to express that sort of happiness. That would be weird, wouldn't it?"

I think they all agree. They should. It's spot on.

My mouth starts to feel dry again, so I take another sip of water.

"Anyway," I start, knowing I need to keep their short attention spans. "There seems to be quite little engagement going on in these sessions. It seems attendance keeps dropping too. So, thanks to you guys for turning up and keeping me company. But, help me out here, what's going on? Are you not enjoying the books?"

Out of the corner of my eye I notice Brian's hand edging skyward. I forcefully ignore it. I'll pick on someone then; someone who never participates, get them vocal.

"Kieran. What do you think of the books we've looked at?"

He scratches his head. I used to have nice blonde hair like that. I feel like telling him to make the most of it before it fades and recedes.

"Yeah, some of them have been alright," he says, "not into all of them, but that's part of it really isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is. As students of literature, you've got to engage with writings you're not into or familiar with. It's how you grow academically. Hopefully expand your mind somewhat."

A hand goes up, and it's not Brian's! It's a non-descript student whose name I can't recall. Mike? Mitch? Muhammed?

"Yes," I motion at him, "you there... with the... high hand."

"Umm," he begins, "I know what you mean, but we still need to do our assignment, and we haven't been taught how to write it yet."

Ah, this old one.

"We tend to cover content before we look at the assignment," I respond.

"But, it's um, due in, in like, two weeks."

I get this more and more each year. They're obsessed with assignments, grades, results.

"Okay, yeah, there is some criteria for it on the Module Guide."

"Well," Brian chips in, obviously, "it's not very helpful really."

I don't want to get sucked into a battle; I need to make them change the way they think about this stuff. I nod a bit, as if contemplating his comment, and take another drink. They're ruining the scene with all these digressions. I need to get this *Alive Poet's Society* on the road. *This* is the moment on which the success of the film hangs.

"Can I just ask everyone, why is it you're here?"

They're all wondering where this is going. They don't know how to react. They don't get this from the other lecturers.

Brian has an answer of course, "Because it says so on our timetable."

"I mean at this university, doing this course." Should I pick on them individually, to get answers, or leave it rhetorical? I'll pick on a couple of people. That should avoid Brian jumping in. "Josie, why this course?"

She looks around, not ready for this sort of interrogation.

"Umm, because it looked interesting, I guess."

"Right, good. So-"

Brian jumps in. "Also, I chose here because..."

"Sorry, Brian," I say, firmly, but fairly. "We'll just get a few other voices, yeah?"

He slumps back in his chair and sighs, then makes a show of getting his phone out when I continue talking. "Who else chose this course because they had some sort of interest, or passion? Kieran?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"M-," I start, but then still can't summon up his name, so I just point. "You?"

He mutters an agreement. I point at a few more people and get some noises of compliance.

"So then, it seems, you have chosen to be here, because you like the subject. So how would this be. I give you all good grades. Just give them to you. Just like that? And then you stop worrying about assignments, and start

listening and getting involved and actually start enjoying the degree that you're paying so much money to do."

They're shocked, which is good, to get a general expression beyond boredom.

I continue, "would that make these sessions worth something? So, you could turn up, without worry, just ready to learn, ready for education and discussion."

It was like that back in my day. Or at least it felt like it. I didn't have to pay anything, so I wasn't worried about grades. I just wanted to kill a few years in an enjoyable way. And it was great.

"You couldn't actually do that, though." Brain says.

"What if I could? Hmm? What if I could?" I snap back, the words coming out louder than intended.

"Come on guys, talk to me. Think about it. Think about your education, and why you're here. Let's re-assess this shit."

This is where there's a pause in the action, the camera panning around students faces as they reconsider their lives. Then some of them pipe up and a heated debate starts, the music kicking in loud as they become thoroughly engaged for the first time in their academic lives.

But no.

Yes, there's a flutter of movement, but it's folders being shut, pens being put away, phones being double-checked. I turn around to the screen behind me and see that it's 15:14.

It was obviously stupid to think these kids would hang around a minute longer than expected on a Friday.

This isn't how it was supposed to go. They obviously haven't been listening properly to me or taking me seriously. I want to jump on a table and shout, "Sit down and *think!*" But no, I can't.

"All running away now? Don't want to talk about what I've been saying?" I force a smile out, as if I don't care much either.

Most of them are standing up, only half listening.

Brian answers as he slings his manbag on, "I'll email you instead with more questions about the assignment. I've got to catch a train now."

Why don't you catch my fist.

I look around for more response, but it's like people are hiding behind him, as if his words apply to them all. The back tables are heading forwards, to the door. Martha packs her laptop away and keeps her head down.

I feel a pulse of red surge through me. *Alive Poet's Society* failed halfway through production—no one was interested. I go to my desk and take a drink.

A couple of *my* table are still collecting up their stuff.

"Guys," I say, before thinking about it. "Do you get what I'm saying?"

Josie looks at me, with what feels like pity, "yeah it's... interesting."

There's a couple of nods from the others leaving, so I nod too. Maybe they're not *my* table after all.

When the door closes behind them, I take a deep breath, then sit down and finish my drink. I let myself wince, not having to pretend it's *just* water anymore.

There's a knock on the door, before another lecturer pops their head in.

"Are you done?" She asks, exasperated.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," I reply, and quickly log off the computer.

Done indeed.



Brenda Power

How Quaint We Were

The problem isn't that I'm a good teacher, or even a terrible teacher.

The problem is some days I appear to be a twit who's been let loose among children.

Sylvia Ashton Warner

Last year my niece gave up
her fourth-grade classroom
after she realized she could earn more
as a sporting goods store manager
and get farther away from guns
by getting closer to them.

It wasn't enough
to haul 57 books home
before one screeching mother
could have them removed,

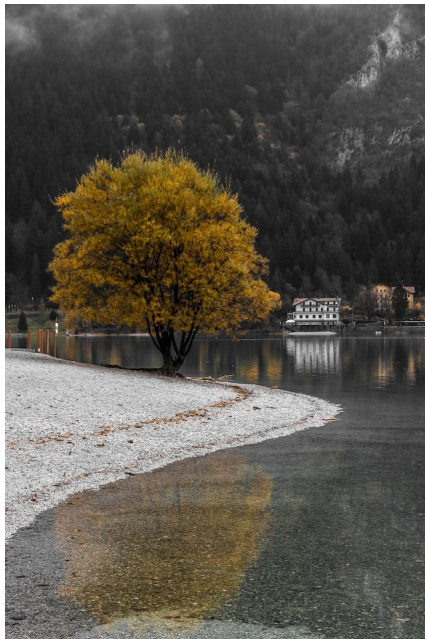
no safety gained
in sliding the photo of her wife
and son into a drawer and locking it,
replaced with the ugly apple-shaped pencil holder,
the banal quote-a-day calendar.

How quaint we all were before,
unknowing twits standing in front of those kids,
worried about being enough,
being better, just being,
focused on them, on ourselves,
ignoring all that mattered
just beyond the closed door.

Kenneth Pobo

Missing Good Stuff

At eight my parents took me to
the Grand Tetons. In the back seat
I drew trapezoids on my
Etch-A-Sketch. We had learned
about them in school. I thought that
I might be part trapezoid. Look,
dad said, see how beautiful they are!
I looked up, but returned to my sketches.
I've had this trouble all my life—beauty
surrounds me and I'm elsewhere. I've
missed squares, circles, triangles,
rectangles, bold parallelograms. Even
shapes that break apart like clouds.
Absence kidnaps me and
chains me in a dark room.



Michelle Trantham

i'm worried

all of my students are depressed,
stressed. i can't even motivate
them with donuts and candy. they
need more than just free food to feel

alive on week five. & i can't
find the books in the library
(the new, technological library)
(with high ceilings and an ironic mid-century decor)
(this building was slapped together in 2017)

i brought the donuts and posted
my venmo in case anyone
felt generous. these private school
kids must be able to spare some
change for their adjunct instructor

(they don't get the whole adjunct thing.)
(i didn't either.)
after class i had ten emails
full of \$1 and \$3 donations
(some must've paid for their friends)

sugar & novelty gets them
through half a documentary
about the beginnings of the internet
or so i think, because at

"the world is a system of ever-changing-"
they start to shift, restless
low energy, sugar crashed within minutes

god, are they getting enough sleep?

The Only Fat Teacher at the Department Meeting

Fatness was my contribution to the diversity discussion this semester.
We were bodies sitting in a circle,
adult and mature and well educated,
shapes represented tall and short
with angles of the delicate that songwriters envied
with soft places for children to run into forehead first
because these were women with families and close relationships
and men with fatherly responsibilities
unbothered or uncaring about the tangle inside my head
made of shape and taking up space.

Youth had something to do with it, too,
the youngest in the room, the least motherly, the least experienced.
The only thing standing out was my shape, pushing boundaries and old molds
that they used to make the too-small chairs we sat on
set in place by those around the circle
that have been filling the same space for years.

Conscious of my wobbling neck
and huge thighs
and thick fingers
and fat arms that stuck out where biceps would be attractive on a man
instead ready to be poked and shaken like jello,
covered in layers of cardigans
(because cardigans were expected in a room full of English faculty, thank god
for small comforts)
Even if the fabric ironically made the circumference of my upper arms even
larger

And I found myself comparing arm-to-thigh ratios
wondering about the position of my legs
and if my thighs were being obnoxious just existing in the room
(and should I eat the offered snacks?)

But youngness needed to prove itself so I took the fat halo and made it shine
and I talked about *perception*
and being *aware* of my fatness
and I knew everyone else already knew I was fat
(it wasn't a secret)
and after my rant we moved to the next topic and then she pulled me aside
after
and said I should write a poem about this
but I didn't know how to articulate everything
(see above)
and I thought it was reductive because poems are precious and beautiful
not full of ands and asides and worries
and this was just a story of an ache made public.

Craig Kirchner

Letter to Amanda Gorman

We are being told daily of our incredible freedom in the Sunshine State, where the sun is experiencing the freedom to be hotter than it has ever been in recorded times.

We are free, as James Madison obviously envisioned, to openly carry our beloved firearms, in case we experience a need to defend ourselves during road rage, or in case our children are being groomed by lesser than ourselves.

We can carry our assault rifles in the trunk, in case a particularly bad case of frustration crawls upon us and we are near the elementary school that scorned us, as the second amendment suggests.

We are free to help pay for the shipping of refugees to places that need to experience the expense and the depravity of empathy, for those illegals seeking asylum.

It is such a privilege to be free to determine the destinies of women we don't know and control their most intimate decisions.

But probably the most important of our newfound freedoms, is our ability to protect our children from history, reality, truth, and young black poets.

We here in the Sunshine State are just beginning to realize how underrated our freedom has been, and how important it is not to have to acknowledge those who don't sleep on our side of the bed, or believe the planet is getting hotter and it's our fault. On a higher level of enlightenment our children are finally been taught the benefits of slavery.

Valerie Parker

Time Scarcity Teacher Mindset

I don't have enough time and energy
I can outsource my own effort and presence
Pay someone else to do menial tasks I detest
Assign jobs in class,
So students gradually take over responsibility
In a rotating routine
I only supervise
Multitask to maximize efficiency-
Listen to courses while I clean and cook
Write plans while I eat and snack while I score
Keep anecdotal records and scores for every student,
Every day, in every subject
Make every minute count
Get so accustomed to always moving and taking notes
That I have trouble staying still
I need fidget tasks to keep me
And my body
Calm enough to pay attention
Write myself out of the room
Delegate my duties
And play director of the class act.

Robot Teacher To The Rescue

People Pleaser to the rescue
Keep us all safe please
It's your duty
Robot teacher to the rescue
Feelings turned off
Professional and holding space
“What happened here?”
Nonjudgmental and listening
Open conflict resolution
Prioritize needs of students
Stuff my feelings, ignore my self
Empathize first, to make progress

You can hear me, hear my needs too

After yours are, when you calm down
I understand, wait patiently
Robot teacher, gets my turn last
If there's still time
Or not at all



Kaylee Condie

Aliens Are Real and Evil Speaks English

I'm not crazy. Just because I believe crazy things, it doesn't automatically make me crazy. Talking to ghosts makes you crazy. Eating anchovies and pineapple on pizza makes you crazy. But believing, no, knowing that your English teacher is evil and that your substitute teachers are aliens does not make you crazy.

My name is Brian Tuntle. I'm 11 years old, I have brown eyes, a face full of freckles, and red hair that refuses to stay flat no matter how much gel I use. I'm also absolutely positive that English teachers are evil, and substitute teachers are aliens.

"But Brian, you do know that Aliens aren't real - right?" You might say, and to that I say - are you sure?

I know that as far as science and space exploration goes, aliens do not exist. There is no proof that life beyond Earth is possible, but that doesn't matter. I *know* that substitute teachers are not human. And if they're not humans, they've got to be aliens.

I figured it out in second grade. I'd had substitute teachers before in first grade, and it always astounded me how they couldn't get anything right. During storytime; instead of reading the book to us, they would open it and have us talk about the pictures. I still don't know exactly what happens when you give a moose a muffin.

In second grade, after this one substitute was trying to teach us fractions when we were supposed to be learning subtraction, the lightbulb clicked. I knew that our teacher had written down notes for the substitute to follow but they couldn't . . . and it was because they didn't know how.

They were too busy trying to pretend to be humans that the simplest of human instructions would confuse them. It all made sense. Aliens don't have to have four eyes, green skin, or large bald heads, they can look exactly like us - haven't you ever seen "Men In Black"? The difference is, they aren't native to Earth. But they aren't evil. They are annoying for sure, but they aren't evil - that's an honor reserved for English teachers.

You know how in Harry Potter everyone hates Lord Voldemort, but there's one character that's loathed and despised by every being on the planet even more? Yeah, English teachers are the Dolores Umbridges of the

real world. The reason we hate Umbridge is the same reason why we hate English teachers - they're supposed to be human!

See, alien substitutes you can forgive because they don't know how to be human - evil English teachers you hate because they *are* human - and they still decide to make your life as miserable as possible. Then they try to justify it, saying that "you'll thank them later" with smug grins. Voldemort you don't have any sympathy for, but at least he knows he's evil and he embraces it. Umbridge is evil and tries to convince everyone, including herself, that she's doing good. Those are the worst kinds of villains, and they walk freely through the hallways of my school.

I remember when I first stared up at the face of pure evil; my first day at Highland Middle School. That was when I discovered that evil has a name: Ms. Price - my English teacher. Who knew Evil had blonde hair?

The day had already been chaotic enough. I'd just finished homeroom and I was on my way to my new locker to drop off my backpack before I went to my first English class. I was excited and looking forward to finding out what books we were going to read this year. It would be the last time I ever looked forward to English class.

"Okay, okay, 14, 15, 20, 27, a-ha! 35! Okay, now that I've found you let's try this combination." I crouched down and spun the dial.

"16 right . . . 27 left . . . and 39 right," I pulled down, but the stupid lock wouldn't open!

"Oh, come on." I dug into my backpack searching for the lock combination.

"16, 27, 39. I had it right, so why won't it open?" I muttered pulling harder on the lock that simply refused to budge. That was when the bell rang. "Oh no, I'm gonna be late!"

I stuffed the paper into my backpack and took off down the hall.

"Room 120, yes!" I cheered and slid into the first seat I could find. That's when I noticed the board.

"Excuse me? Why are the walls covered with different types of frogs, bats, and slugs?" I asked the blonde-haired girl sitting next to me.

"Because this is science class?" she responded, giving me a weird look.

"Oh no! I'm supposed to be in Ms. Price's English class!"

"Oh no, she's strict. She's my homeroom teacher. Her classroom is 110 - on the other side of the hall. You better hurry," she said.

"Thanks," I said and rushed out the door.

When I got to room 110, I paused to catch my breath, then I pushed open the door. It slammed loudly behind me, and every eye turned to stare.

“Brian Tuntle, I presume?” Ms. Price asked from the front of the room.

She was wearing a black skirt and her arms were crossed tightly across her white blouse, a green dry-erase marker was clutched in her hand, her blonde hair was wrapped tightly into a bun, and her cold gray eyes were accusing me.

I gulped and nodded.

“You’re late.”

“I . . . got lost.”

“And I see you also brought your backpack.”

“Well, you see -” I started.

“I was just explaining to your peers that backpacks and cell phones are not allowed inside my classroom,” she turned back to the whiteboard and wrote this all down, “Since you’re already late, you can bring your backpack to my desk where it will stay until the end of class.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I brought my backpack up to the front and set it on top of her desk.

“Take a seat.”

I chose the one as far away from her as possible.

“As the rest of the class already knows, you must arrive on time and with the *proper* materials. Those include your English notebook, a pencil, and the reading we’ll be covering for that unit. It does *not* include your backpack or any other distractions.”

Why was she doing this to me? I was already embarrassed enough, she didn’t have to rub it in.

“Now for our first book, we’ll be studying *Where the Red Fern Grows*. We’ll be reading a chapter a week and your first essay is due three Fridays from now,” she announced, writing all of the critical information on the board.

I groaned. I’d already read that book. It’s a really sad book, and I didn’t want to have to read it again, at such a slow pace. Did she think we couldn’t read? Did she think we were stupid?

“Can anyone tell me what this book is about?” she asked, and being the innocent first day kid that I was, I raised my hand.

She raised her eyebrow at me. “Yes, Brain?”

“It’s about a boy who gets two hunting dogs, the adventures they go on and the terribly sad ending.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, that’s what happens in the book, but could you tell me what the book is about?”

I was confused. Didn’t I just tell her that?

“It’s about a boy and his dogs.”

She sighed and went back to the board.

“That’s not exactly what I was going for, but I’m sure that if we take it slow and steady we will be able to see this classic in all kinds of new ways,” she said, turning to face us with a patronizing smile.

I’m serious, if we gave her a brown wig and a pink dress suit, she’d be Umbridge’s twin. Staring up at her that first day, I knew it. She was evil, and she was going to try and take us all down with her.

I didn’t always feel this way. Back in the days of my youth, (last year at Joyview Elementary,) I loved all of my teachers. I mean, the substitutes were definitely still aliens, but at least the teachers weren’t evil. In hindsight, those teachers did try to warn me.

Mr. Grobiez, the P.E. teacher, said to try out for the running team (to make sure I could run away from the aliens quicker), Ms. Bene, the art teacher, said to keep up my colorful drawings (everyone knows that brightness and originality repels evil), Mrs. Hutt, the librarian, said always to keep a good book close at hand, (this one has mixed results: a book makes you invisible to aliens, but it’s like a spotlight to the forces of darkness), Ms. Sugarslice, the music teacher, encouraged me to try out for percussion in band, (no doubt so that I could use the vibrations to scramble the brains of my enemies), and Mr. Vanorse, my teacher teacher, told me to have fun (aliens and evil recoil at the mere mention of this word). I wish I would have listened to them better.

I did try to go out for the running team, but then I saw that an evil English teacher had replaced the coach and I ran out of there as fast as I could. I was in art class, and my drawings were really bright . . . but then an alien came to the studio and it ‘suddenly’ disappeared. I couldn’t bring myself to draw another one. Soon after, I even switched out of the class - the alien wouldn’t go away!

I did appreciate how a book made me invisible to aliens, who knew they could be so handy, but I hated how it made the Sinister Chancellor of Misery and Woe, aka Ms. Price, turn in my direction with a sickeningly sweet smile. As if I was her next meal. The books in my room have collected a nice layer of dust since then.

Percussion was fun while it lasted, but I should have known the aliens would invade. One of them came into band practice and insisted we “switch it up” and I got stuck on the ding-dang triangle. Yippee. It wasn’t long until I quit that too.

And I tried to have fun, I really did, but the aliens and evil English teachers wore me down. Now, I just wander from class to class, hoping to avoid their wrath. They broke me.

Then one day, something unexpected happened.

Something else you should know about me: I love to play baseball, and the fall little league season had just started. I was excited. I'd been practicing, and I was hoping that I'd finally be able to play the pitcher position.

"Thanks mom!" I called to her as I jumped out of the car.

"Hey, I'll be back after practice and then we need to go grocery shopping," she said, brushing her hair out of her eyes. I inherited my redheadedness from her - but at least her hair is manageable.

"Okay, I'll see you then, bye!" I grabbed my baseball bag, slammed the door and ran to the field.

I was one of the first players to arrive. The two coaches were organizing the gear, baseballs, helmets, and some catcher's padding in the dugout.

"Hey there! I'm Brian,"

"Oh, I know who you are," the coach said, turning around.

I choked back a gasp. It was the alien that forced me out of percussion! "Hi Mr. A. What are you doing here?" I asked, looking down at my cleats.

"Here, I'm just Coach Neil," the brown eyed man in a blue baseball cap said.

"You're the coach?"

He laughed. "Not the head coach, that's still Coach Crow, I'm just helping him out a little bit this year."

"Oh."

"Hey, don't look so down - I hear you want to go out for pitcher this season, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't think I'll get that position either." I said sadly.

"What do you mean 'either'?" Coach Neil asked, crouching down.

I avoided his eyes, he'd probably use his alien powers to control my mind with them.

"Hey, you can tell me,"

I sighed.

"I wanted to be in the percussion section in band this year, but you moved me to the triangle. Now, I only hit about three notes per day. It's annoying, so much so that I quit percussion altogether. I'm stuck sitting in a corner listening when I want to be playing," I explained.

"I'm sorry about all that. I really am. But - if you don't want to be stuck always waiting to do something, percussion isn't where you want to be. You might want to look into playing the trombone. It's really fun, it's what I played when I was in school." He winked.

"Huh. I've never thought about that before."

"Maybe you should check it out - after baseball practice."

I smiled and nodded as my teammates started arriving and I took my place in the outfield to start practice. Turns out, Coach Neil is a pretty great coach. I guess they play baseball in outer space, because there's still no way Mr. A. is native to Earth.

After practice, my mom and I went to the grocery store.

"Brian, could you go to the produce section and grab us some apples? I'll meet you over in the baking aisle after I grab some milk."

"Ok mom, I'll see you soon," I said and went over to the produce area.

I had just spotted the perfect bag of honeycrisp apples when a shadow fell over me.

"Hi there, Brian," a familiar voice greeted.

I turned around slowly and saw the Mistress of the Dark Arts herself looming over me.

"H..h..h..hi Ms. Price," I stuttered and slowly swallowed, "I'm not quite finished with the essay you assigned us - but I thought it wasn't due until next week!"

She raised an eyebrow at me, and I was certain she was going to drag me away to her dungeon. There was no way she didn't have one.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her lips twitching.

No, I wasn't. I started sweating as I stared up into her cold gray eyes, and I cracked.

"I promise, the essay will be done by Monday! I really thought it wasn't due until next Friday, I swear. Please don't send me to your dungeon!" I begged as I lowered my head to hide the tears streaking down my cheeks.

I felt a soft touch on my shoulders.

"What are you talking about Brian?" Ms. Price asked softly.

I was confused. I looked up at her with my perplexed, and sad, eyes.

"Hey, be careful - if those brown eyes get any sadder, they'll go blue," she said smiling, and to my astonishment, I smiled back!

"That's better, and you're right - the essay isn't due until next Friday."

"But you just said -"

"I was messing with you Brian! What did you think - that us teachers don't like to have a little fun?"

"Oh, I knew that - I just didn't think English teachers did!" I blurted out, and then clapped my hands over my mouth.

That was it. I was a goner for sure. I risked glancing my eyes up to hers. Her lips tightened, her eyebrows furrowed together - I could just see her

pointing her perfectly polished nail in the sky and screaming: "Off With His Head!"

But then something sparked in her eyes . . . and she started laughing. Full on, doubled-over, body shaking, laughing. It was terrifying.

"Are you ok?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, I'm fine! I haven't laughed like that in years!"

I almost said: "I could tell," but this time I was wise enough to keep that thought to myself.

"You know," she said, tapping her chin and looking at me, "I'd wager that you don't really like my class - am I right?"

I shrugged. "It's alright," I mumbled, looking at my shoes.

"Can you do something for me? After you finish writing that essay, could you write me a story about why you don't like my class?" She asked.

I leaned away from her. "That sounds like a trap."

"It isn't," she promised.

I narrowed my eyes and leaned away a little further.

"I'm serious. Write me a story about, uh, Benny Mcbeaverface, and explain to me why he hates his middle school English class."

I looked into her eyes, and this time, they didn't seem like the gray on a tombstone, they seemed like the gray of a snowcloud - playful, mischievous, with the hint of a surprise hiding behind it. I trusted those eyes, and I found myself nodding.

"Okay then. I'll see you in class. I look forward to reading your story - and your essay," she said with a wink and walked over to the salad section of the produce aisle.

I grabbed a bag of apples and walked back to my mom in a daze. I couldn't believe what just happened, or what I had just agreed to, but I wasn't a quitter.

As soon as we got home, I got to work. I finished my essay as quickly as I could so I could start working on my story. I won't bore you with all of the details, but I was proud of it. And after I turned it in to Ms. Price, something strange happened - her class started getting better. Nothing really changed, it just got better. I started reading again, I joined the art club, and it turns out that the trombone is a way better instrument than all of the percussion section combined.

Don't get me wrong - I'm still convinced that substitute teachers are aliens, (how could they not be?) and English teachers are, of course, professionally trained in torture tactics, but maybe, just maybe, that's okay.

Jose Joel Robles

The 8th Seat

I saw her last Tuesday
entering the class late,
saying her low-toned greets,
and sat on the corner seat.
Her timidity and innocence
bred conclusion against her,
against her pale mien.
However, no one knew the stories
behind her world.

During that time,
she did the tasks,
heeded the talks,
and copied the words on the note.
Then, sighs and headshakes
as she looked outside the panes
Those tiny nicks on her neck
slowly unfolded the settings
behind her life.

During breaks, she remained
and peered over the phone;
the loud teenage noises
outweighed the calm inside her;
the over-whispered chats
kept her mind wandering again.
Then, she put her head
and closed her eyes
amid the casual mix-ups
behind her back.

Stephen Sossaman

Writing Workshop Guru

Writers led by an autocratic teacher
can't sing solo, just choir to the preacher.



Stephen Schwei

Origins

I

What brought you here
to this library of petals and thorns,
pillows and shards?

I dabbled in childish rubble
and sarcastic provocation,
eager to commune
with others of letters and verse.
To drink and reflect upon
the burgeoning river.

II

Who punched your ticket
and guided you through the thicket
and dark tunnels?

e. e. cummings in the sandbox,
David Wagoner of the Pacific.
Sandburg and Frost.

I reached into my heart,
twisting it inside out.
A denuded tree with branches
arching the cloudless sky.

I sat alone upon a stump.

III

What craving tethers you
to your desk?

Legacy or filling the void,
preaching or interpreting for the lost,
casting petals for the meek
or shards for the incoherent?

Laurels or truth.

Bartek Boryczka

Wes

"I've got a headache. *Please* keep your voices down!" Mrs. Macquire, seated at her overflowing desk, instructed our fourth-grade class in her always tired, nasal voice.

We were awaiting the bell with impatience, but with nowhere near as much impatience as we were awaiting summer.

I was the only one that sat silently, with my eyes on the clock bouncing my knee and doodling a dragon in my agenda planner. My knee was restless because I had plans to hang out with a boy named Wes after school. At the time I wasn't hanging out much with anyone since I didn't play video games, wasn't much for sports. And catching frogs while adventuring in the woods stopped being cool about a year ago, but above all I was shy and guarded. Everyday though I was practicing skateboarding, with the hidden hope that I would find some skateboarder buddies. But other than being excited I was also nervous because the reason Wes wanted to hang out was to fight, and I wasn't exactly sure what kind of a fight he meant.

Wes proposed the fight, earlier in the day, at the end of lunch. The sky was clear; the air was crisp and still. I had just finished playing a phenomenal round of foursquare and was about to go inside, when Wes walked by restless and said to absolutely no one, "I want to fight someone. Anyone down to fight?"

"I'll fight you," I replied without a second thought, smiling and thinking it'll just be a friendly tussle, then I debated if it was some weird joke that went over my head. Others around me seemed oblivious to the invitation to fight but a few kids smiled with apprehension.

"Uhh, O-kay. I'll meet you at your house," Wes said surprised, then added, "just don't go crying to your mom after. You seem like the kind of kid who tells his mom everything."

"Bro, no way! I swear I won't tell."

As an honest gesture I offered to bring my boxing gloves, which sometimes my dad and I messed around with, but Wes said to leave them behind, just no face shots. Jerome and Aliyah, who like Wes I only knew a little from school, overheard the conversation and Jerome chuckled and asked, "Yo Ray, are you gonna kick his ass?"

"Of course." I replied with a smile.

"Boys are always wanting to fight." Alyah commented with disapproval.

"Yeah it's fun." Jerome said.

"It's a good workout." I spewed out quickly, then blushed.

"Well cool if we come to watch?" Jerome asked.

"Yeah! I'll give you my address."

Wes was bright and amiable, (well most of the time.) Everyone in school knew that Wes had some anger issues. Back in second grade, Wes had a habit of snapping colored pencils, #2 pencils and crayons over his forehead when he was frustrated. Coincidentally in the same year, his older cousin who was in high school, Stan, snapped, and he broke two classmates' noses in the back of the school bus fracturing his own knuckle in the process.

The fight was over before I even knew it started. I was sitting in the front of the bus and all I heard over the din of chatter was some sudden shouting in the back and then a few curses. Stan's fight on the bus was the only time I ever saw the chill bus driver, Steve, screech the bus to a stop, demand order in a booming stern voice and threaten punishment but then in the end he only gave a "first and final warning." Afterwards, I tried to find out what the big fight was about, but I never did.

Stan got off the bus with Wes until he graduated high school, they lived together for at least a few years. They didn't talk much, which wasn't surprising as Stan was eight years older and had the meanest looking eyes I've ever seen. After they hopped off the school bus, I often thought how grateful I was that I didn't live with someone like Stan and that my older cousin, who sometimes babysat me. The time we had, was great and lots of fun; for one thing he would make treasure hunts.

So, Wes's anger was starting to worry me just a little before our fight. I remembered that back in the first grade a kid named Denis taunted Wes for being a ginger chicken, who's too scared to jump off the top of the slide onto the wood chips. Wes became madder than hell and launched a fat stick at Dennis' temple. Dennis lost so much blood he became pale and almost passed out. Then again, I wasn't worried about being hurt in my upcoming fight, since I had no beef with Wes, and I thought afterwards maybe he'll want to skateboard.

In fact, right after the fight plans were arranged at recess, I spent the rest of the day looking forward to our harmless tussle, like how in winter Fernando and I would try to push each other off the snowbanks when we played king of the hill during lunch, until a teacher would give us a couple days detention after a few ignored warnings. However, as the day progressed I grew more worried but pushed the worry out of my mind, thinking my nerves

were probably just some social anxiety because this was my first time hanging out with Wes.

Finally, the bell rang. I said, "see you later" to Jerome, who was in my homeroom; then I threw my notebook in my bag, bolted out of school faster than usual, pounced on my bike and peddled the two miles home as fast as I could. Arriving, I was winded and sweaty.

"How was school?" my mom asked.

"O-kay. I'm, uh, going to hang out with a friend later. He's going to come here." I tried to play it cool, but I heard my voice come out a little tremulous with anxiety.

"Oh, nice! What friend?"

"Wes... and maybe some others."

"Sounds fun! I think I remember you telling me something about Wes. Please be safe!"

"Mo-om, of course!"

My mom smiled with pursed lips in response.

Dinner was breaded chicken with dill mashed potatoes and a spinach tomato salad. All the vegetables were from my dad's garden, and I helped pick some of the tomatoes the day before. I was hungry and was the first one done eating. As soon as I put my dishes in the sink, I heard some light knocks on the door. Jerome and Aliyah came over on their bikes, but Wes was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Wes?" I asked.

"We're goin' to his house." Jerome said.

I grabbed the inhaler off my desk and dashed off on my bike following Aliyah and Jerome. While biking Aliyah smirked at me with glee and curiosity. "Good luck with your fight," she said.

"Y-y-yeah . . ." I stammered, beaming. *Damn, I should've said thanks*, I thought a minute later.

In about fifteen minutes we made it to nice tan brick two-story apartments. My palms turned clammy when Jerome began to knock in rapid succession on Wes's door, and I thought maybe this was a bad idea and I should leave, but I was committed, it was too late now. The Wes that swung open the door seemed to be a different Wes than the one I knew from school. He was serious and concentrated, as though mimicking his older cousin and the fighters he'd seen on T.V. He greeted Jerome with a fist pump, nodded to Aliyah, and when he saw my bashful smile and hand waving in aloof enthusiasm, he took on a mocking grin.

"What's up, Ray. Let's get this over with before my mom gets back."

"Uh, so we're not going to the park?"

"No, we'll do it here, on the front lawn."

"Uh, okay, I guess."

There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun's rays warmed deep. Jerome was the referee, he stood between Wes and me. He held some authority since he was the tallest and strongest boy in our grade and the best at basketball. Aliyah sat at full attention criss-crossed on the grass.

"Okay, no face shots and no nut shots." Jerome said and glanced at me with a sympathetic narrow-eyed look.

Wes and I were about the same height and build, but the anger in Wes's light blue eyes became evident to all three of us, an obvious advantage. I smiled the friendliest smile I could manage with my left cheek going up as high as it could. Wes scowled back and stared down at his shoes.

"Fight!" Jerome yelled as he stepped away.

I expected wrestling for a take-down and lunged forward trying to take Wes down by the knees, but he slithered out in an instant and, with all his strength, punched my gut, the wind was knocked out of me. My body bent in half like a lawn chair, and I was gasping for air. Wes was indifferent or oblivious, put me in a headlock and slugged me in the stomach again, and again, and again.

The referee, Jerome, decided the fight was over. "Okay, that's good!" He hollered.

Wes didn't seem to hear. He hit me in the gut once more. I felt like I was drowning in fists. Until Jerome leapt forward, snatched Wes from behind with both arms and yanked him off me like a father scooping up his tantruming child. Tears stung my eyes, and I rested my hands on my knees. My diaphragm was spasming and everything hurt. I was unable to understand why Wes was so relentless, but he calmed down fast and told Jerome to let him go. Once he was free, Wes's eyes retained that kind somber expression I was used to seeing in school.

"Sorry dude, I thought you knew what was up," Wes said, shaking his head.

"Agh, *Fuck!* I thought we were just gonna wrestle! You hit me in the nuts!" I snarled, trying to regain some face.

"No way!" Wes protested, then argued back, "dude, you should've asked *before* how we're fighting, and I thought you wanted to box since you asked about bringing boxing gloves?"

"Jeez, Ray, are you okay?" Aliyah asked with concern.

"Ye-ah, I-I-I'm just, just okay. I-I-I just, I just need a minute," I whimpered, as I tried to hold back tears but then gave in and let some flow.

"You alright, man? Do you want some water?" Wes asked with a sudden tender voice that threw me off guard.

"Ye-es." I said, with my breath already almost back to normal, but I was pretending to still be in pain and out of breath, so I stayed bent over with my hands on my knees.

Wes went inside and came back with a plastic water bottle. After I wiped my eyes and chugged some water, I remembered I had my inhaler. For dramatic effect, I tore it out of my pocket as though my life depended on it and took two deep puffs.

"You have asthma? Alyah asked.

"Yeah, just a little." I answered.

Then Jerome asked, "does that do anything if you take it a bunch of times?"

"I don't know. I don't think so," I said.

"Can I try?"

So, I gave Jerome my inhaler and to everyone's amusement he puffed it about ten times. Then I inhaled it several more times to join the fun. After a few minutes of chatting, for the most part about how Jerome's bike didn't have brakes, he said that he felt the inhaler hits, although he seemed sober, but after he said he felt something, I started to think I was feeling a little funny, but I was just high from repressed anger, confusion and adrenaline, but not the Albuteral.

"Let's go to the park." Jerome suggested.

We all agreed this was a great idea and set off. At the nearby park we had a blast riding our bikes down the steep side of a large grassy hill that led into the baseball field. We tried to see how far we could go before our bike's stopped without hitting the brakes. Jerome, who had the bike without breaks and who invented the game, rolled the furthest by far, all the way by the woods behind the baseball field.

And Wes and I were getting along decent after our "fight," although we were awkward and quiet towards each other and didn't talk much with Jerome and Aliyah either. Wes and I tried not to look directly in each other's eyes, and we didn't say anything to each other, until I decided to speak up while waiting near home plate for Jerome and Aliyah to bike down the hill. I knew Wes skateboarded and I told him I had just started to learn. I told him I had a Mongoose board. He said he has a Plan-B board and that it's harder to ollie on a Wal-Mart board, because they're heavier. So, that's how I learned that a Mongoose skateboard is the same as a Wal-Mart skateboard. I turned red with embarrassment and jealousy, although when I was recently gifted

the skateboard by my parents for my birthday, I was giddy with excitement and could hardly sleep that night.

After our game of biking down the hill, we biked over to a nearby Sherwin-Williams, and Wes decided to buy two cans of spray-paint for us to decorate the park. We colored a large unused concrete pipe that was on the edge of the pond by the baseball field. There were few people at the park and either way the pipe was out of sight so we wouldn't get in any trouble. In half-foot size letters, I painted "ASS BUCKET" in purple.

The sun's rays were beginning to elongate, and the day was starting to grow cooler as dusk approached. A short while after our juvenile graffiti, Wes said he had to go home, because he still had to eat dinner. Then Jerome and Aliyah said they had to go home too. We biked together to the stop sign, I said, "peace out, see you guys later," and I went my separate way.

The bike ride home I spent brooding, thinking about how I got my ass beat, and when I arrived home, I was quiet and sullen. I didn't say a word about my fight, which I wanted to forget as soon as possible, I just said that we biked around and hung out at the park. Then I complained of being tired and having a headache, shuffled up to my room and read a book about pirates. Cozy and under my covers I fell asleep with a chapter on Blackbeard open on my chest and my night table light still on.

I said almost nothing to Wes after our fight, and a few weeks later Wes moved across town and went to a different school. Once he moved, I thought that was the last I'd see of him, but then the summer before seventh grade, my last year of trying to skateboard, I was skating with two friends at the park by my house and was surprised to find Wes by himself in the gazebo, doing kickflips and heelflips off of a picnic table and chain smoking cigarettes. It was five years since I last saw him. He looked the same, only older and somehow wiser. This time I wasn't jealous of his skateboard since last Christmas my parents bought me a better and more expensive skateboard, but I was envious of how good he was at skateboarding.

The whole time Wes was kind, yet his eyes were exuding an aura of heavy darkness. I went over to say 'hi', and after talking a bit I could tell that he was trying hard to be pleasant and felt silly about the scuffle we had, but neither of us brought up that childish fight. When my two friends were off exploring the woods, he offered me a cigarette. I hesitated but took it to seem tough and cool, I almost coughed up a lung. He laughed, then locked eyes with me and said with a smirk, "sounds like maybe you shouldn't smoke."

I asked him, "if it's bad for you, why do you do it?"

"Why not," he said with a defiant look, gazing at a cloud.

"Because it's not healthy."

"Well, it's really not *that* bad. Them saying it's bad for you is just a marketing thing, Cheetos and McDonalds are just as bad, if not worse. But anyway, no one's ever fully healthy and it helps with my nerves." He replied with a small shrug of his shoulders as he looked at me a little unsure.

I was certain Cheetos and McDonalds were not as bad as cigarettes, but I didn't say anything.

Then Wes peered down at his cigarette as though it was the first one he's ever seen and said, "also my Dad died in a car accident when I was seven. He was killed by a drunk driver. When something like that happens you realize that life's fucked up and you might as well do what you want."

"Oh, that must've been really hard."

"It happens," he looked at me a little saddened and perturbed.

Then I was startled, so I jumped and turned around when I heard.

"Waddup!" and "Yo we saw an owl!"

It was my two friends hollering as they returned from the woods. After discussing owls and wildlife, we all attempted to pop an ollie off a row of picnic tables but only Wes was able to, sticking the landing almost every time. Wes was skating a lot better than me and my friends and, after our short chat, he was kind enough to give us helpful tips on how to improve our stance, ollie, kickflip, and pop shuv-it. He said, "you guys just started out, keep going at it and you'll get better. The beginning is always the hardest." Then he popped an ollie clean over the tennis net, nailed the landing and asked while coasting over, "yo Ray, can I ollie over you?"

I looked at the tennis net, didn't hesitate much and answered, "sure dude, why not."

Before he pushed off, he took a massive last hit from the Marlboro that rested steady between his calm fingers, hacked a lougie and crushed the stub with foot, while I laid on my back, my forehead covered with sweat. He was rolling over fast on his Plan-B skateboard, the sound grew thunderous until, *Pop!* And he was high over my abdomen and coasting smooth on the other side. And that was the last time I saw Wes.

A few days later, I was shocked and thrown into disbelief while eating Fruity Pebbles on a sunny Saturday morning when I recognized Wes's older cousin, Stan, in black-and-white, in the newspaper obituary section. He had just turned twenty-one. As I said earlier, Stan was older than Wes by about eight years, lived with him for at least three years, and broke his knuckles in a big fight on the bus with two other guys when he was in high school, and I was in the second grade. From the little I remember and saw of him on the bus, his eyes always seemed to be on the hunt for violence, but in the newspaper photo he looked kind and somber like his cousin Wes.

Noreen Wilson

ALWAYS

Teaching trials
Teacher tribulations
Teaching styles
Teacher jublations
Teaching lows
Teacher woes
The bustle
The hustle
In the hallways
ALWAYS

Teaching responsibility
Teacher maturity
Teaching through the years
Teacher retirement tears
The journals
The papers
The messiness
The happiness
Throughout the day
ALWAYS

Teaching worries
Teacher scurries
Teaching sorrows
Teacher of tomorrow
The hope
The scope
The promise of more
The yearning for
Memories that stay
ALWAYS

Juyanne James

Ekphrasis: In Awe of Art

Years ago, while acquiring an MFA in writing, as a plenary assignment, we creatives were tasked with foraging through the local arts and crafts shops, studios, and museums in downtown Louisville, then creating an ekphrastic poem inspired by at least one of the pieces of art we encountered. This was the first such assignment for me, not only because my areas of concentration were fiction and creative nonfiction, but also because I had never actually put an appropriate word to an action that, for most of my apprentice years of becoming a writer, I had already been doing. In many ways, I had always written from an inspired perspective—often after reading a beautiful poem, or a great book, or seeing an amazing piece of art. My first semester as an undergrad, for example, I had taken an introductory art course and was, afterward, strung out on creativity. There were so many poems started while at work, so many imagined stories while walking home—all of it loitering in my head until I could get home and write it down.

I have since, as an instructor and professor teaching expository and creative writing, asked my students to write from a similar “inspired” place, and I am rarely disappointed in the work that they create. But getting to this point might be worth a little reflection.

I remember that day very well. My friend Gretchen, and I decided to complete the assignment together. Neither of us were from the Louisville area (she, from Lexington, and me, New Orleans), so we needed each other’s support to get around the downtown area. From the moment I had met Gretchen, I knew we would be lifelong friends. She was white, thirteen years older, had solid white hair already, and dressed and acted as inconspicuously as she possibly could. I was, for all intents and purposes, just the opposite. She had been a librarian for most of her adult/working life and was now retired. I didn’t realize it then, but I have always admired and enjoyed the company of librarians; there is something about their specific kindness, their know-it-all spirit, which warms me. Perhaps it is because I love to learn, any and everything, and they have plenty of knowledge to share. Even as a teacher, I love being taught something new.

So, Gretchen and I went wafting through as many art shops and museums as we could, not quite sure of when we might be inspired and by

what. We eventually came upon a bright and lovely room of artistic creations, and when I saw “Boat Bottle” by Maurice Hall, I stopped in my tracks, as they say. The thing about writing ekphrastically is that the writer first must internalize the object (much like Keats and his Grecian urn) before she can begin the process of creating her own work of art. I was immediately inspired by Hall’s beautiful bottle:

Boat Bottle:

I see you from across that new room, and
I am so rightly drawn
To you

I stood there watching this strange bottle (fat with every possible item thrown atop it, sporting all the colors of the universe).

Gretchen agreed that it was a beautiful piece of art, and she said, “Those arms look like they’ve come from the sea.”

“Yes,” I said, enthusiastically. “I’m going to use that.”

She smiled and moved on in that way she had—so happy I had found something that spoke to me. Thinking of it now, I am reminded of how kind and careful she was with everyone else’s purpose. She strode off, still searching for her inspiration.

Later, as we walked the streets, still searching, in and out of craft stores and art studios, that inception of the poem kept punching me in the head, as though it were trying to wake me up to its reality. The words then started to come, quicker than I could write them down. They were all wrapped around Gretchen’s line:

Your arms, stubby like coral
We think, “They’ve come from the sea,”
Waves for a skirt, mellowing into the earth
How smoothly you now sit on
Richness of old blood spackled
It’s in the grey dawn of your belly
Where you birthed us then set us free
Some say you still do

I believed I had found my inspiration and that the poem was mostly finished; I would therefore be able to go back to my room at the Brown hotel and finish the poem in time to submit it by the end of the day. Gretchen and I

pushed onward, though, wanting to make sure we had tapped into every ounce of our creativity.

In one of the studios, I came upon a statue of a black girl, looking so elementally African. I would never be able to detect or explain the moment it happened, but this new piece of art fused with the poem I already had already begun about Hall's "Boat Bottle" and became a single creation. The bottle acquired a new significance: its connection to Africa. I sat there writing the words that were literally spilling from my mind—a type of creativity that surely comes from the act of depersonalization:

You carried the original boat people
On your head octave and encompassing
I want to bow and address you, "Your Bountiful Roundness,"
But a distorted pillow plops over, and then a small tray
Carrying the ashes of my peoples of Africa?
Would they ever have forsaken those sweet lands?
So, we place what we will upon you, and then
You tell us a tale . . .

The statue was *Onile* by Judy Fox, and it reminded me of myself, so many years earlier, growing up on a farm—barefoot, running, working hard, simply being black and poor and pushed around by the world. I can't explain my shyness back then, how unsure I felt around just about everyone. I realize now that I had continued to search for this conclusion to the poem because my own story was missing. It came through the voices of those first African Americans, those who came before me, without a choice or a voice—my ancestors.

Black girl, black girl
Cast your shadow on me
Your elbows speak of shyness
Like wind finding sea
Twists in your hair, they take me home
Bring me home, Mama
On twin legs, let them be longer than lean
Your shadow casts you standing
Elbows full and tendered, they take me home
Black girl, black girl
As if you would ever jump into the sea . . .

One of the instructions I give students (whether they are first year composition students or graduate level writing students) is to describe a piece of art, and in doing so, find the sentiment of what the piece is saying. In the above stanza, readers can see the statue—from the shadow it cast upon the onlooker, to the twists of hair, the long length of the legs, and the elbows that are satisfied with where she is. They can also understand just as much about me, the writer/poet here—from the shyness, here described as the quiet of wind lighting upon the sea, to the love of my home and my mother, leaving readers to understand, like my ancestors, my desire to go home.

At the next day's plenary session, all the writers and instructors crowded into the lecture hall and the poetry staff introduced their favorite ekphrastic poems. I sat in the back, practically hiding—knowing that my poem was good, mostly because I had put so much of myself into writing it. And yet, I did not want to be called; I did not want to draw attention to myself.

One by one, names and poems were called, and all the creatives clapped and felt real joy at hearing what everyone had written. Finally, the head of the poetry department stood at the podium and called my name, my poem, and labeled it as her favorite:

“My People, They Come from the Sea,” by Juyanne James

Of course I did not want to go up there and read the poem, but everyone clapped and figuratively and literally pushed me toward the stage. I found Gretchen's eyes, and we smiled. There was a lot in that smile, including the hours we spent walking the Louisville streets, the moments we both found our art piece(s), but mostly the time we had spent together.

When I got to the podium, my shyness, as usual, enveloped me like a heavy secret that weighed me down. I could barely speak. Yes, it was my work, my poem. But also, yes, it was still me, that black girl who always felt inferior, always did not understand my place in society. I was in my forties by then, and I should have felt no fear. At some point in my life, the fear should have crept away, to hide or get lost and never be found again.

But, as I stood there, my voice began to come more easily. I think I was growing up incrementally, with each line that I spoke. I thanked Gretchen for the line that she gave me, which helped me get going. No one understood our friendship, perhaps because she was older, plain, and inconspicuous about everything she did in life. She was that quiet, incredibly friendly and caring librarian until the day she died about ten years later, from a quick and merciless cancer diagnosis. I mention her death, not to elicit pity or awe, but to assure the reader that I am still being inspired by Gretchen's life and the kindness she showed in the short years of our friendship.

These years since I completed that first ekphrastic assignment, I have loved the creative spirit that took control of me that day, that allowed me to listen to the art and what it had to say to me. When I read the poem today, I am always happy that at the end, I speak directly to Onile, the statue, but understandably I am speaking to and for myself as well:

Onile:

Let me sit for a while in your presence
And I won't ask you
To speak.

I have since sat in many museums and simply listened without speaking. Yes, art speaks to us, very directly. And this is what I try to share with my students: they must first slow down and try to listen to their creative voices. I try to help them find creativity in every stroke of the paint brush, every piece of clay molded, every word and line perfected on the page, as well as every flower in a garden, every beautiful note of a song, and specifically, every person who has ever meant something to them.



Danielle Fedrigo

The Bath Sign Painter of 1787

Clamoring up the ladder once again,
I summit, clasp my paint can,
Reach for my brush,
Carefully brace against the building's facade.
Under my anonymous hand,
Letter by letter this sign takes form—
A daisy pressing
Through a crack in the pavement,
Insisting on itself though
None will pause to call it beautiful.
Grasping my brush handle, I finish "READING ROOM."

Last stroke done,
I lift lunch pail and coat.
Back at a house, I warm a meal,
Rest for those hours left in the night.
Arising with dawn's first blush, I gather my things,
Readying myself to the work waiting in this day—
Yet again to trace out the unremarkable.

Martin Johnson Heade's "Newbury Hayfield at Sunset"

Near the hills of Newbury,
Unfurling at their feet,
A moorland lies, yielding itself up
For animal feed.
Through its midst,
A river wends its way,
Restful, come to day's end
As the sky proclaims herself nearly snuffed—
Brilliant as she bids the sun adieu.

Speckled now—this land attesting
To the work of man's hand,
Where he has weathered the heat of the day—
Has contended in one colossal effort against unbroken ground—and left
Puffs,
Hay bales settled soft as pollen.
They sit now,
Ready,
Waiting on the winter.

Wil Michael Wrenn

Autumn Day

Sky blue,
clouds white;
high above,
birds in flight.

Autumn day
crisp and light;
autumn day
frames the sight.



Winter Day

Clouds roll;
winds roar;
in the sky,
seagulls soar.

Winter day,
winter chill;
in the freeze,
hearts beat - still.

Gospel Chinedu

Wet Blue, Bright Blue

The day begins with a wet blue.

Lord, I wake up with a plethora
of soft bones, calcify me. Bless
the doors I am yet to open. Let
their hinges welcome me with
the sound of a trumpet, let their
thresholds give warmth to my
feet. Lord, there's a darkness
that floors every room of my
life, spread your carpet of light.

Let your glory adorn my ankles
that I shall trample upon darkness,
like boats afloat in water. Lord,
the air is a mixture of sorrows,
breathe into me a new breath.
Let my lungs be filled with snow.

Let the snow melt & flow into my
veins, into the aorta of my heart. Let
my heart be light weight. My face, over-
flowing with laughter clean as the blue lake.

Martha Patterson

Cutting Words

As someone who's often consulted in writing, I've learned the need for revision. My mother, writing in the early days of television, said she never revised and didn't need to. Maybe she didn't. She was proud of her first drafts, and I loved her writing and thought one of her children's novels was a terrific piece of work: well-told, imaginative and not overwritten.

But I constantly revise my own work. The writer Annie LaMott said in her wonderful book *BIRD BY BIRD* that all first drafts are crap. And my eighth grade English teacher gave my class the best writing advice I've ever heard: "When you finish a first draft, cut and cut."

Now I do. When I go over anything I've written, I cut entire paragraphs. I cut qualifying words and phrases like "really" and "sort of." I try to get to the point without extraneous detail; I want to find the exact, right word.

My eighth grade English teacher was a fan of Strunk & White's marvelous little guide *THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE*, which is partly about eliminating needless words. I kept my copy for years because it gives fabulous advice on concision of language.

Today I write plays, fiction, poetry, essays. I've found repeatedly that brevity helps and verbosity doesn't. When I get an acceptance letter it's usually because I've prepared and rewritten. After finishing a first or second draft, I can always make my writing better. I tighten sentences and think about what the precise word is under the circumstances. With poetry, I'll cut entire stanzas trying to shape the poem and make it tight. That's how I "turn dross into gold," much like a fairy tale character spinning wool.

When I critique the work of other playwrights, I sometimes recommend that they cut lines or entire speeches of a given character - there's no need to overdo explanations or to repeat already-stated ideas. In first drafts it's easy to overwrite.

A friend who studied journalism in college says she has the opposite problem when writing: because she was trained to write concisely, she always needs to expand. But most writers don't have this issue. It isn't so much that "all first drafts are crap" -- I've completed a few first drafts

that were tautly written and said exactly what I meant. But more often one needs to revise.

Be brief and precise. Get to the point. Know when your writing fills in too much that the reader can figure out for herself. Avoid excess. Cut and cut and cut - that's the best writing advice I ever received.



Jane Hertenstein

Tim Tintera's Thesaurus

I don't know when I decided I was going to be a writer. Certainly, I was a big reader, always had been and admired many writers, especially Louisa May Alcott. I wanted to be Jo. But that didn't necessarily translate into being a writer. There must have come a time when it became obvious that it wasn't a phase. The Jane, who wrote poetry and fastidiously kept a journal, was going to write her own stories.

But first I had to steal Tim Tintera's thesaurus. What a word! What was this odd kind of book. It was about numbers and words. It was half science and half English. With a smidgen of Latin—at least when it came to the arcane classifications. Yet a thesaurus made sense of the crazy universe.

I was maybe a 6th grader and Tim Tintera was a lot older. Likely an 8th grader. I played after school with his sister. I might have thought he was cute, when he wasn't being annoying and a bully. He mostly ignored us. Which was good because when I snuck into his room he wasn't around. I spied the thesaurus on his desk, skimmed through it, and took it. I never once thought I was going to keep it. Perhaps borrow.

At some point I might have had a falling out with Tim Tintera's sister, I forget her name. Or maybe the family moved. I remember 2 or 3 families living in that house, ringing their doorbell on the weekend and waking up the dad to see if Smokey or Kim could come out to play, and , later Tim Tintera's sister.

I found the thesaurus helpful, then indispensable. It followed me everywhere, packed up with my most important books. I never left it behind. College at Wright State and college at Ohio University. "Career" move to Chicago. Through several apartments, disasters, offices. Categories of words my constant companions. Through chaos they were there, organized, whispering calm.

Yet there it was as big as life, the name Tim Tintera inside the creased and battered cover. Until the cover fell off.

Tim Tintera wherever you are, I'm sorry I stole your thesaurus. But, think of it this way, you have contributed to my success, though limited and maybe just in my own mind, that I might have experienced. What might have been just a resource for you, a paperweight, became the cornerstone of who I am. A word person.

Thank you. God speed to you. Blessings, benedictions, well wishes.



Colin Ian Jeffery

Voices

Voices from long ago call echoing in my dreams
Memories of childhood, joyous, sweet, and innocent
Bright golden summers that seemed never-ending
When happiness reigned supreme with days rich with love
Family supporting and encouraging, guiding my way.
Now, my parents and brother are long gone and grave deep
And I am burdened with old age, antheric bones, blood pressure
Alone, difficulty walking with time cruelly speeded up,
Destination the grave and final sleep coming ever closer
Throughout life I sought for meaning and truth
Finding the blue planet was like a single grain of sand
Lost among vast desert of stars expanding ever outwards
Away into an eternal blackness of space with limit unknown,
While wondering on the existence of a loving God.

You Astonish My Heart

You astonish my heart
Giving meaning to every day
Reason for each breath I take.
Your voice echoes on inspiring
Soft lilting within my soul
Giving my Muse reason to sing.

Nolo Segundo

A Hundred Thousand Lives

Each night you dream in fours or fives
or more, hundreds of dreams a month,
thousands of dreams a year, each
dream replete, each dream a little life.
Yet...

You know you've dreamt but a few,
and can scarcely remember even
most of those....

Where are the unknown dreams?

Perhaps in a special place in your
unconscious,
that vast part of the mind lying
iceberg-like beneath the waves
of the knowing world...

Are those dreams that came alive
only in the dark side of your mind
still there, waiting patiently, waiting
to be known by your sleeping soul
when it awakens in the real world,
the true world?

I have lived long enough to have
made over 100,000 of these little
movies--
will I get to see them again?

H.L. Dowless

What a Fortunate Man

He sailed across the ocean
To a land afar,
To an island of mystery
Neath the falling star.

He dwelt in a granite castle
High up on a hill
By the surging sea,
In the warm Poseidon winds
And away from the chill.

He was surrounded
by glitter and gold,
And all of this aside from his many travels
To kingdoms untold.

Often he hung his head
Longing for more,
While he continued to dream
About what might lay hidden in-store.

Oh,
What a wealthy men
You really are!

We gather here tonight
Round this beach bonfire,
Singing your song to a
Dobro guitar.

Oh
What an adventurous man
You certainly are,
Surrounded by the good captains gold
And eastern silk by the yard!

Now
The Polynesian girls are dancing,
Can't you see them all around?
Their voices all chime
To the strum in my sound!
They wear roses in their linen robes.
And carnations in their hair.

The most beautiful one in the center
Is certainly smiling and grinning.
I swear the likes of you
Simply can't keep from winning!

Indeed,
What a fortunate one
You really are!
I swear
I can see your name written
In the midnight stars!

The Hole in the Wall

Sister Sue lived in the convent. Tim Flowers worked nearby on the land. Sister Sue had lived behind the wall for such a long time. Flowers thought it was all so grand. The convent was oh-so-splendid, thought he, with the well-tended gardens and the gold studded walls..., the elegant paintings and well-educated residents..., the canopy beds draped in such delicate satin sheets.

In the garden midst there was a water fountain, with a statue of tranquility's saint. By the small pool side surrounding the fountain, Sister Sue would appear following the rise of the sun. Donned in the anointed sheet of purity, she was, moving with the grace of proper learning; carrying 'neath her right arm, a large ceramic jar filled with grain for the many fish that swam about inside the pool shimmering so beautifully by her bare feet.

The puff of the morning wind moved the red tip bushes that hid the hole, through which peered the face of Tim Flowers. Tim tended the land surrounding the convent, making the garden park grow so lusciously. When she raised her glance, Tim stepped to the side, never desiring for her to catch him glaring, as she carried on with her assigned duties, awash in such charming grace.

With delicate hands she eased back her head scarf ..so gently, in a motion that was made ever so smoothly...; revealing a face so delicate, seemingly bathed in the beauty of angelic vapor. Like glue Tim's eyes were fixed upon her form, charmed by the beauty of her ways; like birds do for a Tom cat, before he leaps forth to end their mortal days.

Before him in the morning breeze, she moves with the grace of the venerated cherub as she casts handfuls of grain into the pool. The nun never knew from where he stood viewing, for the wall held him in the place that it should. As she walked, he thought that the breeze *alone* moved her, for her feet never seemed to touch the stone of the garden, nor the wood.

Soon she moved from the pool of fish, pausing before the lever of the wine press, suddenly glancing in the direction of the hole in the wall. Tim's figure froze like an effigy of cold ice, being concealed by the movement of the large red tip bushes. The nun glanced back down upon the wine press, again quickly glancing back up toward the hole in the wall.

With delicate hands she eased back her head scarf so gently, in a motion that was made ever so smoothly; revealing a face so youthful *and delicate*, being bathed in the misty beauty of angelic splendor. Like glue Tim's eyes were fixed upon her firm hourglass form, charmed by the beauti-

ful euphoria in her ways; like some hen does with a sly fox, before he leaps forth to end her days.

The feeling called him forward with the rise of every sun, to the hole in the convent wall; silently watching this lady in waiting, feeling the pull of her spirit burn, quietly yearning to heed her body's call. In the silence of mental voice he yelled out to her in joy filled greeting, hoping that she would somehow lend an ear. He wished that the feeling would in some way find her, and both of their souls would discover the same cheer.

On the opposite side of the mist there between them, one peach morning her face rose to meet that of his. Before he could move to hide he was now forced to freeze, lest his figure her roaming eyes should find. The bushes in the breeze lost their motion, but when she turned he then saw his chance, so he stepped aside.., so slyly. Around the distant corner he now walked, anticipating that she would move to find the hole and his long time secret.

From within the now stilled bushes she saw the light through the hole in the wall. Gently she walked toward the opening, viewing the world outside beyond for the very first time. It was at this moment that she breathed a breath of new air. It was at this time that her eyes filled with new light. For in the morning distance she thought that she heard the whisper of her name, so she listened with all of her precious might.

On star-filled nights she often hears a rustle in the hedgerow. When the wind puffs, she sometimes detects a heavy thump. When the headmaster is working on his issues, she lies silently dreaming of taking time to make a forbidden jump. In her mind she beholds visions of liberty, by her breast she embraces feelings of embracing passion. Oh..., how she longs for the company so dearly while she plans for it in delicate fashion.

So, every third night she slyly moves away from the company of others, always dreaming of doing so soon. She is lulled by the feeling of morning, though enchanted by the light of a full moon. With the rise of the sun, she detects his presence just beyond the stone wall; for only a small glance of him she spoons with the coming of nightfall, and the soft golden glow of the mid-night lune.

The hole in the wall is still calling. The compelling power found in its voice, she can no longer resist. She moves forward when the feeling is so real, and the urge to do so heavily insists; and the ability to skillfully manage this situation really thrills her, with each call of the Whip-Poor-Will.

Cory Fosco

Racine Circle

In the center of Racine Circle,
the summers,
long conversations
top ten songs in continuous sequence.
Unforgotten words in our heads
remembered less these days.
Replaced with
la-las, do-das
I remember that song.
How does it go again?

Police driving up.
Beaming red and white lights
upon our faces.
You kids smoking
evil weed?
The neighbor on the corner
convinced we were bad kids.
My brother and his friend
went into their home
took two mechanical pencils
and a battery operated calculator.
We laughed, shrugged,
picked up our conversation where we left off,
dreaming of the future.

Innocence filled the air
as a couple drifted off,
silhouetted bodies rolling in fresh cut grass;
leaving more than grass stains
for Mom to Shout out.
I clung to the Gold Circle condom my father gave me
when I turned fourteen.
It sat in a Nike shoe box,

beside the orange Velcro wallet
unused for two years.

August meant block parties.

Kickball.

Volleyball.

Early versions of Karaoke.

The smell of beer and bratwurst.

Our parents let us get drunk.

Our fathers sat talking

about what they did when they were our age

hands upon their bloated bellies

reminding us we would grow old someday.

I used to drive there sometimes.

I'd see myself singing little ditties

while trying to kiss the girl next door.

Our ghosts remain on the curbs.



Cami Rumble

Sweet Peas

These curlicue blossoms
Aren't grown up enough for a vase
The delightful tangle
Belongs in this avocado-colored cup
Lolling all over the place
Rather too pink for my palette
Each sturdy stem a study
In unexpected lines

Little withered bits are
Caught up in new growth
They're messy, unapologetic
Peaceful chaos
Reposing in their wild grace
Reminding me that life
doesn't have to be perfect
To be beautiful



Anne Karppinen

Lilywhite

Fair Eleanor sat in her room so fine,
Working her silken skein.
And she saw the fairest corpse a-coming
That ever the sun shone on.*

The river rushes past me. It leaps over rocks, swirls in small pools, and resumes its course. Wind sweeps over the lea. Grasses bend, and then spring back up again. How can I, who am so much like them, resume my former life? Am I doomed to remember for the rest of my time here? Or shall I keep making the same mistakes over and over?

I did not mean to kill Lady Eleanor, or the others. That is not what I do. I liked her; she had a beautiful voice. Whenever she sat at her window, singing her long songs, I used to swim downstream to listen. She was a fair, kind woman. She seldom had the heart to scold her maids, although they were insolent and man-hungry, loitering on the yard and looking hopefully along the road.

I only meant to help them all - but it is true what the songs say. We fairy folk should never meddle with mortals. We are longer-lived and thus more experienced, but they get lucky sometimes with their quick wits. Thomas the Rhymer hoodwinked the Fairy Queen: so did the no-good Tam Lin with his devious betrothed. I had learned all these ballads by heart. I should have known better. I should have remembered, and reflected.

And yet they draw us. The same skeins that entangle them reach around our hearts as well. They are different from us immortals, more frail and transparent - and thus all the more alluring. So it was with George Collins. He used to walk over the lea, sometimes with a girl on his arm, but oftentimes alone. The riverside was his refuge. He sauntered to the edge of the water and gazed into the calm river, anxious to see his reflection. I used to lurk at the bottom, and many times his eyes met mine. He did not know what he saw, and soon forgot the uneasiness that touched his mind at the fleeting contact.

Once, when he was sleeping under the oak tree, I could not help myself. I swam to the surface just to see him. He looked handsome in his sparkling linen shirt, and he dreamed on as if he had no care in the world. I could have claimed him there and then: one simple note, and he would

have followed me into the river and stayed there for good. Instead, I sat on a stone and waited. That was my first mistake.

Waking up, he did not notice me at first. I sat and watched my fill as he pulled on his boots and ran a lazy hand through his hair. He gave a yelp of surprise when he finally realised my presence. I suppose he had never seen anyone of my kind before - but soon his curiosity overcame his fear, as I knew it would. As it always does. Mortals, too, have their weak points, curiosity being the main one.

We talked: mainly about his life and his many accomplishments. I asked him if he would come to see me again; he promised he would. And he did. I used to sit on the white stone in the middle of the stream, waiting for him, while my hair and skin dried in the midday sun, and I found it difficult to breathe.

Lady Eleanor waited, too. Her song had a new sound to it - lighter, sweeter. One day, as I floated past the castle, I saw people preparing her betrothal feast. There were garlands of midsummer flowers, flags flying, and merry music. The feast lasted long into the night, and I stayed to watch it all. Just as I was about to dive down again, I saw a couple entering the shrubberies on the riverbank. The man was roaring drunk, and he was leading by the arm a giggling girl - one of Lady Eleanor's maids. She feebly protested as the man pulled her down. *Oh George*, she sighed, *what will your bride say?*

I plunged into the river and did not surface for days. I did not feel betrayed myself - there had been no promises between him and me. I was sorry for Lady Eleanor. My heart told me that George Collins was not a particularly pleasant man; he would not appreciate the goodness and generosity of this sweet-voiced woman. All he wanted from a wife was money, obedience, and children: this much he had revealed to me during our talks.

I brooded for seven days and seven nights at the bottom of the river. On the morning of the eighth day, I went to one of my sisters, and bartered with her for what I wanted: a small phial of a colourless, tasteless liquid that she brews on moonless nights and sells for a high price. I climbed on my white stone and waited. When I saw George Collins coming I dabbed a little of the liquid on my lips and called to him. I had been gone for such a long time that he had grown anxious, and rushed to embrace me.

We have always played games with mortals: hide and seek, push and pull. Life and death, too, at times. The price I paid for the poison was negligible, and I wondered at the sudden generosity of my sister. I should have known that in the end, it was not me who was going to pay in full: it was the lady who loved the faithless George Collins with all her heart. It was she who

had to see his pale corpse carried through the gates. It was she who had to hear the piercing cries of her serving-women who rushed outdoors to caress his wet face and try to revive him with their kisses. And it was Lady Eleanor who had to feel the same pain as he, when the poison slowly travelled from his lips to her heart.

The river keeps running. The clouds pass swiftly overhead. There is nothing to hear but the sound of wind and water. I bartered my voice for someone else's freedom: what I got in return was perfect silence.

*She whooped, she holloed, she highered her voice,
She held up her lilywhite hand.
'Come hither to me, George Collins,' she said
'For your life shall not last you long.'**

*Poem quotations from 'George Collins', a traditional English ballad



John Davis

The Heartstone of Lady Macbeth

Damn if she isn't the hitman, the living spit with wit;
no more bit-by-bit for Macbeth to be the real drillbit.
And no more flim-flam—can he be the jazzman,
the helmsman with the plan not like a has-been caveman
from Japan. To slice and dice with a knife. Easy as
chopping chicory. That curly endive makes anyone
thrive. A woman is not just the curl of a wave. She is
the wave that raves, the tone of the foam. If she has to be
the main moan in the tidal zone for him to get
the throne, at least she's got the backbone while he
thinks cologne. He wonders will folks adore him being Thane
of Cawdor? The horror of having a husband who lacks
hubris and husk. He's thinking Musk, that rancid rust
that bulldozes a nose from anything pleasant.
Like any grill, she chills her briquettes, negates her
sweat before she kills. Anyone in her way she grills
them medium rare. But now, what gown will she wear:
lace gold, white gold or bold in blue?
Won't Duncan's ghost be the slime mildew.

She Was That Way

Her soul sat in the chair
The rest of her sat there
the gold dust of her voice
below sea level—hoarse
the rest of her hard love
hard hustle hard night shove
leaning against her spine
running on slow-drag time
the rest of her unsung
simple slip of the tongue
streetlights fluttered through her
like a bird's heart, a blur
when I found her staring
when I found her blaring silence
when I found no rhythm
no back-beat just the hum
of clocks Time had no time
in the room Had no rhyme
If I lifted her up
would there be a breakup
of soul and bubbled skin
Depression the tailspin
has-been double dealer
the connoisseur liqueur
no matter white curtains
no matter no certain

Talk to my Shadow

Slow down. I can't walk that fast
in late afternoon. I've got bunions
and you're running ahead
like a hairless terrier
about to snare a fox.

And then you walk behind me
a stalker in all black
gonna flatten me
a hack pickpocket who trips
whaps my shoulder just for a laugh.

When you cling so close, compose
yourself. Your personal space
is not acceptable and then you
disappear at noon when I'm trying
to introduce you to the sun.

I had hoped you would make your own way
when you turned eighteen, off the payroll
so to speak, but you're my double
trouble, the shade that won't run.
I always watch my back.

Enabling our Family Artifacts to Speak

The next generation doesn't want the old, brown furniture that's been passed from one generation to the next. I can accept that. The thing is, they hardly want any of the stuff that the inheriting generation typically accepts from their elders. "If you can do us one favor while you're still around, you can sift through your stuff, decide what really matters, and deep six the rest," my son Alex tells us. I worry that that what I consider priceless family artifacts (of little or no monetary value) might soon end up in the trash heap.

I try to explain that these artifacts hold stories of those who came before, the risks they took, their perseverance against the odds, their good fortune and ill. Alex gives me an opening: "Then tell us the stories that go with the stuff so we can share the love." At another level, Alex is saying, "Are there stories we can only appreciate by owning, preserving, and holding these artifacts? How will preserving 'the thing itself' continue to inform our lives?"

As we were commencing the effort to write up the stories to enable certain artifacts to speak, I came across an unopened manila envelope marked "Dish for Jim" in my Dad's handwriting. I opened it and found a dish and a note from Dad. At that point, Dad had been dead for twenty years so it felt like he was messaging me from beyond the grave. The dish was a shallow, seven-inch-wide metal bowl. The white porcelain bottom was multiply dinged and well-worn. The top has a two-inch-long chew mark along the rim but otherwise looks newly old because someone—obviously Dad—had updated it using a gold-brushed swirl. So why am I getting this plate? Dad wrote:

"About this dish and a grape arbor. I was born at 758 58th Street. Sometime after—either before or after Joe was born—we moved to 57th Street, almost directly behind."

"My very earliest memory is in a carriage looking up at the sky through an arbored vine—a grape vine—in the rear of the 58th Street backyard."

"Apparently, one Sunday morning when I was twenty months old—maybe to make me feel better since I was no longer the 'baby'—my Pop took me down, walked or carried, to a hardware store on Fifth Avenue. I remember getting to the store with its outside display."

“Pop bought me this dish for my oatmeal gruel which I apparently lingered over for half an hour according to Mom. I used it for years, then for years it was Snowball’s water dish with a slice of lime in the middle.”

Since Snowball (the cat) died at least 65 years before Dad wrote this note, one can only speculate about where it had been in the interim and why I’m seeing it now for the first time.

After I show Alex the dish and note, he says, “Now that we know the story behind that dish, it might qualify as a family treasure, but only because we have both the dish and the story.” And, as important as it was for Alex and I to agree that family artifacts require stories to give them life, it was equally important for long-dead Dad to stand before us to demonstrate the preservation of family artifacts and the linking of stories to the artifacts.

Without the supporting story, the plate would have stood no chance of being considered a family artifact worthy of preservation. Even with this supporting story, it may not. If it does, it’s only because Dad wrote a story to explain why it was important *to him*.

We set in motion to write stories to document our alleged treasures, analogous to how the owners of old buildings and houses prepare their applications to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. We’re actually trying to do two things at once. First, write short compositions that tell the stories behind an artifact. Second, stimulate our children and grandchildren to begin writing the stories behind their own treasures. For our children, this isn’t asking too much because they’re the ones who pressed us to write our stories in the first place. For the grandchildren, with two third graders, two first graders, and one preschooler, the ability to reflect and write varies. Third grader Ben—the lover of Cabbage Patch cards from the 1980s and bottles from the early 1900s, who claims to love the smell of antique stores—will gladly tell the stories behind his treasures. However, he’s more likely to dictate than write by hand. His twin, Bella, can easily write by hand, but her treasures are probably the latest stuffed animals.

Some artifacts are wearable. For example, when Dad turned twenty in 1935, his Dad gave him a square-necked, burgundy sweater from the haberdashery where he worked. Dad turned it over to me thirty-two years later as I turned twenty. I wore it for over a decade until my wife said, “We need to preserve it. I’ll knit you a clone.” To perpetuate the myth, I wore the clone for a decade until I outgrew it. I planned to give Alex the original, but due to a phenomenal growth spurt—ten inches in one year—he outgrew it at 15 while I was blinking. He now owns both original and clone. Alex’s plan is, when his son turns 14, he will look for the moment to gift it, knowing his son will be wearing his ancestors. This is far from our only wearable artifact—for exam-

ple, we still have a christening dress that my wife's great-grandmother embroidered in the late nineteenth century—but the sweater has most clearly been welcomed into the present.

When I was seven, Dad's mom gave me a wisp of pink spun glass, claiming it was angel hair. When she was a child, it had been given to her in 1893 after a family friend brought it back from the Chicago World's Fair. It became one of her treasures because it came from a far-off place. Chicago, represented something transcendent, an angel, and it was pink, proving it was other worldly. It takes up almost no space. I respect the dreams Johanna projected onto it and the memories it still holds. As much as I'd like to turn it over to one of our first or third grander grandchildren, with both spoken and written story about angel hair, I wonder whether with all the distractions they experience they'll place more than a moment's value on it.

There's one treasure that already has my daughter Emily's full attention. Her most prized artifact is her porcelain nightlight of a pigtailed girl, which shattered into over 100 pieces when she was three. My Dad, who liked working with his hands and believed in repairing things, "keeping them in use," painstakingly laid out pieces varying in shape and size, experimented with how they might fit, arrived at a plan, and glued them back together. Only upon close inspection can one detect any seams. Now Emily and her children will treasure the little girl nightlight not *despite* its flaws, but because they are a testament to my Dad's skill, persistence, will to preserve, and love. And it carries with it a story Emily already has shared with her children who someday might tell their children too. For now, it stays where it's been for the 40 years since Dad glued it back together: high on a bookshelf in Emily's childhood bedroom, waiting to be carried off. Beneath it is Emily's written story of the nightlight and Dad's love.



Because we earned the reputation for running a home for disposed family treasures, various family members have dumped on us the artifacts they no longer wished to keep around but couldn't part with. This makes it even more difficult to come up with the stories. Therefore, we've attempted to require our "depositors" to share the stories behind what they're turning over as a condition of our acceptance in perpetuity. Naturally, we've had mixed luck recording this.

One of the problems with even the stuff we keep on display is that it's not only out of style but, from my humble perspective, it's downright ugly. Somehow, I ended up with multiple vases from the late 19th century that belonged to a great-great-grandfather who made his living in the stinky business of tanning goat hides. Not one is attractive. We've never used them. I keep them because they were his, even though he died 117 years ago. I'm happy to document *his* story because I'm happy to report that in the past year Emily has thrown herself body and soul into documenting history via Ancestry.com. Over and over, she writes little compositions based on what she's learned and adds them to Ancestry. She values the paper artifacts available online, even more so the ones we possess that have yet to be scanned and shared via Ancestry. But the old vases? I'm sorry, there's no justification. They've got to go. I fear Emily will say, "Hold them for me."

The question isn't merely what *will* my children and one day, I hope, their children value in the artifacts and the stories behind them. It's what *should* they value, what do we *want* them to value? Every artifact can speak to future generations, but do we want them to? For example, my Mom's dad left the family when Mom was four to sail the seven seas on cruise ships as ship's purser. I own seven small ivory figurines he bought in China in the 1920s. I don't like them because to me they represent his abandonment of his family, which resulted in Mom's shuttling from one foster family to another for seven years. Still, I've kept them because they're the only thing he ever gave me. Who wants them?

Thirty years ago, when Alex was ten, he and I used to visit a cluster of antique stores on Sunday afternoons. Once, a forty-five-year-old woman turned eagerly to the shop's owner, "The woman this postcard was sent to, Laura Page, she was my grandmother. Do you have any other cards sent to her?"

The shop owner answered, "I don't have the foggiest. You'll have to look."

I broke in, "I've got about 20 cards sent to her in the same handwriting. You want them?"

She said, "No, I don't need the cards, but could you make copies for me?"

I mailed her copies of the fronts and backs with a note, "You can still have the cards too."

She wrote back, "This is all I need to tell their story."

I admire that she sought out the postcards to tell her grandmother's story, but I can't fathom her not wanting to hold the actual postcards in her hands. She adds credence to the claim that "the thing itself" doesn't have to

be preserved. My response: without feeling the wisp of angel hair rubbing against one's cheek, can the myth behind it even matter?



Duarte N. Nobrega

Take it

Crown the jester,
Blow the wind,
Evict the bird,
Take its nest.

Embrace the quest,
Torn the vest,
Be naked
Like the lake.

Be naked
Like the moon,
Be naked
Until noon,
Be naked...
Like the bird
You evicted.

LollipopArt - SoHo Girl

Her parents are rich
But she couldn't care less
About the press
When she's heading to Brooklyn
To howl like Ginsberg
And drink like Kerouac.
Her body is still pure,
But she couldn't care less
About her mind and its tours.

She lures men
With her lollipop,
That she holds like a cigarette,
To give her a ride back.
She taps her bare feet
On unknown dashboards
Like she's on a Tarantino flick
Just because she's a Soho chick.

She's just a 21st century girl
Who likes to purr
When beating Neo-vintage poetry.

Joe Walpole

The Pugilist as Guest: One Fine Day with Thom Jones

Miami, November 1993.

Thom Jones doesn't look like Thom Jones.

I mean, *this* Thom Jones on stage about to read at the Miami Book Fair does not look at all like *the* Thom Jones whose debut short story collection, *The Pugilist at Rest*, had propelled me to risk life and limb tearing through the streets of Miami just for a glimpse. The Thom Jones I expected to see as the author of such gutsy manic unsparing stories had war scars, a face livid with outrage, a face battle tested, mottled, rough-hewn. But *this* Thom Jones has a face shiny and cherry-blossom soft, rosy-cheeked. Cherubic.

The cherub steps to the mic and tells the crowd, "Everybody's in a good mood now. I'll put an end to that." He does. His tie loosely knotted, he reads his pain-wracked story "I Want to Live" in a staccato-like, relentless drone, mounting to outrage as it nears the end. It is mercifully brief. The old lady behind me screeches, "*Is that it?*"

In an alcove after the reading, where he sits behind a table to sign books, the first thing you notice about him is the physical discombobulation. He just does not look well. Even though the alcove is cooled by a fine breeze coming off the coast and even though the auditorium is A.C. super cooled, beads of sweat percolate along his hairline. There is a fever in his eyes. It takes him a long time to sign books for the thirty or so fans because he keeps asking over and over how to spell each person's name. He looks manic but acts catatonic, moves like a man on Thorazine. He is not. Later, he tells me he was worried he had slurred while reading. He did not. But he is on anti-epileptic meds. And he is fighting diabetes. His face is thin, unnaturally so, his hair combed straight down in what we used to call a Caesar cut so that there is something monastic-looking about him. When I speak to him, telling him that Robert Olen Butler, another writer of the Vietnam War, had told me he liked Thom's work, he surprises me with the slow lotus blossom softness of his response: "I am deeply touched."

He tells me he is afraid he had given himself too much insulin this morning and says he's got to get some food. So the two of us hazard crossing busy Biscayne Boulevard and I have to take his arm. He is thin and bow-legged, his weight down to 150, though he has been thinner, he tells me as we wait to cross. With the diabetes he had dropped to 140, unlike in his druidical drinking days when he had ballooned to 215. He is telling me this as I try to steer him across the street.

We manage to make it across to Miami's downtown tourist haven, Bayside Marketplace, a fancy warren of overpriced eateries and tourist shops selling overpriced gewgaws, set on the blue of the overcrowded Intracoastal Waterway. Thom begins an idea, but lops it off, never gets to the end. A cheeseburger (no condiments) and a large Styrofoam cup of coffee (no sugar, no milk) set him at ease and he is able now to reach the ends of sentences. With that and a filtered cigarette, he sits back and we settle in for what proves to be one fine afternoon of conversation, Thom Jones and I, both of us ex-military, ex-janitors, ex-drunks, two still-raging bulls crazy about writing—"I'd *die* for my writing," he says—and on this gorgeous Miami day, between smoke rings, this is what Thom tells me:

Booze and beer. He has not had a drink for years. In the old days, he was a binge drinker—ten, eleven days at a shot, drunk, then the clean-up. He preferred beer, Hamm's, a cheap beer drunk by the characters in his stories; indeed, in "The Pugilist" the narrator drinks "a half rack of Hamm's" before the fight that brings on his epileptic seizures. The onset of Type I diabetes hastened the end of Thom's drinking career, and he entered himself into detox, where he had the DTs: "I saw bats, animals, everything." From detox, he went to AA meetings, but after a while decided to let writing be his meetings and his therapy. "I'm never gonna be happy anyway, so I might as well write."

Sobriety has not erased his rage, what he calls his "poison." On the flight to Miami yesterday he lost his first-class seat assignment due to the strike at American Airlines and was given a seat that did not tilt back because it hit against a bulwark. Worse, he had begun twitching, his arms jerking, the onset perhaps of an epileptic fit—he had not had a fit since his days in the Corps but this felt like the start of something bad. When Thom complained to the steward and asked for an aisle seat, the steward shrugged him off, said he would attend to it later. Thom waited for "later." But when the captain announced that the standbys could enter the plane, Thom watched them gobble up the open aisle seats, and he became furious. He told off the steward, whose answer was succinct: "Screw you." The two of them shouted. Thom, almost shouting now—people are staring—leans in and tells me, "He doesn't

know how close he was to getting killed. I had the punches all planned out, the combination. Even like I am now, I can still hit and hurt.”

Boxing. He gets his love of and talent for boxing from his father, who started him boxing as a kid, though Thom is quick to add, “I was never the fighter he was. He *never* had any fear. He was crazy. Really crazy.” One day Thom’s father walked out to his car in the parking lot and saw a man getting into a red Nash just like his—“an unusual car,” Thom says. Convinced the man was trying to steal his car (he wasn’t; it was the man’s own car), Thom’s father clocked him: knocked the man’s eye out. His lawyer offered Thom’s father a choice between twenty years in prison or the nuthouse. Mr. Jones chose the nuthouse.

Thom talked about writing and likened it to his days training for the ring. He talked of not *trying* to write, not *forcing* yourself to write when you don’t want to and explained his approach to writing by comparing it to his boxing regimen: In the morning he used to run, then train in the gym, then spar—“no smoking, no drinking, no jerking around”—just hard work. But sometimes at night he would get the urge to run, just run, long and slow, untimed, unhurried. Then he would walk into his garage, and without any pushing from anyone, poke at the bag. He would find himself in a groove and be able to do things he never could before when his coach was yelling at him to concentrate and work harder. Those nights in the garage, Thom swinging at the bag with ease, still resonate and they inform his writing life now. He tries to write with the same unforced ease as he found those nights in his garage by himself.

As to the composing aspect itself, “Boxing and writing,” he says, “it’s like sizing up your opponent. There are about twenty things you watch for—hand speed, foot speed, heart, coordination, etc. Same with your writing, and you just make note of those certain things for the story you’re writing. Just throw trouble at your character. Make things as difficult for him as you can. Make it hot, the radio won’t work, the clothes itch. If he wakes up, make him late. Pour rain on him. Get him into an accident and see how he reacts. You’ve got to test him to find out who he is. If I take the character to decision, he has to kill somebody or back out—*do* something. Like in boxing.”

Boxing is hard, he explains—“the sit-ups, the running, the fear.” But writing, too, is hard. “It’s only for people who can’t not do it.” He advises me to “write your insanity. Pain is everywhere, people identify with it, they like reading about it. Don’t be afraid to tell things that are embarrassing. I don’t. Who cares? There’s no one trick to writing, no one way to do it. I don’t pre-plot at all.”

The book. In his story “The Pugilist at Rest,” that early sequence in which the narrator smashes a Marine recruit named Hey Baby happened exact-

ly as written. Hey Baby had been hassling Thom's friend Ralph, called Jorgenson in the story, "harassing him and pushing him around." One day, the recruits running on the parade field with their rifles, Thom saw Hey Baby shove Ralph with his rifle and Thom "hammered him in the temple with the sharp edge of the steel butt plate of my M14," as he writes in "Pugilist," fracturing Hey Baby's skull. Thom tells me, his voice like talcum powder now: "I wonder if today I'm still legally responsible for what happened." At times like this you cannot not notice the hollowness of his face, the occipital bones jutting out, the pugilist's unrest.

Other parts of the story—the terrible defeat in the boxing ring, the temporal lobe epilepsy, the nightmarish neuro-psych ward at Camp Pendleton—were also taken from his life, as were other stories in the book. His story about the doctor who helps his institutionalized sister is really about his old high school girlfriend. "She two-timed me just before I went into the Marines in '63. She went out with other guys, including John Belushi, who was younger but hung with us because he thought we were cool. He wasn't that funny then." The girlfriend went crazy, walking naked one day down a highway with a gun. She put it to her head and fired, but lived through it. "She entered a very expensive hospital, then I lost track of her. I'd like to know whatever happened to her."

Ralph, Thom's best friend—"my main man"—who died in Vietnam like his fictional counterpart, Jorgeson, was married to the woman Thom would eventually marry, Sally Williams from Seattle. After Ralph's death, Thom and Sally became pen pals, a correspondence that blossomed into love. Sally was studying at the Sorbonne in Paris, but they moved to Chicago, to be near her father, who was sick. When he died, the couple settled in Olympia, where they now raise a daughter, Jenny. "Family is very important to me," he says. His mother he phones often—"I like her"—as he does his brother and sister. "I like my brother and sister, but I *hated* my step-father," a used car salesman who took over the family when Thom was three. Thom's stepfather is the real life model for the creepy stepfather Frank in "As of July 6, I Am Responsible for No Debts Other Than My Own," of whom he wrote: "I knew he was a louse and that he hated me. I was afraid to be in the same room with him."

The bile. Somehow, the mention of his overbearing stepfather gets him thinking of this year's National Book Award, his loss to Annie Proulx (*Shipping News*) a recent open sore, his ire up, his mouth down. Indeed, he brings up the subject a half dozen times during the afternoon. "I'm totally furious. I can't believe I lost." He says at least two of the judges approached him and whispered how much they had liked and advocated for the book, apologetic about his losing. Thom says he allowed himself to get caught up in

the ritual of the ceremony—the tuxedos, the celebrities, the press, all the glad-handing and camera clicking. But he rails against the committee chairperson—“a feminist lesbian! an academic!!”—who spoke for ten minutes, in contrast to Annie Proulx’s acceptance speech, which lasted only thirty seconds.

But that was then. Today, standing in this glorious Miami sunshine, he is emphatic that all the bad things in his life were not bad things; that he “*had* to go through them, experience them, *have* them” in order to have the good that he now enjoys. “Everything has worked to my eventual present good.” We are looking out over blue water, blue sky, Thom blowing a smoke ring. He whispers: “Oh, yes.”

I pull the car into the half-moon landing zone of the hotel. I can’t remember now whether it was the InterContinental or the Hyatt but I know it was one of those mucho money Miami hotels because I remember thinking, pleased, that the Miami Book Fair was treating its writers first-class. Around us spins the whirligig of lives on the move, the mark of swank, gleaming limos, pretty women in high heels and minis, valets in livery, perfumery, car doors slamming, chatter—Spanglish—and into this high gloss hurly burly I deposit Thom, who once again looks cherubic, a bit lost, befuddled even.

At the entrance to the hotel, the cherub looks back. When his eyes find me, I wave. He grins. He throws me a mock jab and a juke and a bob-and-weave then a right cross, POW. Thom Jones, the pugilist at last.



Janet McCann

Sending out Poems in the 60's

Sending out the same poems
To two editors was forbidden,
And you didn't do it anyway because
That carbon copy looked suspicious.
You could get three poems and a half sheet note
And the SASE into a #10 envelope
With just one stamp. And then you waited.
Months later poems came back, tired,
Their folds melted. With a printed slip.
Sometimes an encouraging note was scrawled
On the slip, *This almost made it. Send more.*
You can't send those out again, their condition
Told a sad story. But now and then a letter,
Sometimes handwritten, told you that
Swamp Rot Review was going to print your poem!
Sometimes with a check for \$3 or even \$5!
And didn't this feel an awful lot like joy?

Does a New Pen Write Clean?

Or does it drag the dreck
Of the past, a messy winding trek
Like a garden snail
With an acid trail?
Why won't it say just what I mean?
Does a new pen write clean?

Sean Des Vignes

I'm Not A Computer

There are limits to human intelligence.
Gun to my head, I could not tell you
the number group after trillion. A middle-
aged man on the C train plays sudoku
from Rockaway Ave to Fulton St trying
not to forget his birthday. When I teach
I watch the lectures settle in a pocket
behind my students' foreheads where
it then evaporates. Once, I thought it was
blood pulsing to my ears when I yawned
but later learned the ears have muscles
too and sometimes they contract. A block
of ice is engulfed in flames and your first
guess is that it wouldn't stand a chance,
the ice, but did you know the only thing
burning is the alcohol the fire emits,
the heat of which melts water off the ice
but never burns it? All things considered,
it requires a patience fire may not have.
And dare I say in the war between frozen
and burned it is possible for the ice to win.

Ode To The Tin Can Of Royal Dansk Cookies

with no cookies in it
armed with a lid slightly tightening
or lifting
depending on the weather
by the window
inside your circle
you held more needles
than my family's sad, diabetic arm,
a history of strings
unused crayons,
yellow index card littered
with bad handwriting
once important phone numbers,
an aging ziploc
with postage stamps hosting the face
of a random president
as I shook you,
the thumbtacks you swallowed
tortured you into music
bless your cylindrical,
shadow-colored flesh
bless your sound,
you nuanced steel-pan,
drum of a West Indian
kitchen table, you sound
like the sewing of a shirt
like utility, your insides
as tough as a thimble:
in my grandmother's last
days, clinging to life
in a hospital bed, swelling
fat with IVs and syringes,
I thought of you
tin can,
what a generous
alloy of skin, what confidence
to be entered
and unmoved.

Cary Barney

The Night the War Began

for Giedre

The night the war began I muscled my way through the crowd at the station towing my poor disoriented mother behind. We at least had tickets, but nobody ever asked to see them, and we were lucky to make the train. We had some bread, cheese, ham, an apple apiece and two large beer bottles I'd filled with tap water before leaving. A woman not much younger than my mother gave up her seat for her. She'd have collapsed otherwise. I stood crammed into the passageway between cars with our single suitcase, half a dozen other passengers, and their bags. It was a long journey out from the capitol, fourteen hours and counting, some spent sidetracked so military supply trains could get by. As we rattled slowly through the dark, I checked on my mother from time to time and found her weeping, then chatting with a young man standing in the aisle with his cat mournfully meowing in a box. The next time I checked she was asleep, cheek pressed to the window. Then the train stopped again, less than fifty kilometers from the border and safety. Rumors began to spread, fed by texts passengers received on their phones: the border was closed, and the train would not be allowed to pass. Or the rails up ahead had been shelled and we'd all have to get out and walk. It was raining hard. When I found my mother again, she looked up and said, "Am I going to die on this train?" I laughed and told her no. She drifted off to sleep and fortunately never woke.

The night the war began we sang slow sweet dirges for peace in the candlelit square. It started to snow, and the flakes hissed in the candle flames. We sheltered the guttering flames with our hands. We stood before the church and sang and prayed our voices would carry across the world to the war zone. Thermosfuls of cocoa made the rounds. A small crowd formed around us. When we stopped the applause was muffled by mittens.

The night the war began I had a dream you were still alive and in our bed, and you turned to me and touched my face and said you loved me, and I said it back, and we held each other and rocked from side to side the way we always did and didn't have to say a word. But then I realized your

body in my arms was cold and I let it go. The gunfire woke me, and I was glad you hadn't lived to see this.

The night the war began our writing instructor sent us all a prompt over our group chat. We were to write short narratives opening with the phrase "The night the war began."

The night the war began I opened the locked trunk I kept under the bed and took out my old rifle and revolver. They hadn't been used in decades, not since the last war. They wouldn't be of much use now and I was probably too old to re-enlist, but I cleaned and oiled them anyhow and thought about where I could get my hands on ammunition. My daughter came into the room quietly, behind me, and I sensed her presence. I'd never told her about the war or the guns, which had been locked in the trunk since before she'd been born. I looked up at her and I don't know what she saw in my face. She said, "Teach me to shoot."

The night the war began my partner got a call from one of the independent stations, who wanted her on a panel of commentators and academics to discuss what would happen next and how things would end. She dressed quickly and pulled on her coat. I offered to drive her but they'd already sent a limo to pick her up. I asked if she wanted me along for moral support but she said no, just stay home and fix me a nice meal for when I get back. The car must have been caught in traffic a couple of kilometers from the station, but she'd expected that and brought her running shoes in a bag so she could run the rest of the way. I was watching on the small TV in the kitchen, a potato peeler in my hand, when she joined the panel, a little late and out of breath but clear-headed, articulate and incisive as always. She was in the middle of her second intervention, mildly questioning the government line that we had the right to invade, when the signal went. It was what we'd both expected: all channels but the state television had been taken off the air. I started to peel the potatoes. She never made it home.

The night the war began I was on call at the hospital when they told me my aunt had been admitted. My uncle had died the year before, they'd had no children, I was the closest relative. She'd been very ill for some time and now had slipped into a coma. She wasn't on my floor and I was much too busy to go down and see her. She was a gossip and a scold and a constant irritant in my life, though underneath it sweet and kind and caring. They asked me what if anything should be done to prolong her life if it came to decisions

being made. All I could think was, hurry up and die. We're going to need that bed.

The night the war began I started a novel that would have nothing to do with the war. The novel would be my refuge from the war. I created characters whose company I knew I'd enjoy and put them in places where no tanks were rolling, no snipers firing, no shells exploding. My task, as I saw it, was to keep any of that from happening. I'd keep the tide of war as far as I could from my writing and from my characters. I'd protect them from the war. I'd have to be vigilant to keep the war from creeping into it anyhow. It would be my war against the war. I lost. Now I hear it praised as a great war novel. I wish I'd never written it.

The night the war began the army was out in our fields planting anti-personnel mines. What if we need to harvest? we asked. We're sorry, they told us, but surveillance suggested the enemy would come right through our land. So there went another winter's yield. They're going to trample it all anyhow, they said. We're taking your house too, as a command center. We asked about compensation and they laughed. Wouldn't aiding the war effort be enough? As long as you fucking win, we said. But really, we'd sell our wheat to either side. We only wanted to be left alone.

The night the war began I took the elevator down to the street, jay-walked through evening traffic, and stood there looking at my building. What would it look like, I asked myself, after a missile strike? I'd looked at plenty of photos from war zones. Kitchens, bathrooms suddenly exposed to the air. A mascara of smoke ringing each wound. Or the whole building collapsed in a cascade of brick. I tried to imagine my building that way. I imagined my neighbors standing in the street with me wailing with grief for lost homes, loved ones missing or killed. I reassured myself: it's not happening here. Not likely. Not yet.

The night the war began we were ready. We had cans of beans, soup, spaghetti sauce stacked in our spare room. 20-gallon jugs, 18 of them, filled with water in case the mains were cut. Powdered milk and orange drink. Energy bars. Mirrored lanterns and seven cases with 300 candles each, in case the electricity went off. Cards, board games. Books. History books, to keep up the children's education, in case the walk to school became too dangerous. Math flash cards. Notebooks, pencils. The children knew something bad was happening, but we'd get them through it. We looked at each other and the

same thought occurred to both of us: that we'd never been so united, so organized, that our marriage had never worked as well as it was working now. And to think a few months earlier we'd been talking separation. Maybe war was what we needed.

The night the war began I picked up my father from his dental appointment. They'd wired his mouth shut. This meant just soup and other liquids for a few days and more importantly no talking politics in the car. Then I thought, why not? He can't talk back and drown me out. I let him have it. "There's a silver lining to this war," I said. "The government will mishandle it, sending young men and women off to pointlessly die. Military objectives won't be met, it will drag on for years, and with everything going toward the war effort the government will be unable to meet the basic needs of the population, which will finally - finally! - rise, revolt and demand the mass resignation of the government. So yes, pop, we finally do agree on something, don't we? On with the war!" That'll get him, I thought, right where it hurts, in his party loyalty. When I looked there was no fury in his eyes, just coldness. "If you could," I told him, "you'd turn me in, wouldn't you? But then who would pick you up from the dentist?"

The night the war began I was shredding Wagner on the Stratocaster with the amp way up and a shitload of reverb. I wanted the invaders to hear it when they began their assault. Yes, I was welcoming them. I couldn't wait for them to arrive, to start shooting people. I'd tell them to start with my neighbors, who always complained when I played. More than once they called the police, but I knew the police would be too busy tonight to pay any attention. I cranked it louder and felt the walls shake around me, like they would when the missiles started flying. It would be awesome.

The night the war began we found the note from the Homeowners Association in our mailbox. My husband read it in a fury. It said the plastic slide swing set we'd set up for the twins was a) visible from the street from certain angles, b) too garishly colored, and c) higher than the border fence between our place and our neighbor's. We immediately knew she'd been responsible, the mover and shaker behind the sanction (an initial fine of a hundred dollars and three days to remove the equipment before a thousand dollar fine would kick in). She'd told us our children were too loud, objected to our Christmas lights (too uniformly blue, which she claimed triggered her depression and migraines) and the smell of our barbecue (she was vegan). I knew the real reason was she had the hots for my husband, since I caught her watching

him from her window while he was tanning and... Wait, is it okay to use war as a metaphor, or does this have to be about a literal war?

The night the war began we were in her bed, both feeling terrible. He'd gone to the recruiting center three days before, when it became obvious what was going to happen, and was already on his way to the front with little training. Odds were he'd never make it back alive and we'd never have to explain anything to him. She'd honor his memory, of course. They had been in love before marriage gradually ate away at it. We'd been seeing each other whenever our schedules and his absences allowed. Things had worked out and I'd never met him, but felt I knew him through what she told me. I imagined him dying and thinking of her. I resolved to sign up the next day. She talked me out of it.

The night the war began I wrote a poem about my feelings of helplessness and desolation. When I finished I contemplated letting a tear drop onto the page. But if I had to contemplate it, I immediately told myself, it would no longer be authentic. The tear would be an aesthetic choice, an affectation, completely insincere. Then I thought, so's the poem. Did I really care about the war? Only enough to write a poem. I tore it up.

The night the war began I thought of deleting my browser history, my social media accounts, and all my old blog posts. Of course, you can't really delete anything. It's all still there somewhere, and if they wanted to find it, they would. If they hadn't already. So, there was a chance they'd seek me out if they got through the lines and rolled into town. I'd be jailed, tortured, tried, executed. Or maybe just sent for reeducation. Or I'd be completely ignored, as I always had been. Which would be worse? In the end I didn't delete anything. Come and get me, I thought.

The night the war began we were already in our cabin up in the mountains. Nothing would touch us here. Up the hill behind us there was a clearing where at night you could see the lights of the city. We walked up there with a blanket for the ground and a couple of sandwiches and a bottle of wine and two glasses. The city looked peaceful from here, the usual grid of streets, but phosphorescent flares gave it a ghostly look. When missiles arrived we saw the distant flashes and plumes of smoke, then half a minute later heard muffled explosions. The flashes increased in their frequency, sparkling in the night. Neither of us wanted to say so, but it was beautiful.

The night the war began I responded to the prompt with my best story ever. My protagonist was a sniper holed up in the attic of an abandoned factory. I made the sniper a woman, which was an additional challenge for me since I'm a guy. I had her watching for an advance unit of the invading troops, who were known to be entering the area and eying the factory as a possible base. When the first of them arrived I had her hesitate. They were just kids, after all, the same age as her own sons. Their mothers were waiting at home fearing they wouldn't return. I've never been in a war, or been a woman, but I felt like I was right inside her head as she tried to decide whether to pull the trigger. I left it up in the air, too, so the reader had to imagine what would happen. Man, I fucking love writing.

The night the war began there was only one enemy we cared about. There they were, far below in their segregated section of the stadium. We hooted and jeered them, bellowed our songs at them at the top of our lungs. The first seat cushions flew, then bottle rockets and roman candles. We didn't even know if the teams would take the field and we almost didn't care. But finally they did, just as the first tracer flares began to glow in the distance outside. Fuck that war. This was our war, and nothing would take it from us. When the shell hit the upper stand at the south end and the game was called at 0-0 and the players scurried off the field we stayed where we were. We sang even louder.

The night the war began a strange woman came up to me in the street as I was on my way home from buying the cartons of cigarettes I knew I'd need. She grabbed me and kissed me, full on the mouth. I was startled but didn't resist. It was an amazing kiss, her velvet tongue swimming voluptuously in my mouth, filling it with the taste of sweet wine. Then it ended. I stood there wondering what that had been about. "Just in case," she said, "that's the last kiss for both of us."

The night the war began our son confronted us. "You've always taught me to believe in a kind and benevolent God. You've been keeping the truth from me. If he exists, why would he let this happen?" We tried to explain that God can't start or stop wars, that it's up to us, that he looks on in hope and sorrow, hope that we'll listen to his voice and do as he'd have us, sorrow when we don't. Our son wasn't buying it. "What use is he, if he's just a spectator?" My wife slapped him, then took him in her arms and wept.

The night the war began my nightly online chess game with S. took on a new vehemence. We'd remained friends although his country was about to attack mine. Our games were usually slow and analytical and we amicably shared our critiques of each other's moves. But tonight I quickly answered his Ne4g5 with Qxb3!. This was war.

The night the war began the neighbors knocked on our door to ask if we could spare a roll or two of toilet paper. What should we tell them? We'd stocked up well in advance of the predictable run in hopes that what we laid in would see us through whatever was coming. If we gave in to generous impulses now, who could tell who else in the building might catch on and come begging? Was it our fault if others had not foreseen this as we had? Wipe your asses with your movie posters and comic books, I wanted to tell them. But my husband sighed and went and got them a roll. "We don't have much more," he said. "Please don't tell anyone." Once the door was shut I shook my fist at him.

The night the war began I lost my bet with a friend that it wouldn't start until morning. Lucky for me his house was hit that night and he never had the chance to collect.

The night the war began my students' stories began to trickle in, then flood. I brewed some coffee and sat down at the computer to read their efforts. I thought some of them were pretty good. The prompt had made them stretch their imaginations. I decided to write a few myself.

The night the war began they called and asked me for help. I'd designed the highway bridge across the river which had been finished five years earlier. It was my crowning achievement, graceful, modern, but in harmony with the architecture of the old city. I could see it from my living room window, lit up beautifully at night. Now the city wanted to blow it up. It was the only bridge into the city that could support the weight of tanks and military transport. If the lines didn't hold, enemy convoys could arrive in a matter of days. Explosives were scarce. Where did I, who best knew the structural strengths and weaknesses of the span, think would be the best places to deploy them? I was only too happy to oblige.

The night the war began, as we'd all known it would, there were still timecards to be punched in the morning, shelves to stock, still inventory to be

taken, spoiled goods to be discounted. The store would open as usual. People would still need to buy. Perhaps more than ever. We'd do great business. Why assume otherwise? I didn't build this business by being pessimistic. I expected my employees to be there at seven a.m. sharp, like any morning. I went to bed confident they would be. I'll never know if they were, since our block was hit while I slept. Three days later they found my body crushed in the rubble.

The night the war began I found out I was pregnant. We'd been trying to conceive for several peaceful years with no success, but with war looming we decided the time was no longer right. We didn't want our child to be born to the sound of gunfire. Now the enemy, a sperm, had slipped through our line of defenses. What would we do now? Hope the war would be over in seven and a half months?

The night the war began the church was full. I knew some would look to me for words of consolation, others for strength and conviction, others for fiery sentiment and assurance of victory. I stood before them and had no idea what to say. I finally settled on some utter shit about inner peace, a victory we'd already won and needed to defend now with our faith and love for our fellow human beings, including the approaching enemy. I was in good voice and managed to make it all sound convincing. I almost bought it myself. Then the shell hit and the stained glass window on the west wall of the sanctuary shattered and showered the congregation with its shards. All ceremony collapsed as some parishioners fled to the street or the basement, but others rushed to help the shocked, the injured, the bleeding. It wasn't a sign from God, but it would do. I tore up my robes for tourniquets.

The night the war began I ate quickly, lied to my parents about where I was going, snuck out my window, shimmied down the drainpipe and ran up to the park on the hill where we'd get a good view. My friends were waiting. There were bottles of rum and vodka and two liter plastic bottles of Coca-Cola and Fanta to mix. We'd get plotzed and watch it all happen. Who cared? We'd all be dead soon.

The night the war began I deleted my story and started it over twenty times, though it was never the same story. I was trying for an authenticity which eluded me. How could it not? Imagination can only take you so far. I finally gave up.

The night the war began mama tucked me into bed and papa read me the story about the mole with the funny nose who lived deep in the ground and made friends with the gopher and the hedgehog and they had tea together every afternoon down there in the darkness where nobody even knew they were there and they were safe and I think papa was making it up because I didn't remember the book that way. I didn't know why his voice was all shaky either.

The night the war began the dog was terrified. This was much worse than fireworks for her. She cuddled with us on the bed and whimpered, looking up at us with pleading eyes, as if we could make it stop. All we could do was gently stroke her back, pat her on the head, and talk to her in that calm, soothing voice which usually worked but tonight did not. No question of taking her out for a walk. We thought, okay, this happens, we do this to each other, but how can we do this to our dogs?

The night the war began I gave up waiting for my brother to call and called him instead, though it was his turn to apologize. He'd started the quarrel. He'd brought the subject up - again - just when I'd felt relieved we were finally past it. Weren't there more urgent matters to face now? Shouldn't we draw together to confront them, to see each other through this, be prepared to say goodbye if it came to that? Couldn't we at least try to be on good terms? If one of us were to die in a shell blast, be shot by a sniper, be arrested and taken away to end up in a mass grave, how would the other survive knowing the opportunity to mend things between us was gone forever? So I called. He must have seen my name and declined the call. He was like that. I tried again, insisting. At last on the fourth try he picked up. He brusquely asked what I wanted. My prepared speech disappeared. It had had something to do with how much I loved him, despite everything. "Well?" he barked into the silence. "I'm still waiting for that apology," I said.

The night the war began I thought it would be easy to get a sidewalk table at the café, but the place was jammed and I had to wait. I finally got a table and ordered a drink. It arrived just before the flatbed trucks pressed into service as troop transport rolled into view, crammed with volunteers. We all raised our glasses and cheered. Some of them cheered back. I heard one of them shout my name. It was my cousin. She waved her arms in a gesture to come and join them. I shook my head incredulously. How could I, overweight and out of shape as I was? I'd never have lasted a day. But the disappointed look she shot me as they sped away would stay with me forever if she got

killed, I thought. I drained my glass and got up to run after them. After half a block I was out of breath and also remembered I'd forgotten to pay for my drink.

The night the war began something in me rebelled against the assignment the instructor had given us. It just seemed wrong. How could we, in our bourgeois comfort many time zones away, claim the right to speak for those in the line of fire? There is something holy in others' suffering I could not bring myself to intrude upon, to violate. I found it distasteful and told him so. He wrote back that he partly agreed.

The night the war began we were rehearsing the scene where the lovers are brought before the Emir and pressured to confess their sins, on pain of banishment. It's a lovely duet, the soprano and tenor intertwining in sinuous, pleading lines as the thunderous bass of their accuser and judge implacably tries to cut them short and the chorus parrots him in chiding, scornful bursts. The clash of soaring melody versus angry atonality rises to a moment of apparent triumph where a single violin cuts into the tension to establish the simple, moving theme of the finale, in which the lovers, in close, heartbreaking harmony, accept their fate and bid each other farewell. We all ignored the silly libretto and heard the music as a powerful enactment of everything going on outside, everything we were feeling inside. The soprano and tenor wept openly. After the final note we put down our instruments and wept as well. Opening night was in three days. We all knew it would never happen.

The night the war began we took out the small paper packet he had passed me, shook out the pills onto the table, and counted them. Three would be enough, he had said, but just in case take four. That's four for me, I thought, four for her. But there were only seven. I decided to cut one of them in half. Would three and a half each be enough? Or should we just live?

The night the war began there were other things in the news: murders, environmental disasters, world premieres, athlete signings, plane crashes, market fluctuations, celebrity divorces, election campaigns, deaths, white collar crime, other wars. All would obsess the world for a few days, weeks, months, then fade into background noise and be forgotten as the world went about its business making more news. We wondered how

long before we'd be relegated to that background, one more discordant drone in that noise, fading into imperceptibility. Would we be heard?

The night the war began I decided I wasn't really a writer. What use were my words, anyone's words? Words couldn't stop anything or make anything go away. I wrote the instructor and thanked him for his guidance but told him I was dropping out of the course. He said he was sorry to see me go but understood. We'd have coffee sometime, maybe once the war was over.

The night the war began I made my way down into the subway as advised with a change of clothes, some food, the headlamp I'd bought for camping, and the book I was reading crammed into my backpack with a thin rolled-up camping mattress and a sleeping bag under my arm. The platform was already crowded but I found a spot beneath a vodka ad. I sat on my mattress with my back against the wall, ate some chocolate, and read my book. I was a couple hundred pages from the end and wondered if we'd still be down here when I finished it. I was too absorbed to notice when the man sat next to me. I'd put the book down to take a swig of water from my bottle when he spoke. "Amazing book," he said. "Don't you think?" I agreed and we talked about it, then talked about other books we loved and how much we would need our books now. When the lights went out we kept talking. I asked him if he was cold and unzipped my sleeping bag to wrap it around us both. All night we shared our warmth and our words. In the morning before we ventured out we exchanged numbers. "I hope we'll see each other again," I said. "I hope so too," he said. "Maybe once the war is over."



J. S. Ryan

Fall Back

My mother-in-law will be late to her own funeral, as they say. The woman's relationship with promptness is about what most of us have with poison ivy or great white sharks. My father-in-law accuses her of "circling," just wandering around, picking up this, straightening that, applying something to her face or wiping it off, changing shoes or clothes, none of it pertinent to the deal at hand, which is on-time departure. These accusations are almost always followed by bellowing exclamations of "for chrissakes!" For him, the runway is lit up bright and she's been given the all-clear, but...

My wife and I have gotten into it over this ourselves - usually on the way to a movie I'm keen to see - as she seems to have inherited the tardy gene from her mother. But we never go twelve rounds the way her folks do.

My father-in-law is a Marine, as in once a Marine (a *long* time ago; now he sells insurance), always a Marine. In even the mellowest of circumstances, he's all about mustering and showing up early. Countless extended-family vacations have ended in tears and acrimony because, even with no deadline and nothing whatsoever awaiting our arrival back home, the man will pace back and forth, frothing, shouting orders and insults, treating everyone no matter their age as naughty recalcitrant six-year-olds.

One Easter morning in Massachusetts with snow still on the ground, my father-in-law opened the door of his idling Cadillac, leaned in, and pressed his ungloved hand against the horn for a good fifteen seconds. Birds burst up from the trees and doors flew open up and down the suburban street. Oblivious, or way past caring, he stomped the driveway into packed submission, cold air puffing white out of his red-raged face. Easter brunch wasn't for another two hours, and we were only an hour away from the meet-up at Aunt Linda's, but he could not abide the "circling" he knew was going on back inside the house. As a dutiful son-in-law, my job was to shut up and go along with the program, so I gave the old man and his Caddy a wide berth and soldiered on, freezing my ass off, my membership in the punctual platoon offering threadbare comfort.

She was late getting to the gate at Logan Airport for United Flight 175 and so did not board her plane, the one that soon after flew into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. My father-in-law kept the paper

copy of his wife's plane ticket on the fridge with a *Semper Fi* magnet. He didn't really retreat, but he eased up his tirades on her dilatory nature.

One night, weeks later, early October of 2001, the two of us sit together in his den with our after-dinner Sambuca, and he tries to explain the military's Article 86 to me, the one about not showing up, the failure to go to an appointed place of duty. It seems important to him that I understand. He lays his hand gently on my knee, his eyes staring down at the carpet between us as if from a great height. He needs a new word, he tells me. He just can't bring himself to say "circling" anymore.



Bill Camp

Introverts Unite

Banishment, blacklist,
The cold shoulder,
And the silent treatment
Have little consequence
To the introvert.
Like kryptonite to Batman,
A silver bullet to a vampire,
A wooden stake to heart of a werewolf,
Or a forearm to the chest
Of Andre the Giant,
They have no desired effect.
In fact, at times,
Banishment is a relief.
Because now we can spend time
Doing what we *really* want to do.



Zary Fekete

The Tower

Elaine slowly turned the pages, her eyes flicking across the words. *"I've just got time to look at the tower"* Caroline now said aloud, and she put the guide book back in the pigeon hole under the dash-board and drove carefully along the gentle curves until she came to the fork for Florence on the left. On the top of the little hill to the right stood a tall round tower.

Elaine imagined the woman in the story looking up at the tower in the distance. As Elaine read the short story, she unconsciously rubbed her palms with her fingertips, trying to imagine the feel of the stone wall which Caroline would soon feel when she began to climb the tower's steps. Elaine felt like she was there. She could imagine breathing the Italian air. She felt she knew Caroline's breathless energy, her eagerness to climb the tower and impress her husband; that she had finally done something on her own.

"What did you say?" Elaine looked up from her book.

Katie was staring at her, the book dangling from her hand. Katie glanced from Elaine to Megan on the opposite sofa. Megan looked supremely bored, already having closed the book and begun to examine her nails. "This story was so dull," Katie said. "Right?" Megan nodded and snapped her gum.

Elaine looked back at the page. She had read the story twice already. She liked it immensely. She already decided to read it again tonight. But why did she like it? It was difficult for her to make her thoughts come out in words.

"It's not dull, I don't think," Elaine said. "Sort of cautious, perhaps. This woman in the story...Caroline...she wants to...to finally impress her husband. All he's done since they arrived in Italy is show off what he knows and talk in circles around her."

"Can you imagine visiting Italy," Megan interrupted, sprawling out on the couch. "Oh!" she sat up quickly again and pulled out her phone, turning to Katie. "Have I sent you this video yet? There's a woman I've been following. She posts about where she travels. She must be rolling in it." She held up her phone for Katie to see. Immediately a

woman's voice on the phone began talking very quickly. Pulsing music played in the background.

Katie gawked. "Oh, my God!" she said, pulling out her own phone and crossing to Megan's sofa. "Here. Let me show you one. Get a load of this rich bitch!"

The two friends dissolved into laughter. Their copies of the book slid from their laps onto the floor as they continued to tap through their phones and chatter to each other.

Elaine looked at them. Then she bent her head and looked back at her book. Her mind was still with the woman in the story. Who was she? Did she like being in Italy? Did she love her husband? Elaine wished she was there at that moment with the woman, staring up at the tower. She wanted to put her own foot on the first step and to begin to climb. She wanted to feel the blood pump in her legs and heart as she mounted the stairs. She imagined breathing the cool air of the stone tower as she went higher and higher. What would it feel like to step from that last step out onto the platform surrounding the tower and see the entire countryside unfold before her?

She looked up. Katie and Julie had moved into the kitchen and were pouring themselves more wine. Their books carelessly lay on the floor where they had forgotten them.

Elaine carefully put her bookmark in her book. She stood and moved to the front window. As she stepped away from the book she stepped out of the tower's world and back into her own. She slowly felt Italy fading away. She was back in Katie's living room as she had been when she arrived at the book club an hour ago. An ordinary housewife in small American town. She sighed as she stared out the window. All the houses in the cul-de-sac looked the same. Every driveway was identical.

She looked out the window waiting for a few more moments to pass until she could offer an excuse to leave. She hated these times. Not the book club. She loved that. The book club was her weekly escape. It was the before and after times she dreaded. The awful walk from the car up the driveway to the house, knowing she'd be stuck in small talk for...how long? Fifteen minutes? Thirty? She couldn't do it very well. She didn't know how to follow the trains of thought. Who went where this weekend. Who ate at which new place. Why the food was so awful. Who to follow on her phone. She didn't even know what half of the apps were that they talked about.

She glanced back at the kitchen. She really wanted to return to the story but she could tell Katie and Julie were already done for the evening. The rest of the time would be spent comparing and preening.

Elaine was about to announce her departure when she happened to glance out the backyard window. She gasped.

The yard was gone. There was no neighborhood at all. What she saw instead was a stone edifice rising up before her on the top of the rugged hill. Evening sunshine streaked across the sky. She glanced back into the house. Inside the living room was still there. But when she looked back outside... It was Italy. It was the tower.

Without thinking what she was doing Elaine stepped to the back door and opened it. Wet wind blew across her face. The air smelled different. Older. A road led down to the left (*To Florence*, she thought) and a path led up to the tower on the right.

She looked back toward the kitchen. Julie and Katie were still talking. She looked back out. The sun was just touching the distant horizon. The tower cast a long shadow across the Italian road.

Elaine closed her eyes for a moment. She stepped out of the house. Instantly Katie and Julie's voices were gone. Instead, she heard birds from the trees surrounding the hill. Down in the valley she saw a fox run by. She looked up at the tower. It was tall, its rough stone stood out against the blue sky.

She stepped towards it.



Steve Parker

All About Me

This is my autofiction written specifically for these fourteen people seated here. It is all about me, so if anyone sees themselves as a character, it's purely coincidental.

[Facing Gary] When you give someone a pair of wings, the first thing they normally do is not to fly away but to slap you in the face with their new wings. Then they fly. They fly away.

[Facing the group] But that's okay. It's just the way things are. I am selfish. I am self-centered. Lazy. Every person I have ever met shares these qualities with me.

There are moments, however.

[Facing Sarah] I can be encouraging, welcoming, and courageous, my heart is in my smile its warm.

[Facing Angie] At times I might be strong in my clarity, and intelligent enough not to need to prove my brilliance. You'll wonder what else about me.

[Facing Matt] And maybe only my eyes are visible. Interior and supporting, I can be grounded so deeply that the bottoms of my toes sometimes feel little Chinese feet dancing rhythms on them. Nada, pues nada.

[Facing Emily] It happens, now and again, that my brashness and failed attempts at rudeness cover the softness in my heart. Scar tissue, yes, but without the determination to retaliate. Maybe a little proud of it.

[Facing the group] I am selfish and self-centered. But that's okay. It is human.

[Facing Kandice] There are days I even feel an inner beauty. It is a love I want to share. It is a love I have to share. You can see my grace.

[Facing Mark] - I can't hide a sometimes-inconvenient kindness because those are the materials I build upon. The materials I am built upon. My foundation.

[Facing Rachel] - It might be necessary to listen more closely, but if you do you might often come to know a tender giving fairness. A negotiated emotion without limitations. More worthy than I can admit.

[Facing Pat] Oh, often the lights may for a moment dim from some unknown, direct energy, a clarity I might offer if your wiring is accepting. And acceptable.

[Facing Brittany] - And perhaps not frequently enough, I could deliver to you a soft intellectualism to help you along on your way. I can be surprising.

[Facing the group] I am selfish and self-centered. But that's okay. It is human.

[Facing Justin]- People can't honestly deny that I might say things elevating. Elevating: sporting goods fifth floor; metaphors and similes next stop. Watch the doors. I am irreplaceable, and you know it.

[Facing Noelle] - You know it as well as everyone else. If you take the time to look, you might see a sort of brilliance, shining hopes offered and delivered without charge. Hope is a noun and that's why you love me.

[Facing Elise] - And just be amazed if you consider it - who else keeps pace with quantum entanglements, so fast in two places simultaneously, and everyone can go along for the ride - if you wish - if you can keep up.

[Facing Katherine] - If you are patient for a moment, you could see me uncertain. It's not sign language; my hands just speak along with me. I might work hard because I really want you to see my lights shine outwardly.

[Facing the group] It's all about me. I am selfish, self-centered. That's okay. That's human. Maybe I can't be a writer - I don't drink and I'm a terrible speller. Bucklist goal number one is to be graded,

[Facing Gary, again] Yes graded, with acceptable marks in human-ness, credit for humane-ness, active as a portion of humanity.

And then fly. Fly away.

Tremain Xenos

The Masterpiece

Naoya Sano's photographs were what lured me back to Japan. He was the only friend with whom I'd stayed in contact after my year of high school in Himeji, and he'd landed a job to Kyoto just as I was making up my mind to try a career in painting. He must've known the effect his snapshots would have on me. Those cypress and cedar temple gates, those groves of gnarled trees, those ponds obscured by ponderous boulders—how could I resist? No sooner had I finished my undergraduate studies than I was on the plane, ready to set up my studio in a penthouse facing the Kamo River.

I was dizzy with nostalgia. I lugged my easel to every temple garden and filled my sketchbooks with the storefront scenes and black ceramic fish adorning tiled roofs. When Obon came around I moved among the crowds, around the bustling stands where red banners advertised *takoyaki*, *okonomiyaki*, and too-foamy beer in plastic cups. After the fireworks I holed myself up in my studio to replicate the hues of pink and violet from the girls' kimonos and the honeyed tint that splashed the sidewalks from the swaying lanterns.

I introduced myself at local galleries but, understandably, none were interested. I got one commission to paint a sign, but otherwise I was free to experiment. I wanted to tease something magical out of Kyoto the way Brian Froud did from the English countryside. For weeks I struggled to complete a series of canvases depicting the city as a stone white dreaming goddess, moonlight on her violet eyelids. I hoped that by perhaps the hundredth try, they might look the way I meant them.

But a boy can only languish so long in abject frustration, and Naoya knew every bar in town.

It was in a place called Dice—one of those caverns with subdued track lights and pockmarked ceilings—that he introduced me to a sad-eyed bartendress he addressed as "Ayu-chan." She gave me an evening's education in single malts and blended whiskies, and opened a door to the world of sake. The furrows in her frail hands said she was older than we were, but I couldn't guess how much.

Several days later she called out to me on the street and was amused to no end that I didn't recognize her with a cigarette between

two bony fingers, a paper coffee cup clutched in the other hand, and half her face obscured by hair cascading down from underneath a baseball cap. She toyed with me by suddenly speaking English, after having spoken nothing but Japanese that night at Dice. She said speaking English made her feel free.

She wanted me to help her find English books at the prefectural library. “Whenever you’re not working.”

“I’m just here to paint,” I said.

I added *Ayumi Shikagari* to the contacts in my mobile phone. She wiped her own screen on her jeans and I glimpsed a photo of her own cheek pressed against another woman’s, their shadowed faces framed by a neon heart.

She arrived at the library with a page of notes on the books she’d need in order to talk whisky and sake in English. In the middle of the stacks she stumbled on a guide to brewing *nihon-shu*, and her face lit up at the spreads of workers hauling buckets up scaffolding and stirring the giant wooden vats. She’d wished she could do the same but, “I’m too weak. I’m woman.”

From the look of it a heftier woman could probably have done it well enough, but Ayumi stood a head shorter than me and couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred pounds. Already buckling under an armload of books, she piled on some best-selling novels I’d never heard of. Mishima was the only Japanese novelist I’d read, albeit in translation, but I said *The Sound of Waves* was the most romantic book I’d ever read.

Ayumi wouldn’t hear it.

“He was gay,” she said, in a derisive tone that, considering the implication of the picture on her phone, I found surprising.

“And that’s why you don’t like him?”

“No,” she sighed. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then who do you like?”

“Nietzsche,” she said. “I read all of his books in junior high school.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Because I had no friends.”

“Well, you’ve got one now.”

“Who?”

“Me.”

She laughed. She had plenty of friends, of course. Not least of whom was the one on her phone—who, it turned out, was even more picturesque in person.

As soon as I’d found a gallery foolish enough to showcase my work, I headed to Dice before they opened for the evening, ducked under the steel

door and bounded up the steps with a stack of flyers in my hand. Ayumi stood polishing glasses behind the bar, her friend on a stool before her with careless clips half-swallowed in her chestnut hair and her body swaddled in white fleece and a camel skirt, and single lambskin shoe dangling off her toe. Ayumi stiffened when she saw me. Nor was I eager to close the distance, knowing my brushes would never do justice to the way the lamplight turned her skin to porcelain and the bun of her hair to onyx.

Her friend didn't give me much more than a blasé "*Nishida Kumiko desu*" as she snubbed out her cigarette. But after a few quick murmurs in too-fast Kyoto-ben, Ayumi said they'd both come to the opening.

Arm in arm, they came up the gallery steps. I welcomed them with little paper cups of coffee at the counter. Ayumi breathed "*oishii*" through the steam from the cup in her gracile hands and stood close enough to me that I could see the tiny lines around her eyes and catch the barest phantom of her scent: something like lilacs mingled with the coffee on her breath and the city clinging to her clothes.

Kumiko's phone buzzed. She hurried outside and was back a moment later, just to say she had to leave. Ayumi gave a downcast nod, but she agreed to stay with me for a round or two through the macedoine of artists and visitors. When we came back to where we'd started she stood with her back to the window, sipping daintily and narrowing her eyes at the girls I'd met a week before.

"She's pretty," she said of Wakana, a half-English girl with green-streaked hair and moles on her cheeks like the stars of Scorpio, and, "So is she," of Marina, a stately Russian with dense blonde curls falling to the middle of her back.

"I can introduce you," I said. "If you'd like."

Ayumi shook her head and smiled shyly. She dropped her empty cup in the receptacle and thanked me for the coffee: "Maybe it'll help with my hangover."

I walked her to the car park, but we'd scarcely turned the corner when she ducked behind a telephone pole.

"You see that bald guy?" she said, when I asked what on earth she was doing. "The guy with no hair?"

I could make out a calvous head and frangible nose among the crowd in the colonnade. "Do you know him?"

When he disappeared she straightened up. "He came into Dice and gave me his phone number. He kept saying, 'Why don't you call? Why don't you call?' Typical American, you know?"

I smirked, but didn't say anything.

"I have to tell you," she said, "I have prejudice against Americans."

I didn't say so, but it wasn't hard to see why. I'd been watching from my window all summer as the raucous droves with accents like my own ploughed through the streets at all hours, obstructing traffic and attracting stifled but palpable opprobrium. Wishing to distance myself from the likes of them at any cost, I avoided every bar but Dice. I sipped *nihon-shu* alone in my studio, imagining how Ayumi would drink it: the subtle parting of her lips, her fingertips on the bottom of her *choko*. It was her face I had in mind every time I tried to complete a painting of the moonlit goddess. Something inspired me to try self-portraits, and then I realized how much I disliked my own nose. Although I appreciated the physique I'd gained by four years on the lightweight crew, a half dozen studies were sufficient to prove to me that nothing I could create, and nothing I could become, would approach the beauty I saw in Ayumi and in Kumiko. I staggered among my unfinished canvases, tossed them in a tattered pile and finished off the bottle.

One December evening, Naoya showed me my way of drinking sake was all wrong.

He took me with his friends to a bar near Honnoji Temple so they could school me in the art of sipping. We poured each other one *choko* of *atsukan* after another. Once the room was tilting, Naoya let it slip that Ayumi had a birthday coming up the following day: *Twenty-nine*, he mouthed, as though confiding a dirty secret.

I was twenty-three. I was naïve enough to think a woman's character could be deduced by her reaction to my preferred brand of profundity. I bought a copy of *Songs of Leonard Cohen* and snuck into Dice before opening time.

She was alone this time. She recoiled when I told her why I'd come: "Now you'll know my age."

"I already do," I said. "Sano-kun told me."

Ayumi stared at the package in my outstretched hand, but didn't take it. "People who are older are supposed to care for people who are younger."

"People who are bigger and stronger are supposed to care for those who are smaller and weaker."

She smirked at the cover of the CD. "He looks like you."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or what." I'd always wondered if Janis Joplin really did tell Cohen he was ugly when they were in bed together.

Ayumi followed me out the door for a pre-shift cigarette, and proffered her open pack to me. Not knowing the Japanese expression, I told her in English that she'd corrupt me.

"What does it mean?"

"That it's a bad habit."

"I have to quit," she nodded. "I have to stop drinking too. My doctor told me. I have liver disease."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes."

That's when I asked her to have dinner with me. She looked shocked, so I apologized. "I know you think I'm too young."

"You *are* young!"

But after some equivocation, she agreed to come.

Just before the appointed date, though, I got a message on my voice mail: "This is Ayumi. I'm sorry. I cannot go." Click.

I tried to paint, but for two weeks Kyoto did nothing but frown and rain on me. I searched in vain for inspiration in the temple gardens, in the fallen leaves that buttressed the tree trunks, and in the glaze of melted sleet on the old stone walls. I was oppressed by the contrast between the hardy leaves that cradled the low-hanging berries, and by the rufous maples rendered exquisite by their etiolation. I grew homesick for the blizzards of New England, nostalgic even for those frigid mornings on the Connecticut River that had been the most arduous of my college life. A deracinated outsider, I stripped to my shirt sleeves and wandered Kyoto's streets, feeble wet snow assaulting my head and my trouser cuffs caked with dirty slush. I idled away my days at café windows, watching the bicycles veer deftly around the pedestrians in a wash of grey and beige. I rode trains without destination. Pelted by half-hearted mallets of watery ice, the windows were scrolls of endless brown houses with black roofs. The only colour left in the world came from the odd glove in the crowd or a shrub languishing on a terrace. The train cars remained eternally warm, bright, cosy, soundless, and indifferent, every passenger slumped thewlessly over his device.

On the first clear morning, I blundered into the gallery to be told Ayumi had been in asking after me.

I called her right away. She happened to be downtown. I asked her to meet me for coffee.

She wore the same baseball cap she had that night in front of the convenience store, but with no cascade of onyx hair spilling out from underneath

it. We brought our takeaway cups to the park, and found a bench at the edge of the pond.

"You caught me without makeup," she said.

"You don't need makeup," I said.

"I do! I'm ugly."

I studied her pink eyes circled by amaranthine shadows, and stopped just short of telling her she was beautiful.

"Have you every betrayed anyone?" she asked.

Too callow to take the hint, I asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing," she faltered. "I fought with my friend. I was crying before."

"Is it Kumiko?"

She nodded.

"She's beautiful," I said.

"You don't know her."

"You love her, don't you?"

She nodded again.

I gazed toward the pond and envied the swan his detachment as he glided between the lilies. Then Ayumi doffed her cap, grinned wide and shook out her newly bobbed head, and I smiled despite myself.

"I like short hair," she said. "I like your hair."

"Even though I look like Leonard Cohen?"

She laughed. "I like your nose too."

"I like your nose."

"It's flat."

"And your chin," I said. "And your delicate jaw and your high cheekbones."

Ayumi sat staring at her empty cup. She pressed her unpainted fingernails into her palms. I took them in my hand to give her my warmth. She didn't pull away.

"Can I ask you something?" She paused. "Why do you want to have dinner with me?"

I shrugged. "Is it so strange?"

"Not strange, just..." She looked into the sodden turf as if hoping to dig her words from it. "You never asked me..."

A forelock slipped out from behind her ear. She took her hand from mine to tuck it back.

"Hey," she whispered. "Thank you for the present. I'm sorry I didn't say it before."

"It was nothing."

"It was something. I listen to it a lot."

The wisp of hair came loose again. I tucked it back for her. She flashed me a smile and backed slightly, almost imperceptibly, away.

"I'm sorry," I said in English.

"Why you're always saying sorry!" she demanded.

"I'm making you uncomfortable."

"It's not that."

"There's something wrong."

Ayumi was silent.

"Is it me?"

"It's a lot of things. You too."

"I don't mean to be pushy."

"What's 'pushy'?"

"You know." I gave her shoulder a shove. "Like the bald guy."

She laughed. "You think too much."

"I know."

She looked into my eyes in a way that said she hoped they'd convey everything that needed to be said. I saw two jaded melancholy orbs the color of oolong tea, but they didn't speak my language.

When she promised again to spend an evening with me, my inspiration returned. I struggled to sketch the indistinct blossoms pullulating on still-naked trees. I paced across crimson bridges over rivers dyed an inimitable smaragdine, contemplating lichen-mottled *ishibumi* etched with kanji too stylized to decipher.

Not that I really expected her to show. I waited fifteen minutes at the station, then telephoned.

"I'm sorry!" she spluttered. "I'm coming!"

Past sunset, a tiny unpainted fingernail came tapping on the café window. There on the other side of the glass stood my muse, in all her bobbed-headed glory, a loose goldenrod cardigan hanging like drapes down to an ankle-length periwinkle skirt, the scuffed toes of penny loafers peeking out beneath the folds.

Out of the brightness and chaos of the station and into the wide caliginous streets, she said she was nervous beside me. She said it again when I pulled out her chair at the restaurant. She ordered Amontillado and her eyes held me like Fortunato's chains. By the light of the candles I saw no morsel touch her lips, no trace of lipstick on the crystal. I looked away in defeat. She stared until I held her gaze, and then she looked down and away.

We strolled into the chill of night, along the riverbank where the cypress groves threw themselves blackly into an iron sky. Shivering, Ayumi stuck close to my side. I closed my hand over her icy fingers. She withdrew to light a cigarette, then grinned. "I'm bored. Dance for me."

"Tempting, but I'd need a partner."

"My life is so boring! Work, cook, sleep, that's all!"

I told her about my struggles with painting and how nothing was ever close to right, and about the end of my visa when I'd have to return to America. She listened in silence, the colour washed from her face by the febrile light from the pachinko parlours.

I reached for her hand again. With her cigarette in the other, she asked, "Do you get a lot of attention from the girls at the gallery?"

"Do you get a lot of attention from the men at the bar?"

"They harass me," she said. "I cursed a man out the other day."

"What did he do?"

"He put his hands on my body!"

"Wasn't anyone watching?"

She shrugged. "That's how Japanese men treat Japanese women."

I was pretty sure Naoya would never treat anyone that way, but I didn't say so.

Suddenly Ayumi smiled. "Sometimes they bring me flowers."

"I can see why."

She looked down to watch our hands. "I'm evil," she said at last.

"You're not evil."

"I did something terrible."

"How bad could it be?"

She squeezed my hand. "I really like you a lot, you know."

"And?"

"And that's why...I can't say it."

I released her hand when she crushed out her cigarette, and waited.

"I think you can guess," she said.

"No," I said. "I really can't."

"It's no big deal, really."

"Then just tell me," I said. "Please."

At length she met my eyes and said, "I'm married."

I suddenly felt Cohen had presaged my life with that line about *a girl across the sea, her hair the black that black could be*, but I realized just as quickly that I'd got two verses mixed up.

"You look older now," Ayumi said.

"I feel older," I said.

For a second a faint smile crossed her face.

That's when the scene took shape in my mind: A pale doe bleeding under a net cast by some unseen hunter, and another of her kind waiting for her in the hibiscus. I'd paint her as I saw her from the distance, where I could never truly know which of her wounds were from the hunter's hand, and which she'd borne before even he found her. In the end I'd keep that canvas far too long, always convinced it was my masterpiece. Plenty of my other works would earn me far more praise and money, but for a long time none would turn out quite so close to the way I saw them in my mind.

I drew Ayumi to me, but she kept her arms limp at her sides, so I let go. Then she clutched my wrist and said, "Stay with me." So I stayed with her until the night was morning. I told her about the year I'd spent in Himeji, she told me her name had been Nohara before it was Shikagari, and I confessed I still didn't understand Nietzsche.

The rays of dawn crept up above the skyline. I walked Ayumi to the taxi ranks, watched her climb in, and waved goodbye as the car rolled off into the darkness.



Contributors

Angela Acosta holds a Ph.D in Spanish from The Ohio State University and has taught Spanish language and composition courses as well as upper-level courses on twentieth-century Spain and the Franco dictatorship. Her work has appeared in *The Acentos Review*, *Copihue Poetry*, and *Apparition Lit*.

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Daniel Barry currently works as the librarian at Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. He's had poetry accepted by *Corpus Callosum Press*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *the Ignatian Literary Journal*, and *Calla Press*. When he's not writing, you may find him meditating.

Bartek Boryczka was three years old when he moved with his parents from Krakow, Poland to Eau-Claire, Wisconsin. He has a bachelor's in psychology, lives in Milwaukee, and works as a care coordinator for refugees. He is a voracious reader and writer. Reading is his greatest addiction and writing is his life.

Vicki Boyd has spent her career in education and publishing. She owes her writing life to Mrs. Williford, first grade teacher, who coached her in composing her first sentence, something Mrs. Williford dictated. When Vicki added embellishments, Mrs. Williford delighted in that, enough to set Vicki writing for life.

Bill Camp's poetry has appeared in the *Alternative Deathiness*, *Teach.Write.*, *Lite Lit One*, and *New Author's Journal*. He has also published short stories in *Madame Gray's Poe-Pourri of Terror*, *Teach. Write.*, *Page and Spine*, and *parABnormal Digest*. He teaches college writing courses at Camp Community College and Norfolk State University.

Vincent Casaregola teaches literature, film, and writing at Saint Louis University. He teaches at every level from first year to graduate, including composition and creative writing. He began teaching writing in 1977. Lately, he has been writing a lot about illness, injury, and the impacts of gun violence.

Gospel Chinedu is a Nigerian poet, an ASSON student from College of Health Sciences, Okofia. He tweets @gonspoetry and enjoys playing chess and listening to music when he can. His work appears in various online publications. He recently won second place in a contest sponsored by *Blurred Genre*.

Kaylee Condie has always been encouraged to read and write as much as possible, so she has. Every English teacher has had a profound impact on her. In fact, it was her high school creative writing teacher that gave her the inspiration for her first real piece of fiction.

Peter Crow, member of the North Carolina Writers' Network, taught composition for forty years, mostly at Ferrum College (Virginia), where he designed an interdisciplinary curriculum. Consequently, he won a national teaching award and directed four National Endowment for the Humanities institutes for college and university teachers.

John Davis taught high school English for forty years. He is a polio survivor and the author of *Gigs* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Terrain.org*. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea.

Sean Des Vignes is a writer from Brooklyn. He is an adjunct professor at Saint Peters University. Courses he has taught include English Composition II, Poetry, and Poetry Writing. Saint Peter's has a diverse, underprivileged student body, which allows Sean to introduce writers of various, relatable backgrounds.

H. L. Dowless is a national & international academic/ ESL Instructor. His latest publications have been two nonfiction books with Algora Publishing, a novel, and various other print and online publications: *Leaves of Ink*, *CC&D Magazine*, *Short Story Lovers*, *The Fear of Monkeys*, and *Frontier Tales*.

Danielle Fedrigo is a student at the University of Rochester studying English literature and American Sign Language. She aspires to be a high school English teacher in her native Michigan and hopes to inspire her students to read and write passionately as her instructors have inspired her.

Zary Fekete teaches composition and short stories at a homeschool co-op in rural Minnesota. Last year he taught the short story "The Tower" by Marghanita Lanski to his students. He decided to take a leap of fancy and imagine another story inspired by "The Tower".

Cory Fosco has taught creative writing as an adjunct professor and recently taught his first online class to a group of vision-impaired students. As a teacher, Cory is always amazed at the level of dedication his students have to themselves and others which inspires him in many ways.

Michael S. Glaser is a Professor Emeritus at St. Mary's College of Maryland and served as Poet Laureate of Maryland from 2004 - 2009. He now co-leads

retreats which embrace poetry as a means of self-reflection and personal growth. He now lives in Hillsborough, NC. (<http://www.michaelsglaser.com>)
Jane Hertenstein is the author of over 90 published stories, creative non-fiction, and blurred genre. She has also published a YA novel, *Beyond Paradise*, and a non-fiction project, *Orphan Girl: The Memoir of a Chicago Bag Lady*, which garnered national reviews. Her latest book is *Cloud of Witnesses* from Golden Alley Press. She teaches a workshop on flash memoir and blogs at <http://memoirouswrite.blogspot.com/>

Barbara Schilling Hurwitz returned to the middle school language arts classroom after a twenty-year hiatus while raising her own children. During the next 20 years, she most enjoyed building children's executive functioning and writing skills. Now retired, she has found a new voice through creative writing.

Juyanne James has lived and taught expository and creative writing on the collegiate level in New Orleans, Louisiana, for twenty years. The submission speaks to her desire to help students tap into their creativity, using ekphrastic writing assignments.

Colin Ian Jeffery is a modernist poet with a strong reaction against war, tyranny, and oppression of the truth. Unlike some other poets in the modernist movement, he has a profound faith in God. Colin writes from Caterham Surrey, England.

Anne Karppinen has been teaching writing—both academic and creative—for over ten years. Most of her students are completing their English studies at the Open University of Jyväskylä, Finland; thus, in addition to the more formal areas of writing, she is also teaching aspects of language and culture.

Craig Kirchner thinks of poetry as hobo art. He loves storytelling and the aesthetics of paper and pen. Nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize, he has a book of poetry, *Roomful of Navels*. In his sophomore year of High School, Mr. Johnson inspired him to understand the spirituality of writing.

Janet McCann is a poet who taught at Texas A&M for 47 years. Her most recent book is *Life List*, Wipf and Stock, 2020.

Keith Mulopo is from London, England. He is of Congolese descent. His English teacher in sixth form inspired him to write poetry consistently after he set an exercise for the class to write a WWI sonnet. He has been published in anthologies such as the *Morocco Bound Bookshop's* anthology.

Duarte N. Nobrega was born in Madeira, Portugal. He holds a BA in languages and business studies from the University of Madeira. Also a screenwriter, novelist and poet, Duarte's fiction has appeared in *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight Literary Magazine* and *Teach Write*. and soon to be published in the *Birmingham Arts Journal*.

Steve Parker, retired, has gone back to graduate school for the love of writing. He centers many writings around the people and events in the classroom. This current flash fiction is a parting soliloquy to one precious class.

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Daniel Paton has had short fiction published in multiple anthologies and online literary journals and also writes screenplays and stage plays. Having recently completed his Creative Writing MA, he looks to work on new projects including a debut novel.

Martha Patterson's short story collection *Small Acts of Magic* was published in 2021. Her other work has been published in more than 20 anthologies and journals; her plays have been produced in 21 states and eight countries. She lives in Boston, surrounded by her books, radio, and laptop.

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Jose Joel Robles teaches religious studies to senior high students at Xavier University - Ateneo de Cagayan in the Philippines. He uses some of his spare time in writing. His pieces have appeared in *Teach. Write. Anak Sastra 47, 50 -Wordstories*, as well as other publications.

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Stephen Schwei is a Pushcart-nominated Houston poet with Wisconsin roots, published in *Wax Poetry & Art*, *Beneath the Rainbow*, and others, along with one volume of poetry, *Bluebonnet Whispers*. A gay man with three grown children and four wonderful grandchildren, he worked in Information Technology most of his life. www.stephenschwei.com

Nolo Segundo, pen name of retired teacher L.j.Carber, 76, became a published poet in his 8th decade in over 155 literary journals in 12 countries on 4 continents. A trade publisher has released 3 paperback collections: *The Enormity of Existence* [2020]; *Of Ether and Earth* [2021]; and *Soul Songs* [2022].

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Stephen Sossaman is professor emeritus of English at Westfield State University in Massachusetts, where he taught composition, creative writing, playwriting, and business writing. He is also the author of *Writing Your First Play* (Pearson) and numerous poems and stories published by *The Paris Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and others.

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Wil Michael Wrenn is a poet/songwriter living in rural Mississippi. His work has appeared in numerous publications, and he has published a book of poems. Wil Michael's experience with writing instruction was transformational and inspiring. It helped him to be a better writer and to write in other genres. <https://michaelwrenn.webstarts.com/>

Tremain Xenos has been teaching English composition at two universities in Japan's smallest and least productive prefecture for over a decade. Some of his recent stories can be read at *carte blanche*, *Propagule Magazine*, and *The Dillydoun Review*.

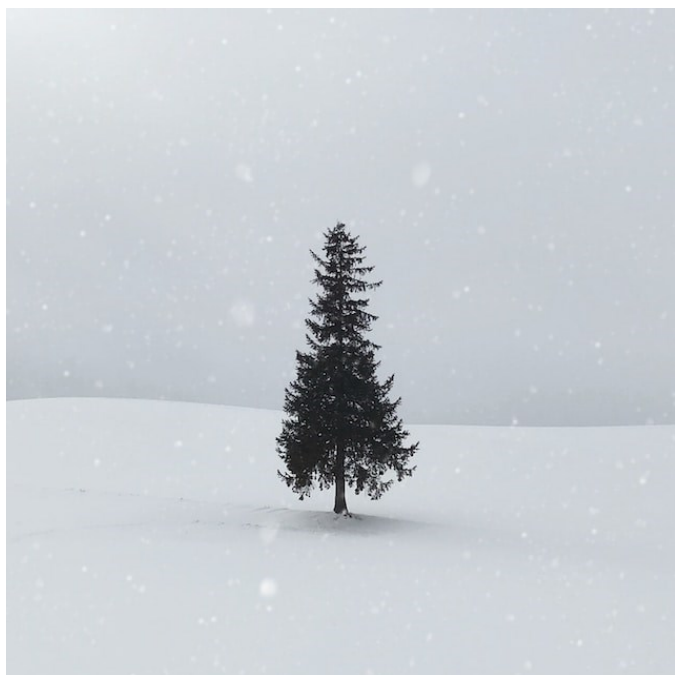


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Ken Cheung	3
Nicholas Ruiz	7
Takemaru Hirai	11
Aaron Burden	24
Dan Freeman	30
Aaron Burden	32
Alex Gherman	35
Mario Dobelm	45
Fadi al Shami	53
Renato Pozzi	55
Ricardo Gomez	60
S. Tsuchiya	69
Gabriel Garcia Morengo	82
Andre Benz	86
Marc Shadeg	89
K. S. Kyung	91
Brooke Davis	99
Aaron Burden	100
Greg Rosenke	103
Jim Ross (photo by author)	109
Artur Stanulevi	111
Sophie Laurent	118
Daniel Simon	133
Ian Schneider	135
Martin Adams	136
Dulcey Lima	139
Fabrice Villard	150
Seoyeon Choi	156