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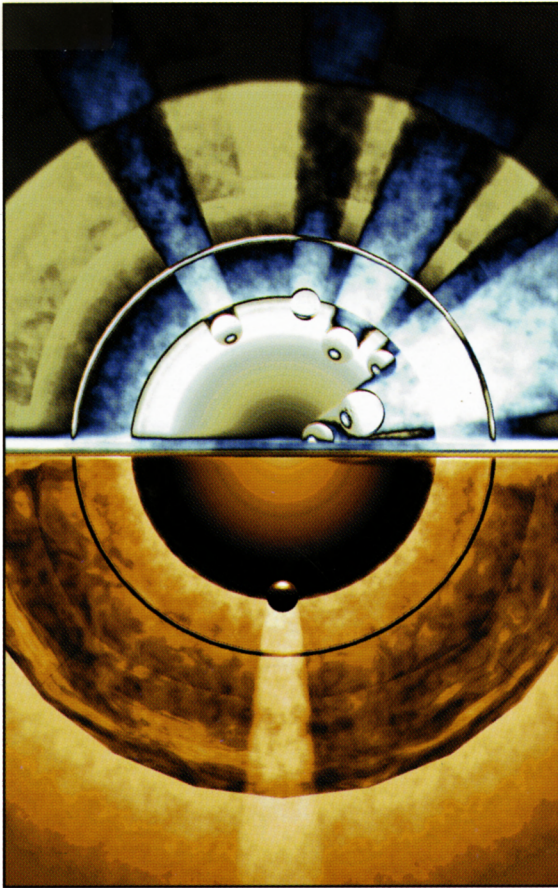
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Editor's Note

What is *Touchstone*? *The American Heritage Dictionary* provides two definitions of the word "touchstone."

touch•stone: 1. A hard black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one these metals with that of a standard alloy. 2. An excellent quality or example that is used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.

Each year *Touchstone* staff endeavor to publish a journal that includes diverse, quality writing. This year, we, again, received more good work than we could publish. I hope this exciting trend continues. In this issue, I am particularly pleased to include an interview with Patricia Hampl, made possible by the Flint Hills Literary Festival and the Beach Art Museum. We are fortunate to be connected to a network of professionals at K-State who care so much about the arts.

I'd like to thank this year's editors and readers for their time and commitment to creating a quality publication. I could not have asked for a more helpful, dedicated staff. And to all students who submitted to this year's journal, thank you for allowing us to showcase your work. Finally, I'd like to extend a special thanks to our faculty advisor, Jonathan Holden, as well as the KSU Fine Arts Council, KSU English Department and creative writing faculty for their continued support.

Interested readers can purchase copies of *Touchstone* at the national meeting of the Associated Writing Programs in Palm Springs, California, April 18-22, 2001, or subscribe through our website: <<http://www.ksu.edu/english/touchstone>>.

Jennifer Henderson
Editor In Chief

Mary Ann Wehler

Mason City Ladies' Sewing Circle

Fiddle fern hangs near corner porch column, scent
 of Honeysuckle suspends in air, swing sways
 at porch end, lemonade pitcher, glasses,
 sliced lemons, plated ice-box cookies set on
 wicker serving table, calico cat naps
 on railing crook, rainbow glints off cut glass framed
 in Grandmother Susan's mahogany front door,
 baskets of mending sit near rattan rockers,
 flashing in and out of fabric, needles spark
 like the bullfighters' sword, the Spanish dancer's
 stiletto heels. The sewing club murmurs,
 Ronnie's croup, Ellie's scars from pox, how
 their garden grows, soon pokeberry jelly time.
 Some quiet complaint how hard husbands' work at
 not working, and they sew. Heels and toes of
 socks woven in and out, knees of jeans, blue
 chambray elbows, christening gown buttons, fine
 stitches on collars of Sunday church-going dresses,
 the flour sacks are last,

pick up the sacks and sew hoods. The hoods fathers,
 husbands, and sons wear when they pound flaming
 crosses in yards at night. They sew hoods for sowers
 of corn fields in Iowa. With stopped up throats
 they sew hoods, murmur about the boy strung up
 in the willow, country road outside Mason City.
 For Don who sweeps the grocery store after school each
 day, Susan sews a hood. The grocer laughs with men
 who sit near the pot bellied stove, cold in May,
 laughs as they brag about a night they dragged that nigger
 roped behind their truck, left him by the river,
 served him right, opens the cash box hands the boy

a dime. Grandmother Susan, father used
 her name with a god-like reverence, he'd look at me
 and say no one could match my mother, she was
 a saint. Grandmother Susan saved her flour sacks,
 sewed my father's hood, placed on his head, carefully
 felt with fingers, so as not to hurt her first

born's eyes, marked with pins where to cut the sockets,
sewed the hood. Whose car did he ride in; who could
possibly catch him? His father, county sheriff
and game warden, threw his rifle alongside length
of rope, fishing gear, and the hoods in the trunk. Late
summer nights, too hot to sleep, Grandmother
Susan sits with her daughter on the porch swing,
they count fireflies, admire her moon flowers.
A familiar car drives by, filled with men and boys
wearing hoods, what's that caught in her throat as she
turns her child's head, *Look, the moon is full tonight.*

Tara Jill Ciccarone

The Wire Sculptor

With a handful of wires and a blinking red sign, the crazy wire sculptor's at it again. Alma hears he's fashioned a stone fountain with wire mermaids, flying flounder fish and a bronze sea horse. He's charging the public to see it, calling his kitchen a wire botanical garden. He's hanging the figure of a stick man, hands holding a telescope up to a glass eye, from the roof of the British museum. She's seen his flyers all over town. They paper the telephone poles orange, seem to blow out at her from around street corners. She pictures his eyes charged with the idea of twisting more wire, his palms scarred and callused like the tips of guitar players' fingers. Alma knows he's responsible for bending thin strips of metal, placing one more each night on the side of her street. There are twelve so far. He's resurfaced out of nowhere. Again.

She caught a glimpse of him running towards her down Orange Street on Sunday. She could hear the tinkling bells sewn into the hem of his denim jacket, the line of coat hangers scraping the sidewalk behind him. She's not going to fall for him again.

He twists and turns, and then, he is there again at her doorstep on Tuesday: the crazy wire sculptor.

He smells like wine at two p.m. It's like he's made of wire, shapeable bendable, able to blend into her porch rails and spring out in front of her. When she opens the door, she notices his tweed jacket too is sewn with bells. A blue bow-tie, bright like his eyes, shines at his throat.

She's about to take Emily to the park. She wonders what would have happened if he had rung the doorbell instead of just waiting there. She doesn't wonder if and how he knew she was home.

When she catches her breath, she turns into the house.

"Emily, why don't you go find your kite," she calls, even though she knows there is no wind in the park this day.

The wire sculptor stands and grins, and as if on cue, the generators click off and silence ices over the porch.

She tries not to acknowledge what he's wearing, but really, his clothes are strange. He should be wearing this suit in Boston a hundred years ago. He never dressed like this before. Behind her, Emily's shoes pound on the floor as she looks for the kite, but at the moment, Alma's eyes are drawn to this man's and held there as if by two glistening cords.

The wire sculptor takes his hand from behind his back and holds out a cube of glass, entwined in copper veins. A dragon fly sits, sus-

pended in the cube, as if frozen there. She thinks vaguely of gag gifts, plastic ice cubes with fake flies inside. He pushes this thing towards her.

“For you,” he says.

She tells herself she will not accept this gift. She is taking Emily to the park to look at spring flowers, not standing there swooning over a man made of wire. And truly, he does look more beautiful than ever in this old, too old but clean jacket and straight hair cut chin length, his blue eyes dazzling her, the pupils the size of the buttons on the jacket Emily wears in spring. The corner of his mouth twitches up, but the wire sculptor doesn’t smile.

She knows when he’s like this. She knows these bursts don’t last. She stands facing him on her porch. It’s one of the first spring days, and the sun licks shyly across her face. From somewhere, she hears birds. He steps closer and the smell of wine intrudes upon the day, clouding the scent of cut grass. This should be over.

Then, Emily is pushing herself between Alma’s legs, trailing kite string from the bedroom to the porch. Emily lets the kite fall onto the ground, and reaches for this thing the wire sculptor has made. Any other time, Alma would stand and wait, watching Emily commit this new, brave action with a stranger, but instead she snatches the dragon fly and holds it close to her chest. Better it be in her hands than in Emily’s two-almost-three-year-old fingers.

“I don’t know what to say,” she murmurs, and there she is swirling in the wire sculptor’s eyes. He grabs her hand and kisses it, and she can feel him making love to her right there on the porch. She knows the way he can touch her. His hands roam over her in her mind. His mouth. She shakes her head and looks at the porch boards. And then he is gone. Quickly, impossibly, because he should not be able to disappear in those clothes. But she lets him.

“We’d better put this thing in the house,” she says to Emily.

“Is that your friend?” Emily asks.

“I don’t know, Miss Baby. Let’s wind this kite string up.”

Alma stares at the dragon fly while Emily bunches the string up in her hands. When she lifts Emily, Alma has to lean into the child’s weight. She thinks absently that Emily feels more solid every day. This heavy Emily, this Emily with her hair halfway down her back, is the first version the wire sculptor has seen. As she wonders how Emily looked to him, Alma tightens her arms until Emily squirms. When they go back in, she lets the door slam behind them.

Later that day, she finds herself stealing glances out the window. She tells herself she’s making sure he’s not coming back, but really, she’s looking. And looking.



He comes back the next day with a stroller fashioned completely of wire. The wheels are made of thick steel cables, bent to circles and wound again and again with copper spokes. She can see he has made the seat and hood out of steel fibers that twist like wisteria. The body itself is made of a pattern of interlocking metal daisies. This time, he has knocked. She holds the door open a crack.

He seems decorated in his yellow suit jacket and tweed pants. She wants to ask him why he is dressing this way now, instead of in paint stained T-shirts and ripped up jeans. She wants to ask him everything, but she makes herself pretend she's not interested. And she shouldn't be. But why these clothes? Why this stroller? Why now after all this time?

This time, he smiles. He sweeps his arm grandly in front of the carriage.

"A pram," he says. "For our baby."

Alma's hands move to cover her stomach like caged birds suddenly let loose.

"You know that's not true," she says.

She closes the door gently and leans against it. She hears his shoes thud down the steps, and then, he is gone. She waits. There is a corner he will turn some place. When she is sure he has reached it, she opens the door, and drags the pram into the house.

He has fashioned hanging elephants from the visor. They suspend with long trunks and ears that stick out like airplane wings. He shouldn't know Emily loved elephants best. In the middle of the handle protrudes a silver key, and when she winds it a calliope tune draws Emily into the hall.

"Is that for me?" she asks. She pushes the elephants back and forth. "This is a really nice stroller," she says. She's wearing a Band-Aid on each arm just for fun. Her blonde hair, blonde like Alma's, blonde like John Luigi's, curls at her shoulders. Her nose turns upwards like John Luigi's, as if declaring she is not the wire sculptor's child.

"It's just to look at, honey." Alma tries to keep her voice smooth, but something inside of it shakes, and she realizes her chest and hands are trembling.

She pushes the pram into the kitchen and wedges it between the refrigerator and the counter. The space in the house expands around them, as if it's not her and Emily in their kitchen together anymore; the world roars in, with the wire sculptor spinning in the center. She can hear his voice in the calliope song. She wants to grab Emily in her arms, but she thinks about the day before on the porch, the way Emily wriggled when her grip tightened. Alma knows she's still shaking too

hard to pick her up.

“Let’s go for a walk, baby,” she says.

As she helps Emily get her shoes and socks on, the music keeps playing, even when they are on their way out the door.



Because they met in the fourth square, he said their love was victim of coincidence from the start. She knew eight streets cut the downtown area into a grid pattern called the nine squares. The ninth square had a bar named after it, but besides that, there was little reference to the squares around town. They were something people talked about when they talked about the town’s history. Alma could take out a map and count the spaces between the streets, four running north to south, and four running east to west, like a tic-tac-toe board with the boarders boxed in. But the wire sculptor talked about those squares more than anyone else Alma had ever met. He promised circumstances would always bring them together, and when it was over, Alma considered moving out of the nine squares and over to the East Rock neighborhood where the statue on the monument towered over quieter streets. She found out she was pregnant then, and stayed in the house on Orange Street. She told neither John Luigi nor the wire sculptor about the baby. She told herself there was not truth to the stories about the nine squares. Long ago, maybe when the masons had been in Connecticut, the grid pattern might have been important, but that story was too old to matter to her. She told herself she was not destined to live a life with the wire sculptor, and New Haven would not remember what they’d had. She lived in the seventh square, and that was that.

But the wire sculptor said he believed in the nine squares the fall they met under the thick smell of leaves and nutmeg. The wire sculptor then, and the wire sculptor now, but somewhere in the middle of it, she called him Matthew.

She met him at the News Stand on Chapel Street. She was scanning a photography magazine for amateur contests she could enter, when he came in twisting a phone cord around a hexagon of coat hangers. It scribbled in the air in front of him as he bent and cinched. He wore wire-rimmed glasses she would learn he had constructed himself. She tried not to look at him as the lines she was reading blurred. Then he was standing next to her, and when she breathed it felt like trying to unlodge a flock of the smallest brown birds from her chest.

“I want you to work harder than you’ve ever worked in your life,” he whispered.

She jammed the magazine back onto the shelf. How did he know she’d been trying to discipline herself, that she was twenty-four and needed to start taking her work seriously?

“What kind of thing is that to say to somebody?” she asked. She tried sound irritated.

“You’re a photographer,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Let me guess, all darkroom, no computer images.” The way he said it without raising his voice into a question made her wonder how it would feel to touch him, how his cheek with a light growth of stubble would feel on her hand, her lips.

“How do you know?”

“I can tell.”

It turned out, the wire sculptor could tell many things. Later, hours later, the hands that spent hours manipulating wire knew the secrets to her body at first touch.

“You know, there’s something to meeting in the nine squares,” he told her that night.

His sheets tangled at their feet. He had the window open, and the fall air curled around them. His thin fingers stroked delicately against the back of her neck, and he seemed to be made of something fine, like eyelashes or dusted wings. Things made to be held carefully in the hands. He smelled like clove cigarettes. The night had something clean about it that made her feel as if she had stepped out of her life and into a story.

“What do you mean?” she asked. She counted the squares in her head. York and State marked the top and bottom of the grid, and if College Street was the second street, then they had met in the fourth. It took a minute, but she could remember the order. She lived in the seventh, and his house was in the first.

“Some people say that when love happens in the nine squares, it’s especially fated. And if it breaks, the people will always be haunted by coincidences.”

“You think?” she asked. She detached herself slightly at the mention of love. Who was he anyway?

“It’s magic,” he promised. “And New Haven doesn’t forget it.”

He was still the wire sculptor then, and she was in bed with him. She felt vaguely aware that this would not have happened in any other month, but that October had drawn them together to merge and blend against the coming cold. Later in the fall, the cold tended to focus her inside of herself. The weather was to blame, not the street pattern.

“It gets sad, doesn’t it,” he said.

“What does?”

“Being alone a lot.”

“Are you alone a lot?” She posed the question carefully.

“Probably as much as you are.”

She thought about the vague periods in her darkroom, walking

around alone taking pictures, always taking pictures. Often she felt like taking the pictures kept her company, like her art was another person that sometimes surprised her. She listened to him breathe and didn't ask the question that ran through her head. How could he tell she was alone a lot?

They spent all their time together. She found herself working quickly in the darkroom and rushing to his house to cook, or eat take-out with him. They slept together every night and the vague feeling she sometimes had rarely hit her.

He gave her irises even though they were out of season, and she tried to remember having told him she liked them best. He could read her mind, it seemed. He made her favorite tomato and pesto on sesame bagels, and bought the chocolates she often craved.

"How did you know?" she asked when he surprised her with a book of photographs by Meatyard.

"Magic," he said.

The clean feeling did not last, but the sensation that she was living inside a story remained. Sometime between New Years and Valentine's Day, an alarm rose and throbbed in her chest, and the brown birds left her. He was Matthew by that point, and a gray aura dripped from him and pooled at his feet as he sat in the house and made no sculptures then.

He sat poking a pile of laundry with a coat hanger one day.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

She had her camera with her and she waited for him to turn his face into a patch of light. She held him that way in a mental photograph as he stretched out on the floor and exhaled cigarette smoke. When his pose matched the picture in her head, she squeezed the shutter and felt oddly like she was sailing above him, as if he had dropped down below her somehow, and that the picture would not look like the Matthew she was used to. She sat down next to him on the floor to stop that idea, but it nagged at her. He glared at the camera.

"It's just the cold," he said.

A dump truck idled across the street where someone was clearing out an old warehouse. She expected him to go running out, trying to salvage any bit of scrap he could find. Get up and bang on the piano. Something. When he stayed spread angel-like on the floor, she had the uneasy feeling that she had made a mistake somewhere in deciding she knew him well.

Then he coughed.

"You think you're getting sick?" she asked.

"I think I am sick," he said without looking at her.

So she cooked thick chicken soup and set vitamin pills next to glasses of grapefruit juice. His cough came rarely at night, and he never sneezed.

It was her way to work through dull periods, and most days she left him alone to do the same as she photographed. Some evenings she would go over and find him sitting with pieces of unbent wire, the breakfast dishes crusting on the counter. She cleaned the kitchen then, and smoothed his sheets over his bed. Most nights they made love quietly, and she felt more and more like a substitute for something else he needed to make him better. But the way he seemed content to rest his head on her chest as he fell asleep made her feel somehow stronger than she usually did.

"I'm worried about you," she said one day when the snowless winter slammed down around them. The temperature had dropped below zero, but still no snow, only a sharp feeling that gave her a headache when she went out doors.

"I'll be all right," he said.

And he was. Sometime in early March, she found him constructing a Volkswagen out of metal scraps, adorning it with huge flying bugs as if the car was under attack from them. He went to the galleries and collected the money he'd made from his sculptures, and one night surprised her by asking to make a plaster cast of her body. As he pressed layer after layer of plaster to her skin, she tried to imagine what she'd be doing if she wasn't with him. The thought nagged at her. A gray feeling crept up inside her as she thought about staying up late printing photographs and keeping herself busy, taking more pictures than she had to and developing them in her quiet house. She told herself to stop thinking that way. He was better again.

When the plaster dried, he painted it in swirls of blue and silver. The small breasts, the concave stomach, the sharp hip bone, were all her own.

"I hope you never leave me," he said.

She ran her hand over the cast.

"I don't want to leave you."

She learned the pattern without looking. His giddy times would come and he'd seem to fizz inside and then drop down for weeks. When the ground thawed in April, he became a scarecrow in front of her. She let herself into his house one afternoon and found the shades were drawn. Her eyes went naturally to a blade of light that sliced through the room and illuminated the dust on the floor.

"Matthew?" she asked.

She had groceries in her arm. Tapioca pudding she knew he liked (not by magic, but because he had told her). The darkness gnawed at the room and seemed to follow her to the kitchen. When she flicked on the light it retreated to other parts of the house. She wiped the counter clean of the food he'd left sitting, guts of tomatoes, carrot shavings, crumbs. She put the dishes away and went into the living room to wait for him.

The blinds squeaked as she pulled them open and he was there, sitting in the corner chair, his arms dangling to the floor. His legs looked like they'd been broken at the knees, as if he'd need splints to stand again. His eyes were shut, but she could tell his face was too tense for him to be asleep. She thought about crawling into his skin, his clothes, standing up again and breathing for both of them. How it would feel. How putting her mouth on his, not to kiss him, but to breathe into him would be. If she could really carry him, that weight might feel less than the one she felt standing in the living room watching him. She found she couldn't touch him; she could only stand there as his eyes snapped open.

They stared at one another. Frown lines crinkled around his mouth and he bit his lip. When she wrapped her arms around him, she knew there was no way to get inside. He was fragile, and at any intrusion she imagined he would fold into himself. She held him gently and listened for the sound of his heart.

And then one day he was better. Again. He built her a tripod out of wire and taught her how to play songs on the harmonica. He gave her love poems folded into oragami birds. He told her they would get married and move to Spain. Sometimes he tried to explain what was wrong with him.

"I just get like that sometimes," he said.

They stood at the top of East Rock and looked down at the trees that concealed the streets below. She thought it was strange not to be able to see her house, when it was down there, nestled in a blur of spring leaves and telephone poles. His hand felt solid in hers as she squeezed it.

"Do you feel like I know you?" she asked. She thought he would say she did, and that it wasn't her fault he was unpredictable and sad.

"Not as well as I know you," he answered.

She waited a minute. She was never sure how to talk to him about his sad times. "You felt like a scarecrow to me," she said finally.

Wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, he looked stronger that day; his scarecrowness had gone away and she hoped he would talk about it. He held his arms out and let his head fall to one side.

"A scarecrow," he said. "I like that."

And so spring bled into a summer of scarecrows. They were everywhere by July, wire scarecrows dressed in rags. She took clothes from the Salvation Army drop at night so he could dress them. He became a blur before her, streaking across town to erect another. The scarecrows had their own collective weakness about them. He jointed their arms to swing limply at their sides. Stuffed with straw, they looked threadbare. He purposefully used wire that would rust quickly. He made seventeen.

"I hope I die a scarecrow," he told her one night.

"I hope you don't die for a long time," she said. They were going to sleep.

"Maybe you'll have a baby someday and you won't have to take care of me anymore."

She tried not to show that she stiffened.

"Who said anything about having a baby?" she asked. She wondered if he was losing his knack for knowing things.

"I just thought you would like it," he yawned.

"You seem happier now that you're making scarecrows," she said.

"Are you changing the subject?"

"I don't know." She mumbled as if falling asleep.

"I like making scarecrows," he said.

He kept making more and more. She photographed all of them. Rolls and rolls of negatives. She learned to print from infrared film, and the pictures looked spooky in a black and white haze. Something inside of her warned her to be careful with Matthew. At any moment he would fall back into a cut out of a man. It seemed like she was always apart from him, and she wondered how different her life would really be without him. She waited for him to break again.

John Luigi from the art museum loved the photographs.

"You've really got something here." John had his blonde hair slicked back, and she could tell he'd shaved that morning. His voice whispered like silk on skin. She knew he had his own gallery, and she surprised herself when she noticed he wasn't sad. Her life had started to break down into two categories, sad and not sad. Matthew, and her.

"How would you like a space to show your pictures?" he asked.

She hadn't expected him to say that. She had been trying to enter them in an amateur show.

"You mean at the British Museum?"

His eyes had a soft light in them. "Why not?"

When she left, she found herself wondering what it would be like to be with a man who was happy.

"Matthew?" she asked that night. "How would you feel if my photographs had their own show? I mean, since I took them of your work."

She heard the alarm going off inside her head, and a small place in her chest constricted.

He stared blankly and rubbed at his temples. She wondered how she could have asked him differently, what trick she could learn to keep him okay.

"You're cheating on me," he said.

She got up off the sofa. "You're wrong," she said, but she couldn't help but think about John Luigi.

“Bullshit.” He glared at her. “I don’t care what you do with your pictures.”

The next day, he stayed in bed until afternoon.

And then he was gone. One day, his locks were changed, and his neighbor said he had left with boxes of metal scraps. She stood and waited at his door, and later, she sat there and smoked and slept. Sometime during the night, she imagined noises inside his house, wire scraping against the walls, hammering, but when she pressed her head to the door, there was nothing. A day later, her neck strained, smelling like cigarettes and sweat, she circled the town.

At the Binaki, the scarecrow stood strawless, unclothed. Charred pieces of flannel curled on the ground like dead leaves. The wire had turned black. She stared. At the next place it was the same.

For a moment, she was angry. Who would do this? She pictured the town filled with burned up men, punks squeezing lighter fluid onto the sculptures. But then she knew.

“Fuck you, Matthew,” she swore at the sculpture.

He came back long after her show had run its course. She was sleeping with John Luigi by then, and working freelance on the computer at night. The newspaper paid her to cover special events, and she still had time for her own work. She sold almost everything she had in her show, and the money was good, better than she expected. She and John took long lunches at the restaurants on Wooster Street. She tried not to think of the wire sculptor much, but some nights it dawned on her that she had not met John Luigi in the nine squares, and that the whole thing with him would turn out to be a terrible sham.

There were no bells and fireworks inside of her when Matthew showed up. He was just there in her doorway smelling like whiskey and cloves. He was back after eight months. He had the condom ready like he always did, and after, she dressed quickly.

“That was a mistake,” she said. His hair had grown past his chin. She couldn’t stop looking at his face. She told her self she couldn’t be with someone that messed up. She was with John anyway. She told herself she wasn’t sad. She wanted to cry.

“I can’t deal with you, Matthew. I mean, maybe if you got some help.”

He smiled his half smile, and for a second she thought he was going to say he’d figured himself out.

“I love you, Alma,” he said. “And I know you better than anyone does.”

“You’ve got to go.” When she said it something crumpled inside of her. She knew that feeling. She knew from knowing him.

She saw him a few more times, but never told John Luigi about him. John got an offer to manage a place in New York, and had already decided to go when Alma found out she was pregnant. She kept the

information to herself, the same way she kept to herself the fact that nights when she and John made love, she sometimes imagined the wire sculptor was inside her, and that she did not love John Luigi at all. She didn't tell Matthew either. Instead, she waited for him to know. If he did know, Matthew never mentioned it. Instead, he left. She gave birth to Emily alone in the hospital, and she didn't hesitate when the nurse asked her for Emily's last name. She made the decision simply. Matthew had worn a condom, John sometimes pulled out too late. She rationalized that Matthew would have been able to tell she was pregnant if Emily was his baby.



Now that he is back again, she stays up late to finish her prints. She's been doing work for the college for a long time, photographing brick buildings and stone fountains, flocks of students with their back packs. The prints come out so quickly she wishes they'd take longer. In the darkroom with the soft glow of the safe-light and the water in the sink flowing, she feels like she isn't quite in the world.

Until she holds a photograph of some kids crossing campus up to the light, and he is there in the crowd, wearing jeans and a shirt, indistinguishable except that it's him. The wire sculptor.

She rips the contact sheets out of their files and it turns out, he's in forty-two out of seventy-two. Pictures she took on different days, at different times. She thinks back to the days the photos were taken. Every image she has of him was taken when Emily was with her. She lays them out on the table, and silently counts the squares in her head. The sixth square. All of them.

At home, she gives Emily pasta in the shapes of wagon wheels. She wonders if he's been watching Emily all day while she printed.

"Emily, what did you do today?" she asks.

"Played play dough." She scrunches her face up when she talks in the same way Alma does. She never acts like Matthew or John.

Alma looks at the prints while Emily eats. He's there in the crowd, watching them. She finds herself trying to read the look on his face, to find a shot where his eye corners crinkle and he smiles. She bites her lip.

She's about to put the pictures away when Emily knocks her cup onto the floor. The dull sound of plastic hitting the linoleum makes Alma jump.

"Jesus Emily!" She snaps before she can stop herself.

Emily's mouth goes wide. Alma has never lost her cool before. She's always known she wouldn't be able to look at herself if she lost it in front of Emily. But suddenly, all the calmness she's learned to keep in her mind seems to buzz, and she can barely tell her daughter it's okay.

The next day she leaves Emily with the sitter and stands, arms crossed, on his stoop.

"You've got to stop!" she says.

"Stop what?" He's dressed normally in his corduroy pants and black shirt.

"You're in all my pictures!"

He grins. "I can't help that."

She realizes she wants to touch him. And he must sense it. He puts his arms around her, and she smooths his hair down the back of his neck. It outruns the length of her hand at the same point as Emily's does. Nothing about him could be more vulnerable than that. She steps back.

"Why were you wearing those weird clothes anyway?" she asks.

"I'm a different man now, Alma."

"I want you to stop trying to get my attention," she says.

"We could try again," he whispers.

She pictures herself coming home with Emily and finding him a mess on the floor, surrounded by broken pieces of wire, his eyes dull as he grinds out cigarettes.

But he's standing there in front of her and he's glowing. He could be better.

"I don't think you could be a father."

"I could try. We could all go to the park together. You two look so sweet together."

She's not sure it's really her talking when she speaks. "I'm warning you," she says. "I'll move away. I'll do it. I'll go somewhere where no one can find us."

As she walks home, she realizes she feels very tired.



A week goes by without him. She finds herself looking for John Luigi's New York number. But how would she explain she needed a blood test from him, and what would he do if he knew. She slams the telephone down in the cradle. She shouldn't have to prove this to Matthew, the wire sculptor.

Then, while cleaning one morning, she finds a copper wire fairy in Emily's toys.

She takes the fairy into the living room, where Emily cooks at her plastic kitchen set.

"What are you making?" Alma asks.

"Bacon," Emily says, and looks up. Alma knows there is no way this happy child could be the wire sculptor's daughter. The wire sculptor's daughter would scream and cry and mope.

"Emily, where did this toy come from?" Alma asks. She mimes

eating bacon with a little fork.

“Do you like coffee?” Emily asks.

“I like coffee,” Alma says. “Do you?”

“No. I like water. Do you like water?”

Alma nods, even though she’s not really playing the game right. She’s supposed to ask if Emily likes orange juice.

“Emily, where did you get this fairy?”

Emily hands her a cup. “You?” she asks.

Alma tries to keep her voice calm. “It wasn’t me. Where did you get this?”

But Emily just gives her more bacon and rattles the kitchen set around. Later, when Alma is actually eating breakfast, she realizes she’s left Emily’s stroller out on the porch all night. When she opens the door to get it, the little red stroller is gone.



She cancels Emily’s sitter and starts taking the baby everywhere as she photographs. Emily is almost too big for the baby backpack, and the straps dig into Alma’s shoulders. She studies each scene carefully before she squeezes the shutter, convinced that the wire sculptor is no where around. Sometimes when she finds herself looking for him, she realizes she hopes they do see him. She catches herself then. She catches herself quick.

On the way home, they sing, “Emily Luigi had a farm, E-I-E-I-O,” and Emily claps her hands. Alma makes sure they sing it loud.

In the house, she slams the door behind her so loud that Emily jumps. Alma picks her up as she turns the lock.

“It’s okay, baby. It’s just us,” she whispers. But she checks the lock twice. “It’s just us.”

And then, one afternoon while Emily plays in the house, Alma lets the cat outside. When she opens the door to the backyard, her breath hitches in her chest. A circle of mesh curls to the ground like small waves, and in the center of it sits a wire duck. There is a cow and a bunch of pigs. She counts five chickens and a dog.

What do you do when there is a farm in your backyard one day?

She feels something shut off inside of her, and she realizes her cheeks are wet. There is almost nothing as beautiful as these twists of wire. Some of the pigs have buttons for eyes. They’re made carefully, no stray wires poking out to cut little hands. Walking slowly, she grabs a stick. As she swings it, the whole farm goes flying around the yard--the tin can piglets, the cows, the little dog, the ducks and chickens. Emily Luigi had a farm, E-I-E-I-O. Alma can’t remember that last version of the song, but it’s almost always the same. Always cows, pigs, ducks, chickens and dogs, the animals she can make the noises for.

She picks the animals up one at a time and chucks them in the wheelbarrow. They look helpless in there, their little legs sticking out. She's about to push the wheelbarrow into the alley between her house and the next, when Emily comes running out.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Emily yells. "My Daddy made those!"



She takes Emily's to the babysitter's and then puts all the animals in the trunk of the car. She drives to a parking lot and throws them in a dumpster. As she tosses them in, she looks at one of the pigs. She tells herself she does not want Emily to have these toys.

She goes home to wait. When she hears his feet pound up the steps her heart thunders. For the first time since Emily was born, she wants a cigarette.

"You can't come here anymore," she says through the door. She says it over and over to herself in her head.

"Alma." He sounds choked up. "Let me in."

"I'm not opening this door."

"We have to talk."

She makes her voice stern. "Matthew, I think you're sick. I think you need to go get help and leave us alone." When she says it, she feels like she's betraying him.

He doesn't answer.

"You've got to go."

"Alma, open the door. It would be so good. You wouldn't have to be alone with the baby. I'll work, and you won't have to take pictures of the college anymore."

"I like taking pictures of the college." She's yelling.

"You love me," he says.

She waits.

He clears his throat on the other side of the door.

"I got a blood test," she lies. "It's not you. Really, it's not. If it was you, things could be different. I just don't think we're supposed to be together."

She sits down on the floor with her back to the door. She waits a long time, and he doesn't say anything. It seems like it could go on forever, the two of them waiting. She's there, against the door, and she's not going to open it. She thinks she can hear him breathing. She wonders about magic, how it works, how he can always know things, what he has in his head in the network of wires that lets him know things and makes him crumple all the time. She wonders if she hadn't had a baby if she would know how to control her breathing so well, so well that she can hide the fact that she's crying. She wonders if she hadn't had a baby, if she would always have gone back to the wire

sculptor.

He bangs his hand on the door once, and then he is gone. And he doesn't come back.



After Emily turns three, she outgrows the backpack, and one morning, in a hurry, Alma takes her out in the pram. Leaves funnel up around them as they walk, and Emily claps her hands. Alma is sure the wire sculptor is gone again, and she breathes the fall air in deeply as they head towards the green.

"This old man, he played one," they sing. "He played knick knack on my thumb."

They have to wait to cross Trumble Street, and the song loses momentum. Alma scans the road for an upcoming break in traffic, and looks down at Emily. She's unfastened one of the elephants from the stroller. Alma's breath chokes in her throat and she counts the squares in her head until she reaches the fourth. They stand between College and Church, Grove and Elm. The light up on Temple Street changes, and the pram rattles as she pushes it, shoving it quickly ahead of her and clear to the other side where she turns down Lincoln Street and away from the grid pattern, picking up speed, while below her, in the seat, Emily has undone the elephant and is molding a small man out of wire.



Later, years later, she will know he wrapped himself in wire so he could stay, to give the illusion of sculpture and remain hanging over them. She is old the year they find the wire sculptor's bones. The blizzard of that winter knocks the sculpture of a man from the top of the art museum. She's trudging through the snow on Chapel Street when she sees the police looking at the sculpture. When they turn it over, a spray of tear shaped icicles releases from inside. She finds herself counting the squares in her head for the first time in years.

"He's gone," she says.

Kimberly Shuckra

Right Now

We sit in a hotel room
an hour before my father's wake
you're peeling
flower print off the wall,
your tie, a long tongue
over the head board of the bed.
Outside the sky is full of water,
I think
somewhere, there is a bee drowning,
an eggplant baking,
handle bars flown over,
a doll's leg left on the beach.
Right now the hinge of a door
has just been fixed,
a kite forgotten in a garage,
you turning towards the lamp
knock a glass
over the table with mosaic tiles,
ice cubes sliding over the rug.

 Lessons from the Unlikely

When I was young, my mother read the Pied Piper to me. There were rats, a fat mayor, a piper dressed like a jester with bells and a flute of some sort. I know my mother made her way through this story several times. It is the ending that I remember clearly. The piper comes to the mayor for payment and, when he is refused, leads all the children out of the village and into a secret entrance in a mountain. All the children save one. He has a crutch. He wants to accompany the children into the side of the mountain, but he is too slow. The last picture of the story is of a little boy who sits, leans on a crutch and cries. It is haunting. It is at this moment I feel the Pied Piper as evil as the mayor, as filthy as the rats. He allows someone to be left behind. To be left behind must be horrible.



In the 1800s at The Royal Earlswood Asylum for Idiots in England, Dr. J. Langdon Down began making observations of patients who appeared to have similar physical characteristics—who seemingly belonged to the same family. He observed these features as straight thin hair, small nose, almond eyes. He noticed that roughly 10 percent of the total population he observed possessed these characteristics. He termed them “Mongolian idiots” because their physical characteristics seem influenced from Mongolia, a region of east central Asia. Down’s observations earned him a diagnosis given his name: Down Syndrome.

He writes in his *Observation on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots* in 1866, “I have for some time had my attention directed to the possibility of making a classification of the feeble-minded, by arranging them around various ethnic standards...” He also notes as comparison examples of the “Ethiopian variety...presenting the characteristic malar bones, the prominent eyes, the puffy lips, and retreating chin...The wooly hair has also been present, although not always black, nor has the skin acquired pigmentary deposit. They have been specimensof white negroes, although of European descent.” His article appeared in the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1867, and his views are elaborated at much greater length in a book entitled *Mental Affections of Children and Youth* in 1887.

As hard as this information is to read, it would be doing Down a disservice not to mention that he used these arguments to prove some sort of *continuous* race, evidence of our human connectedness, evidence

of common origin which randomly reproduces certain characteristics across the world. He promoted the thought that all humans were created equal. In the 1800s, Down presented the institutionalized as compassionately and humanely as perhaps anyone of his generation. He observed that those he studied, those later diagnosed with Down Syndrome, were "...cases which very much repay judicious treatment." He noted several common personality traits: pleasant disposition, sense of humor and the "considerable power of imitation, even bordering of mimicry." He noted the short life expectancy that was "far below the average, and the tendency...to the tuberculosis, which I believe to be the hereditary origin of the degeneracy." He was wrong about the tuberculosis and it would be nearly a hundred year before the true cause of this condition was known.

In June of 1993, my husband and I have our first child. He is born in the dark of early morning—after a long and difficult labor which begins a little before midnight on June 21st and ends at 3:21am on the 23rd. The room hushes, not all at once but slowly, when he enters the world. His mouth is suctioned and he is handed to the nurses. The doctor turns back to me, smiles gently, looks at me for a long time and then not again. The nurses glance at one another and proceed. I think him lovely, but the silence in the room tells me something. I watch as the nurses open his hands and look at his palms. They search and find a single crease, the transverse palmer crease, in his right hand. They whisper. A pink and blue stocking cap is placed on his head. He is wrapped in a blanket and is received by Tim, my husband. Tim's dark hair is a mess, his eyes moist, he smiles. He cradles our baby boy, proceeds to quietly and gently celebrate. I feel the guilt of an unthankful recipient, someone who has perceived the flaw in a presumably flawless gift. I lean to him and say, "Tim, I think something is the matter." He replies, "Nothing is the matter; he is perfect." I search the room again. I notice they have left us. We are alone when we name him: Peter.



It is November of 2000 and cold. I attend the TARC annual meeting and award banquet. As president of the operating board, I address the membership, highlighting the successes of the year 2000 for this organization serving people with developmental disabilities in Shawnee County, Kansas. TARC stands for Topeka's Association for Retarded Citizens. It employs almost 200 people and serves over 700 hundred individuals with delays in mental and/or physical development.

Most people refer to it now as TARC because the word "retarded" has become ugly. It has been thrown around too many school yards, directed towards too many in conversations where it is considered a humorous put down or a put-someone-in-their-place phrase. I hate to hear it used in these ways, but I use it to describe my son. People know what it means, what I mean when I say it. My reasons are practical and not callous. At the same time, I understand strong feelings can accompany something as powerful as a word that has begun to take on different and more sensitive meanings. I was once told the word "handicap" derived from the practice of the poor and often disabled begging for alms with cap in hand. "Retard" came from the musical term "retardatio," which means to gradually slacken the time of tempo. When the word "retarded" was introduced it was considered a beautiful term bestowed by a cultured society referring to a mental lessening of gain or progress, delay, slowness.

My son, Peter, hasn't received early intervention services at TARC since he was three. He is now seven and our three year old is almost ready to pass him up in size. He is tiny, one of the reasons it has been easy to integrate him in a kindergarten classroom of five year olds. He is thin, except for his belly. It protrudes slightly due to lack of muscle tone, his stomach muscles not being strong enough to hold everything in nice and tidy. As a result his torso is the shape of a kidney bean: a bit of an arch in the back, fullness in the front. His eyes are a mixture of blue, from me, surrounded by tinges of brown, from Tim, which have been framed by little golden rims since he was a toddler.



After Peter is born, he remains in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit receiving medicine to rid his lungs of fluid. I spend my days at the hospital. The nurses encourage me to take a break, get some fresh air. I am not allowed to feed him yet; his stomach receives my milk through a tube inserted in his nose. Yes, they all agree that a walk will do me good. I exit the hospital to the rain and drizzle that plagues our Kansas summer of 1993. I am drenched by the time I cross 10th street to the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library. I make my way to a computer, which the librarian has told me is dedicated to accessing a medical database. I begin printing out everything I can on Down Syndrome. As the pages pour from the printer I begin to read. Most of the information is outdated, though I don't realize it at the time. One of the first facts I stumble upon is a 1975 poll revealing that 77 percent of American pediatric surgeons favored withholding food and medical treatment from infants with Down Syndrome, leaving them to die rather than sending them home with parents or families. I leave the library and a busy printer still spitting out the dreadful stuff. I make my way

back across 10th to the hospital—to the neonatal intensive care unit. I enter soaked and winded, stutter when I tell them I have decided to come back early. I decide to stay with him at the hospital as much as possible.

In the days following Peter's birth, I remember that during our engagement Tim had told me that he had always thought he would one day have a child who would be "slow." He wanted me to know this, felt the disclaimer necessary. I think it is ironic, but perhaps no more so than the fact that Down's grandson and namesake was born with Down Syndrome. Records of the grandson John describe him as a lovable person and a good billiard player.

Approximately two weeks after Peter is born, I receive the confirmation that he has Down Syndrome. I take the call from a phone in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit of Stormont Vail Hospital in Topeka, where Peter has been relocated on his third day for a heart condition and fluid in his lungs. I ask for a copy of his karyotype, the picture of his chromosomes which confirms the diagnosis, a word recently added to my vocabulary. It will be sent to me.



Tim and I met in college in the late 1980s. Then, he looked 15 at best. He has matured and now looks at least 20. At first I wondered what to make of him. He was lanky and thin, possessing an unusual amount of energy and talking in a rapid southern dialect. Long before we began dating he began walking with me at nights, around the brick lanes that circled the campus. I stared in disbelief as he repeatedly fell into hedges or tripped over curbs, once rolling down a hill. Later he would tell me how nervous he was during those years of walks. It should have been an indication to me of his attentiveness to a fault. From the very beginning he was willing to forfeit some awareness of his own two feet and various pedestrian obstacles for my sake. But back then I just thought him clumsy and told him so on several occasions.

I have since pocketed dozens of these attentive examples in my memories: Tim rubbing baby lotion between each of Peter's toes; his waking each night to change baby diapers and still waking when one of the kids has a bad dream or needs a drink of water. There are the nightly foot rubs and the surprise trip to Chicago to attend a Norman Rockwell exhibit. He trims my father's trees and hedges, runs to the store for my mother—is even attentive to the neighborhood kids. More than once I have opened my front door to a group of kids who ask me, "Can Tim come out and play soccer?"



I sit in the lobby outside the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, a blue room with faux antique chairs with high backs and carved wooden legs. The furniture seems out of place next to the stainless steel sink that runs the entire length of the wall to my left. Instructions on how to sterilize your hands to the elbows and directions to the sterile gowns are provided above the sinks. All visitors must wash before entering the unit, which is just past the electronic glass doors.

People want to know what caused it and whether or not it runs in the family. My aunt visits me at the hospital and tells me, "Well you know—is pregnant now. I sure hope she doesn't have one." I tell her I think it is unlikely. I try to be reassuring.

Peter remained in the hospital for almost three weeks. I arrived home from days spent with him to find my house clean, dinner fixed and warm on the stove. Most of my family and friends proved invaluable. I found their questions and comments timid and sincere and careful. I was grateful and they were lovely. Now I don't remember the specifics of the questions, but I do know I replied by regurgitating all the facts I knew, the facts that connected me somehow to the baby in my arms. I told them that approximately one in every 800 babies is born with Down Syndrome. I told them the chances of having a child with Down Syndrome increases as maternal age increases. A woman aged 40 has about a 1-in-100 chance of having a child with Down Syndrome. My chance of having a child born with Down Syndrome in my early 20s was about a 1-in-1450 chance. I sketched out dozens of illustrations of chromosomes, feeling relieved and gratified as I drew them. With a pen or pencil or crayon on a piece of scrap paper or on the palm of my hand, I drew and drew like a mad geneticist. I, who blush so easily, attempted to give all who desired access to the explanations of the very personal, and now very public, conception scenario.



I have always been a bit of an art enthusiast. As I begin to educate myself on Down Syndrome, I notice and store the bits of information regarding Down Syndrome and its portrayal in art. What did societies used to do with people like Peter, people who were different? What place did they find in culture? Their representation in art might tell me. I search for evidence of compassion or tolerance. Finding examples would be treasure to me. I want to know if we were capable of seeing past the skin. I search for the exceptional specimen in a painting or even a photograph so I can examine the artist's choices, explain and reveal their desires, name those things worthy and sought after. I take great delight that some of Velazquez's favorite subjects

were the dwarfs in Philip IV's court who he portrayed full of human dignity.

Several Middle Age and Renaissance artists are rumored to use children with Down Syndrome to portray the infant Jesus. I can find no definitive truth, no scholarly articles or art criticisms which address this claim. I say there is no definitive proof in writing, but there are the paintings themselves which one can view and then decide. Bellini, Brueghel, and Reynolds have been cited in various Down Syndrome publications as users of models with Down syndrome, but it is the works of Andrea Mantegna that are particularly convincing. His Madonna and Infant paintings are so psychologically connected, a child wrapped in the arms, the body, of a mother who seems to protect it from all angles. It is a child who is vulnerable that Mantegna presents. It is not this portrayed vulnerability alone that makes me wonder, but the characteristics, the features of the infants of Mantegna. It is in the almond shaped eyes, the open mouth with tongue slightly protruded, the placements of fingers and toes that appear respected and reproduced from a child with Down syndrome.



I receive Peter's karyotype in the mail. I have waited a lifetime for it. I look at his chromosomes lined up and numbered on paper, so tiny, so powerful. The three chromosomes labeled "21" are a quarter the size of chromosomes one through twelve, and I think them rather sumo-like in their stance. The bottom half of the X appears like two thick stubby leg-like appendages, slightly spread. But the top half contains almost no genetic material at all, looks like a set of antennae topped with tiny clenched fists. I read that these "fists" have a magnetic quality which is possibly what causes the chromosomes to not separate correctly. I place the karyotype in Peter's baby book, next to the sonogram images which are strangely similar: a tiny baby with clenched fists.

I become crazed with trying to understand and explain this genetic occurrence. My husband and I teach ourselves basic genetics, begin to understand how this small amount of extra genetic material on chromosome 21 affects each of Peter's genes. This chromosome starts a progression of developments which are eventually recognized in the palm of his right hand, in his facial features, upwardly slanting eyes, small ears, button nose, mouth seemingly too small for his tiny tongue, teeth, head shape, the low muscle tone, the compromised respiratory system, rightly noted but wrongly diagnosed as the source of the syndrome by Down in the 1800s.



Tim and I take our baby home. He never cries so we string bells across his bassinet so we'll hear him when he wakes and squirms. We train ourselves to hear little bells which jingle in whispers. We tune ourselves to them, hear them from anywhere in the house.

My job working with the long-term unemployed expires with its grant funding, five days after Peter is born. After he is home, I make a trip to the unemployment office to apply. It is located on the floor above the one I occupied just a few weeks earlier. I had shared a break room with the people who would be processing my papers. It is awkward. News has spread of Peter. They pass over my paperwork for close to an hour. It sits in the rack and I watch as it is pulled out and my name is read on the application. My acquaintances nervously scan the chairs for sight of me and quickly put it back. I assume they are now appealing to the floor manager to process my papers. She rarely processes papers. She wears big round glasses and stiffly says, "Well, you've certainly lost some weight since we've seen you last." She turns red, wipes her palms on her dress. Peter is never mentioned and I feel sick about it.

As I exit the building, I almost knock over a woman taking a smoke break. I recognize her face but don't know her name. She pulls the cigarette from her mouth and says, "Hey, we heard about your little guy and we're rooting for you." I mumble some sort of thanks and hurry away as I begin to cry. What I really want to do is run and throw my arms around this lady. I want to reach out and grab her words, which have already scattered into the air. I want to press them in Peter's baby book, keep them forever. I remain deeply indebted to those brave enough to address my having a child born with a disability. Whether they did so tactfully is not my concern. It is their efforts and courage I cherish.



After Peter is born an acquaintance tells me, "You know it is really too bad you and Tim can't have any more children." This is news to me. I wonder if my ovaries have betrayed my confidence, told her something that even I am not privy to. Then it dawns on me. After our having a child with a disability it is assumed we are done. She might have just as easily said, "Folks, I think your turn is up." In a sense, Tim and I together are considered a bit of a liability. Nonetheless, we continued to have children to the world's dismay and to the disapproval of a few.

Both of us wanted brothers and sisters for Peter, and it was interesting to come across the writings of Down which described his

own desires. The patient, he said, “should be rescued from his solitary life and have the companionship of his peers. He should be surrounded by influences of art and nature, calculated to make his life joyous, to arouse his observation and to quicken his power of thought ...”

Peter is the only boy in a house full of girls. “What we have to put up with,” my husband tells him. “We need to stick together,” my husband tells him. But he is lost to us women—our influences too strong. He begs for fingernail polish when we pull it out to do our nails; he is one of the loveliest in the long gowns worn during dress up. (Gowns are more fun than trousers so plain, so ordinary.) My husband is fit to be tied, tries to instill in him the right and privilege of being able to pee standing up, still Peter insists on sitting. I am thankful.



By the twelfth century, paintings were used as the foundation for interpretation of higher spiritual truths for the non-literate and perhaps these values were making themselves apparent in content as well as subjects. Mantegna is known for historical accuracy with a glimpse of bitter reflection. Yet he is known even more for the extreme interpretations which shed light on qualities that are in turn tragic and ironic. If Mantegna possessed a social awareness unequalled among Renaissance painters, a compliment he is given freely, it is not so difficult to believe that he would have chosen children with Down Syndrome to portray religious figures in art. Children with Down Syndrome are often identified, naively I think, as angels or as possessing standards of divine beings. I agree with neither. However, people are driven to locate us in crowds, to make their way, out of their way, to tell us about how they are related to someone with Down syndrome, to tell us stories of their experiences with people with Down Syndrome. They relay how they identify something special and unique—we have identified it ourselves. It is obvious that these children would be ideal models, perhaps not physically, but spiritually, for Christ.

Tim and I have noticed that children with disabilities are not chosen to sell toys, are not in commercials, are not the subject of Anne Geddes portraits. They are scarcely represented in any visual art form now. It is only after Peter that I discover the specifics of the subject in Andrew Wyeth’s painting, *Christina’s World*. It is often perceived as a romantic picture of a young woman lying in a field of yellow and scattered flowers. It is actually Christina Olson, a neighbor of Wyeth’s in Cushing, Maine. She is middle-aged, paralyzed by infantile paralysis, stranded by the family burying ground. She is alone and unable to get back to her house, small and brown in the upper right hand corner of the painting. It is a picture of abandonment and despair, but one would never know. So far are we removed. We see vulnerability so seldom we

have difficulty recognizing it. It is frightening for me to think that one day we might lose our appreciation of the weak, lose the sense that our own strengths are to be used for others, assume that our abilities are only for our good and for our gain. It seems that the weakening of this part of our awareness will result in the recession of our collective compassion. I imagine it glistening on the corners of our thoughts, then proceeding on the furthest spots of our memories. It will blink and teeter, will extinguish and be lost, forever.

In the early 1970s, photography had found subjects in people with disabilities. These photographic essays were largely extrapolated from institutions which had separated us; hid from us our children born with exceptions. In 1970-71, Diane Arbus published an untitled series of photographs in *Aperture*. They feature the tenants of a mental institution, many with Down Syndrome. Many of the photographs appear to be taken around Halloween. Women in fancy hats and bonnets carry handbags, thick stockings cling around their knees. They smile in front of brick walls which feel of institution. Another photograph appears to be of some sort of parade, a woman in a nightdress, determined and grouchy. She faces forward and marches, her hand clasps a young man with Down Syndrome with a painted handlebar moustache who looks at the camera. A woman in a wheelchair holds a mask, a witch I think, over her own face.

I can't figure these pictures out. They are surreal and feel itchy on my eyes. Frankly, they are frightening and I wonder what are those women in swimming suits doing out on the lawns of a mental institution facility? Isn't it October? Is this Halloween or is it something else? Something scarier? Do these pictures document a collection, an amassing of difference, of so much difference it created a different world? Such a different experience. It leaves me not knowing at all how people of this time regarded those with disabilities. I think I begin to see the separation—of not knowing where these people go. It feels like a circus.



A few years ago I read that Arkansas state health director, Joyce Elders, in testimony before Congress in 1990, testified her support for abortion of Down Syndrome fetuses as public policy. "Abortion has had an important, and positive, public health effect...the number of Down Syndrome infants in Washington state in 1976 was 64 percent lower than it would have been without legal abortion." And I read it again to be sure that I understand it right. The truth of the matter is so casual, so hidden in the middle of public policy that it is easy to breeze right over it, not realize just what Joyce Elders was proposing, supporting. It feels like a moment in the movie *Life is Beautiful*, where people at

a dinner party are discussing mathematical story problems being taught in the schools. The dilemma presented to the children, relayed through their dismayed parents, is something like: If 600 Jews are sent to Auschwitz and 325 Jews are sent to another concentration camp, how many Jews will be killed in the concentration camps? When the movie's heroine agrees that this is horrible, the others in the party agree with a statement like, "Yes, how can my child be expected to do these advanced mathematical calculations, he is only in 2nd grade?" And there it is. The ugly truth about what Germans thought of Jews in the 1940s. And there it is. The ugly truth about what my culture thinks about people with Down Syndrome in the 1990s.

People often ask me if we knew Peter would be born with Down Syndrome. It is now possible to tell all sorts of things about unborn children. People can screen for gender and a variety of diseases. We check for nothing but a heartbeat. It is enough for us. And when we are pregnant with each of the others, we are always offered the "opportunity" to find out about our children. We decline.



It seems a grand pursuit, to explore our origins, to contemplate our beginnings, to speculate—we, evolved of goop and goo, we, formed from clay. This desire is one of many, to examine ourselves closely, our makeup. It is in some sort of self-interest that we question where we came from and how we came from it. We seek what the world looks like up close, the visuals of our smallest components. It begins as a child with a fascination with those rare parts, in between the toes, elbows, the insides of the nose. These odd and uncoordinated exercises of examination are the precursors of moving closer.

In sixth grade I study protozoa, small single-celled aquatic organisms, a phylum of the animal kingdom, reproduced by binary fission. Single-celled organisms we are not. We are a collection of sorts, of different sorts of cells, which differentiate somewhere in the evolutionary process of the womb, become white blood cells, red cells, bone cells, brain cells. Mr. Kralik introduces my sixth-grade class to the proper care and use of the microscope, shows us how to mount specimens on our slides carefully to avoid air bubbles which will complicate our observations. After all is ready, a drop of pond water is placed on the slide. I move my eye to the lens of the microscope. I am immediately zoomed in for a closer look to a world newly discovered. I feel like Columbus. This protozoa is akin to the parts of me that I cannot see, do not see, all that is there in the layers underneath my skin.

I am reminded of Dr. Seuss' *Horton Hears a Who*, and I imagine my new found protozoa a Who at heart. He is trying to communicate with me; he senses my observations, responds by squirming. He, She,

It wants to say something but has no mouth that I can see, has nothing by the way of skin or features, though it does somewhat resemble an ear. This is one of the living, breathing organisms that end up everywhere, in everything, on the end of my fork. This close-up is intriguing. I want to push my way closer, to squeeze in for a better view.



After Peter is home I take long close looks at this little baby, my specimen of study. I examine his eyes, their slight slant, the small folds of skin in the inner corners called epicanthal folds. His nose and its flat bridge are textbook. I read up on Peter's hand. I see for myself what the nurses were looking at. In my cupped hand, two creases. One begins above my thumb and curves down, the other just under my pinky curves up across my palm to my middle finger. They slightly arch and miss each other. Peter's creases collide.

There are the Brushfield spots in his eyes, tiny light dots surrounding the pupil in the blue and brown of his iris. It is as if a paintbrush has dabbed his eye and lifted out the color in tiny little bristle fine spots. I take note of his small ears which sit lower than normal. The spaces between his big toe and the four smaller a bit wider than usual. I especially notice the muscle tone that Down mistook for skin which did not retain its elastic quality. He is wobbly and weak. He does not hold up his own head until he is almost 10 months old. He does not walk until he is two.



In 1959, Jerome Lejune, a French cytogeneticist, discovered the presence of an extra chromosome in individuals with the physical characteristics observed by Down. Though it wasn't until later years that scientists knew where the extra chromosome belonged, on the 21st pair. Our genes—the blueprints of life. From our rods of chromosomes we can trace our sex, eye color, skin, hair texture, voice. Our genes determine the way we begin and sometimes the way we die. The sperm offers a chromosome and the egg offers one as well. It is the moment of meiosis that the chromosomes split exactly in half, offer themselves, conceive something new, duplicate. The new cell is divided into two, those divide into four, then eight, then sixteen over a period of nine months and throughout our lives. We are millions of cells, made from the original, regenerating and duplicating over and over. What we see around us are the end results of 23 pairs of chromosomes, big and small, stripped x's and y's which contain the whole plan of the world.

It is the moment of meiosis that the individual with Down Syn-

drome inherits the extra chromosome through a faulty chromosome distribution. The chromosomes don't split exactly in half, they fail to separate or disjoin and the pair becomes lopsided and heavy with extra. The pair on the 21st chromosome sticks together and an extra chromosome becomes part of the new living embryo. And as it grows, the extra chromosome is replicated and transferred to each new cell. Three chromosomes on the 21st pair give the name Trisomy-21 to 95 percent of babies born with Down Syndrome. The two other types are Translocation, when a part of the 21 chromosome breaks off during cell division and attaches to another chromosome, and Mosaicism, when the faulty cell division occurs after fertilization resulting in only a portion of cells containing the extra chromosome.



Peter is a ghost every year for Halloween. We throw out all sorts of ideas every year: a pirate, a cowboy, a scarecrow. He has nothing to do with our suggestions. He chooses the garb of a ghost this year again and becomes a different kid, with a not so Casper-like quality. Once the homemade sheet costume is slipped over his head he becomes hunched, his hands are raised. His vocabulary is reduced to "boo," with varying inflections and accents. He considers his frightening new abilities, begins sneaking up on people, slowly from ten to fifteen yards away. His approach takes a quarter of an hour. We have ample time to plan a surprised response.

I wonder, where is the place for people like Peter in this culture? How will he be preserved and presented to those after us? I wonder if a child with Down syndrome could ever more even be speculated in the arms of a Madonna. Public records show that only one in ten couples will choose to have a child with Down Syndrome if the amniocentesis tests positive. I wonder if people will know what a child with Down Syndrome looks like 50 years from now, ten, five. I face my culture and my government and they feel like meeting an armed Diane Arbus in a dark ally. She wields a camera in one hand and a blunt object in the other.



When Peter was about three, and Maggie a newly walking toddler, a woman singled me out at work. She was in her mid-fifties, a different generation, granted. She told me that she had heard I had a child with a disability and another younger. She told me she had a son with a disability too, long ago. She kept him for a while, but when she became pregnant with her second he was just too much. She sent her year-and-a-half-year-old child to an institution. It was not the ending I

expected, and I wondered why she was telling me this story. I thought about how she still carried him with her, not in the typical way a mother carries her child, but in memory which is often much heavier. In telling her story I thought she revealed, in a generous and selfless way, so much of herself. I knew she was telling me that she was like me. She wanted me to know that she had experienced something of what I had experienced. I knew she was seeking a connection. I found it hard to appreciate.

I nodded and listened and thought, with a nasty bit of self-righteousness and fear, "No, I am not like you." I thought her so selfish and preoccupied with the newness of another life that she forgot the value in the child who called her Mother first. Never did we consider not taking Peter home. Never did we think that those who came after him would be more valued. Never did we think we had to choose, like a worn out blanket or winter coat, which was worth keeping and which was worth giving away. I wondered if her second child, and her third, and those who followed ever went to sleep wondering if tomorrow would find them replaced by someone or something else?

Perhaps in this way and in others I react too strongly. Still, I wish people sought out the part of themselves that overcomes, that embraces the struggle as the means to learn about life, our responsibility in it, to it. I claim this as my passion. I say it is right and grounded. I say with fervor that one should react strongly to all that grates wrongly against the conscience, and I say this because my stakes seem higher. There are those who will argue that our sense of right and wrong is a given part of us, something we share like arms and legs. I suggest it is a muscle and must be exercised. The voice of conscience unused and unpracticed becomes easily inaudible, like the quiet tinker of little bells strung across a bassinet.



I feel a great deal of gratitude to TARC, which was established in 1954 when parents found themselves and their disabled children shut out of school systems, day care centers, society, and privilege. They began raising money by hosting bake sales, making private donations, selling Stanley Wax, and at the end of their first year they had \$800 to serve their children.

Tonight the membership listens as I tell them that inventing a future is a lifetime of work. I look out over the dimly lit room, at the numerous round tables which hold cacti of various sorts meant to add a southwest quality to the western theme of this year's meeting. Staff bustle about with blue bandannas tied around their necks, pouring tea and delivering the dinner salads. I look into the faces of the membership and see their age. They've heard what I have to say one hundred times

before, but listen kindly. I find that as I address them I am thinking about how I want to convince them that the young parents today will not drop the ball. But where are the young parents?

I think about how Tim and I fought long and hard to get Peter into our neighborhood school. Those meetings were so brutal, especially for Tim and I who consider ourselves “nice” people, “reasonable” people.

We arrived at the first official meeting to be told that Peter’s teachers were recommending he be placed in a classroom where only children with disabilities would attend. We expressed our strong feeling that Peter should attend the school his sisters would attend. We explained the value of his attending school with “normal” kids, thinking this arrangement would be good for his language, for his social skills, not to mention the academics. We were told that we were “valuable members of the team,” but it was the recommendation of the team that Peter be moved to the secluded classroom. We were told we could appeal the recommendation but administration would not side with us. Tim got up, told them the meeting was over, thanked them for their time.

Immediately Tim and I shifted to business mode, something we have learned we must do to remain effective advocates for our child. In the meetings that followed we brought in copies of the IDEA law, and encouraged the staff and administration to reconsider their recommendation. We pointed to the parts of the law where their actions could be considered illegal. “No hard feelings,” we told them. “This is just business.” But it was actually much more than that and we all knew it. Several parents opted to accept the recommendations presented by staff and administration instead of going through the whole process of appeals. But in not advocating it seems they are laying to waste all the hard work and gains which are laid at their feet. Peter is now allowed in the schools; there was a time when parents couldn’t even expect that. I worry that many young parents have not been educated on the efforts of these people I address, don’t realize they must get involved and advocate, don’t realize they ride the backs of those in this room.



Peter insists on making his own breakfast. When he was six, I thought it would be a good thing for him to learn so I bought some toaster waffles. We learned how to operate the toaster, where to find the butter, syrup, utensils. It has been a thorn in my side ever since. I don’t like toaster waffles, yet he insists on making two every morning, as we did that first time. He hands me mine. Big clumps of butter, way too much syrup. Even if we are in a rush, there is no rushing through the morning waffle ritual. I find myself cursing the high fructose corn

syrup, the cellulose gum or whatever part of the syrup makes it so slow.

The previous year breakfasts weren't much better. I was always in a rush. Peter always made an effort to enjoy each bite, savor each mouthful and reply with an "umm" or a "dats good" or an "ahhh." I set the clock on the stove to beep every 30 seconds to remind Peter it was time to swallow the delicious bite in his mouth and move on to an equally satisfying morsel on his plate.



I clumsily orchestrate my four children out the door, maneuver keys, balance a child on my hip. I am on a schedule. It is 8:05 am, and I have just 3-4 minutes to get the kids out of the house and on their way. I make sure little fingers are clear of the hinges, am momentarily preoccupied as the last child out lets go of the storm door, which attempts every morning to pin me against the front door. Peter, Maggie, Bernadette, and the baby, Bridget, and I traverse the steps of our porch together, and then they are gone. I move the baby off my hip and down to the sidewalk, hold her hand as I walk and watch as my kids stretch out before me, along the sidewalk to the corner where the oldest two will be picked up for school. I watch Maggie's long limbs and graceful strides as she bounds ahead of her brother, Peter, running to catch up, hands straight down to his sides. The flats of his feet hit the sidewalk, making a thump, thump, thump to contrast to Maggie's light tap, tap, tap, barely audible. The kids consider the trip to the corner bus stop the day's first treat. I am thinking about the cold, my hands, how I thought I'd served my miserable time waiting for a bus. I am not smiling. The baby and I are far behind them, two houses. I cannot see Peter's face, but I know he is smiling and excited. Maggie arrives first at the corner, then Bernadette, finally Peter. I cannot hear what they say, but I see how they chatter, gather closely, laugh.

I arrive and wait with the other neighborhood kids, try to make "small" talk. I ask a neighborhood girl, Dallas, how her cello lessons are going as I stamp my feet to keep them warm. The bus rounds the corner and here we say our goodbyes for the day. The neighborhood's five riders enter. I watch Maggie make her way back, find a seat, wave. The doors close, I see my reflection in the door windows. I look cold, so does the baby on my hip. Bernadette, only three, stands by my side. She is too young yet for the bus. Peter, my seven-year-old kindergartener/first grader (he spends half the day in each), stands next to me. I remember the Pied Piper and the boy with the crutch and the memory stings. There is a rawness in this moment as we all look at ourselves reflected in the glass of a bus door. I remind myself that I am too sensitive.

The bus pulls away and immediately behind it is Peter's bus, a

mini, the special-ed bus. Up he goes, a kiss, a hug and he is gone, waving enthusiastically. I turn and walk back home with the girls, and I think about how, when Peter's bus occasionally arrives first, the kids yell, "The baby Bus! The baby Bus!" I wonder if they mean the bus is small or it is for babies.



It is chaos in our house. We don't always realize, but the bewildered look on the faces of those who leave, say after spending an evening, gives it away. It is our family's utterly uncultured and unmannered easiness that is the difficulty. Philip J. Bailey once said, "Lowliness is the base of every virtue, and he who goes the lowest builds the safest." We go for lowliness and have a great time doing it. The kids perform for us. They all have picked stage names: Christina Arena, Christina Sparkles and Peter Music. We listen as they improvise songs, try out their muses in hilarious ways. The Christinas generally sing of love and shoes and the alphabet with lots of "oh yeahs" and "uh huhs" throughout. Peter's repertoire is nothing but food. He sings of hotdogs, pizza, McDonalds, ham sandwiches, Sonic, various meats, oatmeal, Burger King, toaster waffles. We're terribly tacky and find these renditions extremely humorous. In addition to being a great lover of food, he is an early riser. More than once I have stumbled out of bed and down the steps to find the entire contents of the refrigerator on the kitchen counter. It is not always peaceful, but it is often a joy.

Maggie recently told me that she couldn't wait to have another year of Kindergarten. I told her next year she will go to the first grade. She asked me why "Peter got two Kindergartens." She is right, Peter attended Kindergarten last year as well. I sat down with her as a means to find out just what she understands. We have explained to her about Down Syndrome, and in her understanding it has a large part to do with Peter's glasses, why he wears them and why she doesn't. I asked her what Down Syndrome means and she tells me, "Peter can't do some things so good. He can't see so good so he wears glasses, but he is the same inside, he has a heart and all that other stuff." I asked her what she thinks about Down Syndrome and she responded, "I think its great. Next question, please."



My favorite part of the annual meeting is the awards banquet where consumers (the word we now use for people with developmental disabilities served by TARC) receive awards for their hard work over the past year. It begins with a group who has agreed to entertain us with their music. They mount the stage, via the handicap ramp, and

proceed to simulate a rainstorm on huge flat pie-looking percussion instruments. They begin by running their hands around and around the circumference of the instrument, it sounds like wind. Next they tap the instruments with their fingers, lightly, lightly, then harder until it really does sound like dozens of raindrops, hitting a window or sidewalk. They are then given their drumsticks, foot-long pieces of wood with padded ends. It is now clear why the drumsticks were kept out of their reach. They laugh, shriek with delight and bang on the drums, bang and bang to simulate thunder.

After the performance, I watch as an award is given for perseverance to a man who has worked in the governor's office for over eight years. He wears a suit jacket, tie, sneakers. He receives his award, searches numerous pockets and finally pulls out a piece of paper, folded exactly twice, and reads his acceptance speech: "If you work hard, your life will be a success." The paper is refolded and restored to its pocket. He returns to his seat.

The award for enthusiasm is next. The presenter doesn't make it through the introduction before the recipient, a male in his 40s, bounds his way to the stage and puts an arm around her. She tries to continue but is repeatedly interrupted by his pleased acclamations of "Whew!" or "This is big!" or "This is real big!" She tries once more to continue and is again interrupted. He yells and points, "There's my mom and dad! Hello Mom and Dad!" Two tiny, old people sitting at a back table smile and wave towards the stage. He shakes his head, is so genuinely pleased. I applaud until my hands itch.

I think about all that we lost that day, and of all that we gained, almost eight years ago when Peter was born. I think about the human spirit which rallies, which revels in the ability to get past, to get through. I wonder if it was our bravery or our naivety that sought brothers or sisters for this child. We considered what it would be like to explain to a child why we, who love children and wanted children, chose to have only one. I never wanted to face my child and say, explicitly or not, "We wanted more, but none like you."

Peter is our oldest but will remain the youngest. Each of his sisters will pass him in height, in knowledge, in vocabulary. I cheer for his small victories. He will always be the first who learned to read. Tim and I take great pride in hearing him read complete sentences, he still doesn't speak in them. At bedtime Peter reads to us all, slowly and deliberately as he points to each word. We sit on the bed, surround Peter with our bodies and listen as he reads to us.

Once when visiting the school, Tim and I ran into the principal who began telling us a story about how one day she heard a ruckus in the hallway and found Mrs. Levins, Peter's paraprofessional, and Peter in an argument in the hall. Peter was irately yelling, "Homework! Want homework!" Mrs. Levins had no book to send home with him that day

and was trying to explain, “No, Peter. No homework today.” The principal laughed, and told us she had never heard the contention put quite that way before. Mrs. Levins tells us that she thinks we have a recreational reader on our hands. The thought thrills me, and I hope one day he will read books I loved as a kid, *Horton Hears a Who?* Perhaps one day the Pied Piper?



Charles Buxton, an English physician, visited Down and recorded his impression of the visit in the Surrey Office Records. Buxton called Down the “right man in the right place,” and described how children followed him like the Pied Piper, “Taking his hand and evincing their unfeigned delight in his presence.” I read this and make a mental note to rethink my opinion of the children’s tale.

In 1868, Down purchased Normansfield, a “gentleman’s residence” with five acres. In time he acquired the other two houses in the development, more land, and opened it all to residents with mental and physical disabilities. On this property, he and his wife Mary created an environment of learning, providing opportunities for education and craftsmanship, worship and entertainment to as many as 156 residents. Each staff member was required to have “musical or entertaining skills,” which were often showcased in Normansfield’s elaborate theatre. J. Langdon Down continued work with the “feeble-minded” until his death in 1896.

I have seen several of Down’s clinical photographs, which have survived and remain the largest collection of clinical photographs in either the United States or Britain. No women in nightdresses, no painted handlebar moustaches or rolled up stockings to the knees. They are pictures of children in beautiful clothes, collars of lace and embroidered hems. They are pictures of men, like my son Peter will one day be, with button-down waist coats and ties, cleanly shaven, hair combed, legs crossed in dark crisp trousers with hands folded in laps. Like Velazquez’s portraits, they are full of dignity.



The final award given at the banquet is for the consumer who has held a job for the longest time. She is a dishwasher at a local restaurant, employed there for 10 years. She walks to the podium, head down, hands raised over her head in a thumbs up gesture, shaking them as marathoners do after crossing the finish line. She proceeds to accept her award, “I just wanna thank the Vintage. I love them at the Vintage and they’s always says that when I finish with the pots and pans, they’s look just like they’s new. And I love them all at the Vintage and I turned

51 in October and I gonna work for the Vintage until I 100 years old. And I pray for the Vintage, but what I really wanna do is sing my music all over the world. I really wanna to be a country singer. But I thank you to the Vintage and I pray for the Vintage every night. Thank you.” She walks down the ramp just the way she walked up, head down, hands above her head, shaking her proud fists with victory.

At last year's banquet a young man fell on his way to the stage. The room gasped. Members of the crowd got out of their seats to help him up. As he was pulled to his feet I noticed he was still smiling. He brushed off his jacket and trousers and similarly brushed away those who asked if he was alright. He was on his way to the stage and no fall, no humiliation, no embarrassment, no well-doers would slow him down. To those of us who sit and observe, these experiences are invaluable. I slow myself down, retardatio, and observe. Learn.



I find that people with little notion about Down Syndrome say things like, “They are all so loving.” Generalizations like this are hard for me to take. I don't lump my girls' personalities because they are girls, because they were born without complication. But the thing that irritates me even more is the realization that sometimes generalizations work. He is loving, extremely so. I can discipline him and he holds no grudge. Of all my children, it is the hardest for me to see him cry. I can't wrench a “sorry” out of our daughter Bernadette, but his are given immediately and sincerely. He is there, present in emotion at every second. He hides nothing, except a package of hotdogs now and then under his shirt. He doesn't laugh out of courtesy; he doesn't know when he is snubbed. He embraces children who remain stiff, roll their eyes, turn their heads, and he loves it. He is raw, and we relish this about him. I try to seek humility as he shows it to me daily. I wish I could take some of what people throw his way and send it back to them. I wish I didn't have those desires to throw back at all. I wish I made better use of opportunities to teach others.

I think back to when Peter began Kindergarten. All the parents and their students were invited to come in the night before, to put away supplies and find a spot at a table. Tim and I arrived with Peter. He picked a table and sat. We watched, awkwardly, as tables began to fill while Peter sat alone. He got up to explore, and while he was gone a little girl and her father picked a spot at Peter's table. When he returned, the father apologetically picked up his daughter's supplies and moved elsewhere. It is in these times I hurt, but only for myself. Peter doesn't notice.

Yet, I know he will one day. Until then my heart breaks only for me. I wish I had done Peter justice, perhaps explained him in a kind

and objective manner to this father. I wish I could have pulled out a painting by Mantegna and a picture of Peter in his ghost costume. I would note the similarities of the two little boys with almond eyes, wrapped in sheets. I could tell the story of the Pied Piper. I could use the chalkboard to diagram chromosomes while providing an introductory to genetics; I could illustrate all my thoughts with an elaborate formula which equals Peter, all that he is and all that he is not.

*Christina Herbic*Tough Wishes

— For My Brother

He collects the pennies he finds on 57th Street.
 They never splash into wishing
 wells or twinkle like hope at the bottom
 of fountains because there's a condition if you
 toss them there.
 You have to desire something.
 He has no real expression per se because "smiles warm,"
 "tears hurt" and "words can cut."
 Understand that
 his heart is encased in cloudy glass, if it beats too hard or feels anything at all
 it just may
 shatter, but he may never feel
 this piercing.
 He looks at his worn out loafers to avoid
 stares that might crack him.
 And so when I do see him, I speak calmly
 like I practiced.
 He sits on our weathered wood floor right
 in front of me staring
 at his penny jar.
 I wonder if he even hears me and so I talk louder, words from deep in my
 belly
 rise up out of my throat, my face contorts and
 I realize that now
 I'm yelling.
 JESUS—
 reACT
 yell BACK, do SOMETHing.
 Sometimes I want to pull him close, like my father
 does, make him inhale
 my fiery breath on his face, feel SOMETHing.
 Instead he holds his dusty jar of copper
 his only wish
 to climb inside of.

Rosemary Monaco

Near Nameless Creek, Indiana

The children sleep,
a perfect tangle
in the backseat.
You buy unleaded,
and some caffeine,
while I pick up
a President's son
on all-talk AM radio.
We take hot sips
from our overfilled cups
as we listen to a
Down's mother from Maine
wish away nine months
and our headlights
meet and mate
with the midwestern moon.
In the left hand lane again,
our twin rings blink
under a tractor trailer's beam.
The merge sign flashes and
throws smug glints over the tangle
of perfect children,
back-seat snug
not too far
from Terre Haute.

Aaron Thornton

A Story About a Guy Who Gets Help from a Foreign Guy He Can't Understand...

“Kevin, I told you to come in the back door, not the front door. It looks bad for business. And tuck your shirt in.”

That was Jim, the asshole owner/manager of Bunn’s Drugs. My boss.

“I’m wearing an apron, it won’t matter.”

“It’ll be untucked in the back and people will see it every time you turn around. Now tuck it!”

“What did you say?” I said, faking indignance and shock.

“I said ‘Tuck it,’ with a ‘T,’ not whatever you were thinking.”

“Didn’t sound like...”

“You’re on register two,” he said and then promptly turned his back and stomped away.

Of course I was on register two. We only had two registers and register one was for both general purchase and pharmaceuticals, which I knew absolutely nothing about. Register two was for the guy who was only there part of the time because the rest of the time he was out running deliveries. I wandered over behind the counter trying hard to tie my apron on. My fingers still hurt from playing at this bar for like two hours straight the night before. I’ve played longer than that before, even just in practice, but that night we played hard. The crowd was awesome and really got into it when we started covering old Metallica songs. Hell I even impressed myself; I didn’t break my first string until halfway through our last song.

Jim, however, was not impressed with the fact that I was an hour late to work that morning. It wasn’t my fault though. My cat, Fuzzy Nuts, went walking along my headboard again and knocked my alarm clock off. It was just a cheap ass battery operated thing so when it got knocked off, it broke. Lucky for me the furball jumped on my stomach and woke me up right about the time I had to be at work.

As soon as I got situated for a nice long boring slow Monday, the phone rang. Now that may not seem like a big problem, but you see it’s Jim’s job to answer the phone, it even says so in the employee handbook that he wrote himself, yet he never does.

Rrrrrinnng.

Dammit.

“Bunn’s Drugs, Kevin speaking, how can I help you?”

“¿Ello?”

“Bunn’s Drugs, how can I help you?”

“¿Ello?”

“HELLO!”

“O, ello.”

“Can I help you?”

“¿Que?”

Oh no, I thought. It's the old Spanish dude! I'd never actually had to talk to him, just heard tales about how much of a pain in the ass he was.

“WHAT DO YOU NEED TODAY, SIR?” I asked very loudly and very

s l o w l y.

“¿Español?”

“No señor, no taco spanish. Try English buddy.”

“¿Ingles?”

“No. Not *ingles*. ENGLISH.”

“¿Ian Glish? Gracias señor. Me duele la cabeza.”

“What?”

“¿Que?”

“Kay...? What the...”

“Cabeza! Me duele la cabeza!”

This old guy was starting to piss me off.

“Dude, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Mi cabeza! ¿Comprende?”

“NO, I don't *comprende*. What do you need?”

“¿Que?”

Suddenly Jim's voice cut in on the other line.

“Perdon usted, pero, ¿que necesita?”

The old guy simply replied “aspirina.” I could figure that one out. I kept wondering what kind of idiot called a drugstore for aspirin. Then I remembered that he was old. Old people are like that. Always making things difficult. Like here, we have old people discount cards. But not once has an old person ever presented their card until after I've taken their money and given them change. Then it's, “oh you need to *see* the card?” and I have to refund money and explain to Jim why.

My boss finished the phone call in Spanish and gave me dirty looks from behind the counter in the back of the store. Then he stomped his way up to my register and handed me a bag with a bottle of aspirin with a note attached giving the address.

“Mr. Del Drogas is one of our most valued customers...”

“Del Drogas? Oh come on, you're kidding right?”

“No, now listen...”

“What's his first name then?”

“I have no idea and I don't really care either. He spends a lot of money in this store. That's all I need to know. Now listen here. He orders on credit so you don't have to take any money. In case you were wondering he said he had a headache and needs aspirin...”

“Yeah, I figured the aspirina part out all by myself.”

“Just take this to the address and get back here without making Mr. Del... without making him mad.”

“Why don't *you* run this to him like you normally do?”

“It'll be good for you.” He looked at me then shook his head. Stomp stomp stomp.

I knew why he wanted me to run it. He didn't want to have to deal with Señor Druggie, the el Pain in the el Ass.

I looked down at the address in my hand and groaned. 4711 Clearview Lane. I knew where that road was. It was in this ritzy area in the far north part of town where a bunch of rich old farts lived. They even had their own police department and zip code and everything. Clearview Lane was where some of the most expensive houses were. I had no business driving my beat up crappy cancerous rumbling Toyota that leaned to the right side through that neighborhood. Jim had a nice car and usually made the run. Why did I have to do it? I could picture all the old ladies looking through their expensive curtains with their gold rimmed glasses on the tip of their noses and their lipstick drooping into a frown where their wrinkled old lips had once been but had now totally rotted away. Old women were just so damn nosy it made me sick.

“I hate old people,” I mumbled as I walked out the door.

Outside, the weather was just the same as it was when I got to the store. Then it occurred to me that I had only been at work for like ten minutes, but it was nice outside anyway. It was one of those sort of cloudy sort of chilly mid fall days where the leaves are just turning colors and the wind blows them all over your windshield. Everything had this grayish tint to it, creating this surreal haze, yet you knew it was in fact real because the wind was just cool enough to bite at you and drive you into a solitary, lonely state of mind. I took a deep breath as I wiped a wet leaf off my door handle and hopped in. If nothing else, I thought, at least I was driving.

The trip over there took only about ten minutes, which is record time for anywhere in this city, but that's why I'm the delivery boy. I love to drive, and I know how to get where I need to go. I don't think Jim likes me very much, and I suck at playing store, but like I said, I can drive, and I know this town, so he keeps me around. And I am the best damn delivery boy he will ever have, too. You see, me and this town have an agreement. If she lets me get where I need to go as quickly and with as few problems as possible, I'll keep my windows rolled down so that she can hear my Metallica tapes. It's worked pretty well so far.

I turned through the manicured bush and limestone archway that leads into richville. Despite our deal, I didn't think that "Creeping Death" was an appropriate song to blast for my little cruise down Clearview, so I turned it off, and whispered an apology.

4100, 4215, 4575, 4613. I never have figured out how they came up with the numbers for their houses. I mean, why skip so many numbers at a time so that it makes it entirely unpredictable when a house like 4711 would pop up out of all the regulation-length regulation-green grass carpets out there? 4900...Shit.

I turned around in one of the huge driveways and some old guy in slacks and a sweater gave me the dirtiest look imaginable while he reached into his double sized mailbox. He looked like a pissed off bloodhound, mad because I had had the nerve to drive my piece of shit foreign-mobile onto his pure white concrete driveway. I just wished him an oil spot and rumbled away.

I found 4711 and figured out why I missed it. The road leading up to it was about a mile long and it ran through a golf course sized front lawn, so it looked like just another road springing off of Clearview. However, the brass numbers on a stack of bricks with a mailbox buried in it beside the road clued me in, so I turned down and drove as fast as I could, now that I finally had the chance to just cruise.

As I got nearer to the house, I slowed down from my top speed of about thirty five and looked in awe at a castle-sized house that could hold about four of my own apartments in it. There was a turnaround point in front of the front door, so I stopped right in front of the entrance and hopped out.

I knocked on the solid oak door, not quite sure if the huge brass knocker was for purpose or just decoration. I stood and listened to the absolute silence that shrouded the place, interrupted only by a ping or two from my engine cooling off behind me. The brass handles and hinges seemed to glow golden in the pale grey morning haze, making them look all magical, like I was walking into some place really old and, well, magical. And if you couldn't tell just by looking at it, the complete silence surrounding the place told how rich this old guy was. In all of my other deliveries, I could hear the floorboards creaking as they came with their walkers and canes to the door. Sometimes I could even hear the little whirr of an electric wheelchair. But the door didn't even creak when it opened up, and I had to step back to avoid getting head-butted in the chest by this little old Hispanic woman in a maid's uniform.

"Hello?" she demanded before I had a chance to recover. She looked down at the bag in my hand.

"I'm here to see Mr..."

"Ian Glish?" she demanded, jabbing a fat little finger at me.

"I..." It took me a second, but then I realized what she was talking about, so to avoid confusion I decided to play Ian for a while. "Yeah, I'm Ian."

She beckoned me into the entryway with a jerk of her fat little head and started speeding along down the hallway. I didn't have much of a chance to look around, but I saw all sorts of paintings and vases and

other typical fragile rich people stuff. We flew down the hallway, up a flight of carpeted stairs, through the dining room with a monstrous oval table, past the smell of fresh bread pouring out of the kitchen, up two more flights of stairs and finally to a chamber door where Grandma Lightning finally stopped. I stood there with my heart racing, trying to catch my breath and yet trying to make it seem like I wasn't trying to catch my breath at the same time.

Two soft knocks on the door and I heard a muffled voice speak from the other side. The maid carefully opened the door and then roughly pushed me in, closing the door behind me. I stood there in this huge chamber staring at an old guy across the room with a cat on his lap that could've been Fuzzy's twin. To my right was a beautiful black grand piano, with the lid down. It was so polished that it reflected all the books lining the walls surrounding it. It seemed odd that it would be shut, but I didn't think about it too much, because to my left was a little piece of heaven. Leaning up against the wall, side by side, were two Spanish style acoustic guitars, complete with multicolored nylon strings and flowery inlays around the sound-hole and weaving up the fret-board. I looked back at the cat in his lap, the only thing familiar to me in the room, and it half closed its eyes and purred loudly like he was saying it was okay for me to be there with those gorgeous guitars. Then I looked at the old man and he was staring right at me with a sort of smirk on his face, like he was trying to figure me out, or like he was expecting me to do something. That's about when I realized I was still holding his bag with the bottle of aspirin inside.

Feeling like a total idiot, I scuffled over to where he was sitting staring down at the floor to hide my red-hot face. I handed him the bag and chanced a look into his face. He was still staring at me the same way, but he took the bag and nodded in thanks. I turned to walk away, pissed off at myself for acting so silly. All I saw were a couple of guitars and I turned into a giddy little school boy. I reached the door and almost left when I heard the old guy say "Ian" with that thick Hispanic accent.

I turned around in time to watch him spill Fuzzy's twin out of his lap and hobble over to where the guitars leaned against the wall. He picked one up and sat in a nearby chair and began plucking the strings to see if they were in tune. And of course they were. I played guitar too, so I recognized that right off. They had that extra echo, that depth, that pure, perfect ring that only tuned guitar strings have. I listened quietly as the reverberations died away. Then the old man snapped me out of my reverie when he started playing something that sounded like a Ricky Martin song.

He giggled when he saw my expression and pointed at me, or rather at my Metallica shirt and laughed even harder. Then he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and coughed into the other one. Sighing

slightly, he looked at me again, with that same bemused half-stupid half-quizzical look. Then, pointing at my shirt, he just said two words: Kirk Hammett. I fell in love with him instantly, because the way he said it, I knew that this old Spanish dude liked Metallica's lead guitarist as much as I do. Kirk's style is so unique, so pure, so unimaginably god-like. It never really occurred to me that it was strange for an old foreign dude to know about Metallica though...

Without waiting to see my reaction he started to play various Metallica songs, and I just stood there swaying in awe as he flawlessly played the intros to "Nothing Else Matters," "To Live is to Die," and "Fade to Black," in a seamless medley that I envied beyond reason. Those intros aren't the easiest to play either. I lost my shame or fear or whatever was holding me back and motioned at the other guitar. Without stopping he nodded his head, signaling me to pick up the other guitar and sit next to him. I did and I fell in love with the guitar too. It was light, a lot lighter than it looked, and the strings were so close to the rosewood fret-board it didn't take any real pressure at all to hold them down. The natural finish was so sleek, so smooth, it begged you to run your hand across it, following the grain of the light sandy birch veneer. It was almost as if the guitar wasn't there, it was so beyond perfection and reality, so I strummed a few chords to make sure I wasn't dreaming, but then stopped because I noticed he was looking at me. I looked away and back down at the guitar. Carved into the side of the neck, between the sixth and seventh fret bars, was the name Ralph.

"Who's Ralph?" I asked as I snapped my head up in hopes of an explanation. He just laughed.

Instead of answering he started playing the beginning to "The Unforgiven," the first version, from the "Black Album" with the acoustic intro that required two guitars. He started plucking his part and when it came time for the second guitar to join in, I smoothly and surely played the lead part. I knew that song. My buddies and I used it as a warm-up when we practiced. But there with the old guy, we couldn't play much more than a few bars, because then the intro was done and it's kind of impossible to get any distortion out of an acoustic guitar. But it was enough.

"What I've felt, what I've known, never shined through in what I've shown," I sang aloud, to his obvious approval.

"Beautiful," he said, which shocked the hell out of me.

"You know...you can ...but, English?" I stammered.

He laughed.

"Of course I can speak the *ingles*. I would not get very far in this country without it, *buddy*."

I kind of felt bad when he said "buddy." But he said it all light-heartedly, and kept laughing, even while he continued with a song I had never heard before. It was distinctly Hispanic, with the rapid finger

plucking so ingrained into that style.

“Can you accompany me?” he asked, his nimble old fingers never faltering.

“I can try.”

So I did. And then he accompanied me, and I him again, for about an hour, each of us taking turns playing chord progressions while the other improvised leads. We didn't play any more Metallica, but that was okay because what we came up with sounded unreal. We had this sort of bluesy salsa thing going on for a while, then a kind of fast paced Spain meets Nirvana thing. We'd get going on a song, and I'd look up at him, and he'd have his eyes closed, his face turned up towards the ceiling while he swayed slowly side to side in time with the music. I couldn't believe this. I mean, I'd been playing for quite a few years and I considered myself pretty damn good, but here I was putting everything I had into this guitar, a grip white knuckle tight on the fretboard, sitting straight up, trying so hard not to fuck up and this old guy looks like he's in the bathroom taking a piss. So I was pretty much in awe the whole time. We traveled through some Santana meets Satan and I had problems keeping up as I watched his fingers fly around on the fretboard way up there by the sound hole. It took me a long time to be able to play those Metallica songs, and they were fairly intricate, too, but this old guy... I think even Kirk Hammett would be in awe. But somehow I kept up and we created music together until about halfway through our Remember the Alamo but don't forget when Ozzy Osbourne pissed on it song when I remembered that I was supposed to be at work that day.

“Oh shit!” I said out of the blue, stopping the music as I stood up. The cat lifted its head and glared at me from its corner of the room. “Oh, I mean, uh, yeah, I've got to get back to work. Thanks man, bye.”

I leaned the guitar back against the wall and did an apologetic sort of half bow out of the room and left.

“¡Adios, *buddy!*” I heard him yell. Then he started giggling at his own joke.

The old maid greeted me at the door.

“Finish?” she barked.

“Yeah,” I said, then asked as an afterthought, “Is his name Ralph?”

The old woman seemed annoyed at my asking her that. I guess it was kind of rude, but she gave me an affirmative nod of her head anyway, right before she slammed the door in my face.

I have no idea how long it took me to get back to Bunn's, or even how I got back. The whole time I had the song we were playing running through my mind ceaselessly and as loud and real as it was there in that room with the old man. I couldn't believe that I had just done that. I mean, I had played with other people before, but they were all closer to my age and ability. He...he was just, wow. I mean, damn, it was like

playing with a god.

I walked through the front door again and there was asshole personified, with the dirtiest look imaginable on his tight-lipped, cheap, clean shaven little beady-eyed face.

"I've told you before, I want employees to come through the back door. It looks bad when you come through the front."

"I'm sorry," I said, picking up my apron off the counter.

He stood there waiting for some smart-ass remark, but I didn't feel like a smart-ass right then. I felt good, which was odd, because I was at work, in close proximity to Jim.

"So did he use his mean little maid to translate for you so he could talk your ear off for an hour?"

"No, he spoke English."

Jim looked shocked.

"*Señor Del Drogas speaks English?*"

"Yeah. He showed me his guitars, too. And his name is Ralph. I'm glad he spoke English, too, because that little old maid really *was* a pain in the ass."

Jim just stood there looking stupid with his mouth half open like he was going to say something. Instead, he mumbled something I couldn't make out and then wandered away, leaving me with tingling fingers and Metallica songs in my head.

Silvana Unciano

Escaping

Seventy five watt bulb and the hum
of a steam diffusing fan insulate
me like pink fiberglass in the walls.
Hiding in denim and oversized tee
on the toilet seat's green fuzzy lid.
My space to breathe.

Beyond the bathroom door the vacuum
cord stalks, to trip me when I step
from linoleum to shag. Tangled
pant legs, the ironing, lies
in wait. In the den a computer,
brimming with band statements, wants
to chain me to the keyboard.
Warm bodies, family, sit on their heels
to pounce at the sight of me, drag
me to the kitchen or the latest broken
picture frame. Trash blocks the front
exit, demands to be taken out.

I lean against the sweaty porcelain tank,
Finger the muscle knot in my neck,
inhale the damp smell of the drying towels,
and close my eyes. I can almost
hear the silence over the baby's cries.

Josh Stuart

Love Letters from the Spanish-American War

— for Alexander Coleman

I.

There's a rustle in the watermelon patch.

Sunlight peels through the branches of an apple tree.
A crow stalks rows of asparagus, cucumbers, tomatoes.
From the melons, suspicious hissing.

My great-grandfather, tending to his rosebuds,
finally drops his shovel and investigates. Stealing across
his garden, he lifts a tangle of vines to reveal the jaws

of an alligator—who, in staging his ingenious escape
from Birt's Reptile Farm, had slunk past cages
of impotent rattlesnakes, mail-order packages of iguanas

and the dueling stone frogs that marked his path
to freedom. At the sight of this cold-blooded fugitive,
great-grandfather—a tough old cuss by all accounts—

turns and hustles indoors, cursing his herpetologist
neighbors all the way, leaving the shifty gator
to mellow among the fruits and vegetables.

II.

On the firing lines of the Philippines, where mosquitoes
grew the size of baseballs, he'd watch reptiles slither
through bamboo, dart across the sights of his rifle.

Alligators, like bullets, move swiftly in pursuit of humans.
One afternoon, while policing the streets of Manila,
he waded through the gardens of a Spanish estate, chasing

an exotic blossom that caught his eye. Amid the labyrinth
of tiger lilies, orchid bulbs, hyacinths boasting swords

for leaves, he plucked his bloom, sent it to his sweetheart

back in Kansas. *Should anything diminish my faith
in your constancy, he wrote her, I would surely think
you had forgotten me altogether, for I have not received*

a letter from you for a month. He'd carried her photograph
across the Orient: China, Japan, and these Philippine islands.
Once the jungle surrendered the last of its guerillas,

he set off with the sunrise to deliver mail. East Topeka,
he'd stroll past rows of enormous oaks, meticulous lawns
lined with tulips, retracing his route after lunchtime.

In the evenings, he'd curl up with his German Shepherd
and tune the radio to his beloved Cardinals,
cheering pennant races throughout the Depression.

My great-grandfather, who carried other people's letters
from one Roosevelt's administration into the other's,
spent that Christmas in Manila, on the eve of the 1900s,

waiting for one addressed to him.

Christopher Piatt

No Last Names

When you steal from me, you're stealing twice.

-Jack Benny

The following story is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.

That's not my line. Or rather, that phrase doesn't belong to me.

Actually, it was radio shows of the 1930's that first told true crime stories, all the while using pseudonyms in order to guarantee the safety of that ever-shrinking demographic known as "the innocent." Producers of programs like "Dragnet" and "Gangbusters" knew that there was no better source for drama than front page headlines. However, once they were tweaked and filtered through a dramatic lens, these stories were no longer accurate enough to be news stories, but were not exaggerated enough to be fiction. They were only partial invention. Semi-fiction.

Audiences didn't seem to mind, though. "Dragnet" became so popular that it was able to make the leap to a different medium, only to become immortalized on television by Jack Webb. The "Dragnet" theme is one of those handful of TV tunes that are familiar as Christmas carols, but are applicable all year round. And just as those few hard boiled chords have been programmed into the American psyche, so has the idea that the safest way to tell a story about a true crime is to change the names. After all, the innocent must be protected. Right?



It was my drag queen friend who first taught me how easy shoplifting is. I suppose I had always looked down my nose at it. Shoplifting is tacky, I thought. Shoplifting is what people get arrested for in high school. It's how out-of-work movie stars make it back into the headlines. It's not chic like a cocaine addiction, or mysterious like sexual misconduct, or dangerous like carrying a concealed weapon. Shoplifting is in poor taste. And boring. Like food stamps.

And it's wrong. Right? Taking something that is not yours is wrong. Coming in at number seven: . . . Thou shalt not steal. Do unto others, etcetera.

My drag queen friend will take anything in a mall that is not nailed down: CD's, lipstick, little leopard-skin purses, candy bars. Con-

fidence is the key. It may seem that a six-foot-four chain-smoking cross-dresser is just too conspicuous, somehow too ominous not to be noticed stuffing merchandise into his pants in Gadzooks. However, when this diva struts through the mall with all the attitude of a throbbing Gloria Gaynor song, people get out of the way. These are the same nerves of steel that help movie stars, politicians, and hard-working prostitutes stay above water. Just like every other cutthroat profession, shoplifting is all about appearances. At all times, one must remain Cool.

My personal history of theft prior to the gas station mess is as follows: the only thing I have ever stolen is other people's stories. I am a story thief. I listen carefully to the love and war stories of friends, coworkers, and strangers on airplanes, I file them away in my head, and when they have had enough time to incubate, I tweak the details (names, settings, etc.), crank them out on paper and label them "fiction." It is a literary fencing operation in which I am the narrative pickpocket. I steal the joy and heartbreak from an unsuspecting you, file off their serial numbers, and sell them on the black market. But while I may have stolen some people's most valuable possessions and sold them back at exorbitant prices, I have never, ever shoplifted. Famous last words? If so, they certainly weren't mine. I probably stole them off somebody else.



My drug dealer friend works at a gas station. He works the second shift, as apparently drug dealers do not work in the morning. The gas station in question is labeled a "snack shop," and while it does not sell beer, it is a small, well-stocked convenience store. It is owned by a local family that owns several such establishments. The store in question, however, has no security cameras and the managers keep a lousy inventory of its merchandise.

My drug dealer friend is generous in that grandiose, *Cosa Nostra* kind of way, and I am in the family. He fancies himself a postmodern, blue collar Robin Hood, stickin' it to the man by liberating the Twinkies and Camel cigarettes of the aristocracy. I am still unclear as to how his ring of bandits got started, but by the time I became aware of it, it had blossomed into a full-fledged underground society. There are two distinct groups of patrons at this gas station; the people who have to pay for their Snapple and the people who do not. I am a member of the latter.

It started with a fountain Coke on a hot afternoon. He wouldn't let me pay for it. That simple. I resisted the gesture at first, but he was full of "Oh Please," and "Look Who You're Talking To," and "You're In The Family It's The Least I Can Do." So I graciously thanked him, took my forty-four ounces (I'm an American; I demand excess gratifi-

cation), and hit the road. That simple.

It then became a recurring game. We were role playing. He was the Mafia Don and I was his Prodigal Son, returning after straying from the fold, only to be greeted by a feast and the fatted calf. I would resist, he would insist, I would resist, he would insist, I would give in. The routine became our own "Who's on First?" It was playful. And no one was getting hurt because the only thing that ever hung in the balance was snack food. It was root beer and potato chips. And an occasional newspaper. Surely no one would miss these things.

This lifestyle is all about rationale. More importantly, if you can rationalize this, then it has become a lifestyle. I found myself creating justification for accepting the generosity. My paradigms ranged from "Hey, I'm in college. These are the experiences that can only exist in college. I won't be able to shoplift ten years from now. This is my prime," to "Hey, poor kids spend their whole lives stealing, and yet the country's economy hasn't collapsed since the late 1920's. Something must be working." I was becoming a real jackass.

Like everything else that is both illegal and fun, shoplifting is a slippery slope. Eventually I only feigned bashfulness when I took things, and our cute banter became perfunctory, and then just boring. Then we stopped going through the motions altogether. I would come into the store, nod to him, stuff some M&Ms into my pocket, and leave. I also upscaled to more expensive merchandise. Before taking a road trip I would stop in for free batteries. On my way to a party I would drop by for breath mints and condoms. Once I complimented my friend on his sunglasses and he insisted that I take a pair for myself.

And I was not alone. There were others. Many, many others. My drug dealer friend is enormously well-bred, smartly dressed, and belongs to a good Greek fraternity, so his social circle is immense. An entire community of cell phone-toting, fake-tanning, SUV-driving bar hoppers counts on him for free gasoline and cigarettes. This was never about stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. This was college kids ransacking a local Mom and Pop store.

I was a culprit. At first it was cute. I came into this story with a clean record. I'm a straight arrow, a wallflower nerd who was corrupted by the bad seed kids. Which was novelty. Good fun. And then suddenly I'm in the same echelon as hardcore stoners who are jonesin' for potato chips and stealing them to satisfy their munchies.



My artist friend constantly accuses me of lying. He and his therapist are working on honesty, he tells me. He's so much more fulfilled when he tells people what he really thinks of them, he assures me. He thinks I am too political, too sterile, and wouldn't I be so much

happier if I went though life like he does, which I assume means reaching self-actualization by taking ecstasy at major theme parks and talking loudly about my genitals in the mall food court. When am I going to strip away my layers, he wants to know. Will I ever shatter my routine?

I want to tell him to piss off. I'd like to say to him, You want honesty? Fine. Your therapist is a fucking con artist, and everyone knows it but you. I want to tell him, Your free association lifestyle is a total fraud, okay? I dream of screaming, Artist? You call yourself an artist? Directing an all-S&M production of Edward Albee's *The American Dream* does not liberate the literature from the shackles of modern theatre. Nor does it reinvent the text. It's a fiasco and an embarrassment for all involved, you nitwit. That's honesty.

However, I recognize this strategy to be a counterproductive one, so I keep my honesty to myself. Instead I tell him, That's great. Working on honesty. Yeah, my therapist and I are working on subtlety.

It was my artist friend who suggested I do myself and my writing a favor by trying something new every day. He put down his chopsticks, looked me straight in the eye, and insisted, breaking free from your rut should become a discipline. "You need to break more rules," he prodded. When I asked which rules he recommended, he inquired "Have you ever tried shoplifting?"

What? Of course not. No. Absolutely not. Jesus. Why would you even suggest that, I asked indignantly.

Not only was it a stupid thing to recommend, I told him, it was wrong. It was not like a suggestion to walk around a city block naked, or chain myself to a tree to prevent it from being cut down, both of which are illegal, but neither of which does anyone any harm. But shoplifting is stealing, I snapped at him. It's not that I'm unwilling to try something new, I explained to him (slowly and loudly, so he wouldn't miss the point), it's that I don't take things that don't belong to me, comprende? You think I should try anything once? Why don't *you* try something new once? For once why don't you keep your mouth shut so that some of the things that are meant to stay exclusively inside your head don't tumble out for all the world to hear? That would be something new. Shoplifting. Jesus.



My grandmother was notorious for taking things from restaurants. Usually small cream pitchers and ashtrays. It was adorable. She was old and it was adorable. She would slip them into her purse and giggle and insist that no one would miss them. When they cleaned out her house after she died, they found countless cream pitchers and ashtrays, like the jigsaw puzzles in *Citizen Kane*. Sitting in her basement stories were swapped about favorite And Remember The Time We Took

Her Out For Her Birthday And She Stole The . . . experiences. At first the grandchildren fought for them, but the more they dug, the more they found. Eventually though, the volume became overwhelming, and the stories lost their novelty. Finally several of them were thrown away. I kept my personal favorite from my youth, an ashtray from Sardi's she had stolen on a trip to New York. I slipped it into my personal box of the kitschy heirlooms that had been divided, but I did it when no one was looking so there would be no arguments over its custody. I really wanted that ashtray.



I would be lying if I did not admit that my artist friend's shoplifting suggestion haunted me for days. It usually does not occur to me to break the law. I drive the speed limit. I pay my taxes. I don't even smoke pot. What's more, I pride myself on being nonjudgmental. While I usually do not break the rules, I work valiantly to be impartial of my friends who do, pending nobody gets hurt. After all, I listen to National Public Radio. I go to the movies. I know there is enough evil in this world without my breaking the commandments or casting the first stone. While deviance intrigues me, I promised myself merely to observe it from the outside looking in.

So I considered going to the mall with my drag queen friend and watching him shoplift. Or maybe watching my drug dealer friend score a deal. These are people who know exactly what they're doing and have a perfectly good rationale for it. They live in their own moral universes, and their personal codes of conduct allow them to go on. They can live with themselves.

Which is great for me, I suppose. After all, my artist friend and my drag queen friend and my drug dealer friend all make irrevocable, defining choices on a regular basis. They have constructed for themselves identities that are ideal for a quirk thief like myself. It's easy to steal from characters with so much definition. I would like to pretend that I have withheld their names to protect their anonymity, but honestly I prefer using their titles instead. Names cannot be changed to protect the innocent when no one in the story is innocent to begin with. And thank goodness for that because by the time the final credits roll it has become apparent that innocence is excruciatingly dull.

What could be more appealing than a cross-dresser who shoplifts? More delicious than an Abercrombie & Fitch narcotics dealer? The names have been changed, in fact, to protect the writer.

So by now you have figured out that I have been taking things that were not mine for a long time. I meant to tell you about the first time I shoplifted and the circumstances and characters surrounding the incident. However, given the accidental nature of my first foray into a

life of crime, losing my shoplifting virginity seems strangely unimportant. I thought my artist friend's suggestion was a joke. Only much later did I understand how unfunny it was. The soapbox tirade I unloaded on him was ridiculous. I cannot take the moral high ground until I resist my gas station buddy's generosity. And I have still yet to resist.



Some college friends of mine have an annual theme party called "The White Trash Bash." The name implies all. Partygoers dress up, or rather dress down, in heavy metal tee shirts, hunting gear, class rings, Wal-Mart smocks, crimped hair, and lots of blue eyeshadow. The house is decorated with Billy Ray Cyrus posters and clotheslines with dirty underwear (in front of which couples pose for pictures, a la prom photos). We drink canned American beer and trash can punch and listen to hard rock ballads from the eighties. The affair is, to an academic crowd, quite a grand parody.

On the way to this year's blue collar ball, I stopped at the grocery store around 10:00 p.m. for a two-liter of 7-UP. In front of me in the check-out line was a woman with her baby who was buying generic brands of all the basics: milk, cheese, hamburger, flour, bread. Staples. No frills, no sweets. The woman appeared to be exhausted, and was still in some sort of work uniform. When she took out her food stamps, she flinched. I looked away immediately.

I only stopped at the grocery store because my drug dealer friend was not working that night, so I could not get the soda for free. I was doubly disgruntled. Not only did I have to pay for a two-liter out of my own pocket, I had to drive out of the way to get it. And now I was standing behind a woman who had a job but still needed food stamps and looked like she needed to see a doctor, and I was waiting to buy soda to take to a party that made fun of poor people.

A moment of clarity in a Food 4 Less on a Saturday night is as sobering as a cold shower, and I have not yet figured out how to turn it into an anecdote. It's just a bitter pill. That simple. And embarrassing. I'd rather admit to a nasty outbreak of herpes than a really thought-provoking case of White Man's Burden.

At the party, several girls sported stuffed pillow-pregnant bellies. Elite academia at its finest. Illegitimate pregnancy among po' folk is apparently some sort of laugh riot, and I seem to have missed the joke. Or, perhaps it wasn't funny because I'd seen the punch line earlier in the evening. Nothing ruins a great party joke like some asshole who already knows the punch line.

Shoplifting is about fraternity guys making stupid dares with each other, or bored housewives entertaining themselves, or kleptomaniacs

taking things out of compulsion or thrill. It is not about poor people sneaking food off the shelves because they have not eaten in days. That is *stealing*, taking out of necessity. That's what people go to prison for in French novels, or worse, in real life. Those people are thieves. Shoplifters are just passing the time. Frankly, I find the thieves to be a hell of a lot more noble.

This is not a confession of the "Hi-my-name's-Christopher-and-I'm-a-shoplifter" variety. In revealing this secret I half-convince myself that I am absolved (in the Catholic sense), but in telling this story I steal the confidence and identities of my friends and reduce them to stock characters. These things I took I did not even need. Ultimately, there is no nobility in admitting to any of this.

So for the first time, I'm trying something new. I'm admitting defeat. I have tried nothing new. I've used my grandmother as an *anecdote*. And I've relegated friends to a shadowy, semi-fictive place where no one has last names. So I probably belong in the nebulous, no-last-names place, too.



Hi. My name's Christopher. And I'm a shoplifter.

John Weslie McClurg

The Perpetual Suicide

Instead of a cup of coffee, she blows her head off every morning. And yes, it is shocking and painstakingly ritualistic: she wakes, throws the blanket off, marches into the bathroom, and the next thing you know, she's blowing her brains out! Turns out, she has this huge blue gun with a barrel the size of a toddler's thigh hidden under the sink next to the cleaning agents. In our morning/night-lit room, sometimes I think I hear her loading the big blue gun, hear her say "I'll make it nice," and then the sound of a hundred distant muskets go creeping across the sky: this is the sound of alarm! So my alarm I beep off, knowing what she's done, that she's done the inconceivable all over again for the futile, most beautiful of reasons. Then with a touch of tragedy, I slap on my coat, fall into pants and shoes body-numb, and bump the guitar into a fat dead note as she comes out, head in one gorgeous piece-set with a smile as a cherry on top. It's my job to ask no question, just take her down the dark and dingy stairs out the front door to a car that rests in one frosty, lovely magnificence.

Josh Shuart

Archaeologist's Poem

This kibbutz feels like Vegas
come May, when the archaeologists
begin arriving from stateside,
fresh off a week trolleying up Masada
at sunrise and posing for Dead Sea
flotation photos. Summer's prelude:
the glare off white-hot flesh
at the hotel pool, the aroma of kosher
McDonald's imported from Tiberius.
Busloads of tourists chug past citrus
groves, palm trees, the camel farm,
finally descending upon the museum's
prize artifact, the "Jesus Boat,"
dating from the Nazarene's famous
stroll across the water. Between
photo-ops, the local celebrity revered
for stumbling upon this treasure
shows up at an excavation site,
waves his metal dectector over a locus
someone's been digging for weeks,
and listens for the shrill beep of paydirt.
He declares it worthless in a matter
of seconds. These archaeologists, who
jet in from Connecticut, East Lansing,
and even Kansas, don't seem rattled
in the slightest by the bright yellow
signs warning *Beware of Land Mines*
in three languages. Nor do they appear
paranoid by millennium fever,
despite their proximity to Armageddon
and with it, the imminent possibility
of the Four Horsemen galloping in
during the late-morning popsicle break.
No, after cataloguing the day's finds
on sleek Apple laptops – a silver coin
bearing the haughty profile of Zeus,
a pair of Bedouin skeletons locked
in an embrace of centuries, and, today,
a nine-inch nail and a Syrian bullet

from the same bucketful of earth—
they congregate in the bomb shelter
for this evening's distinguished lecture
on the art of Greek pottery restoration,
or the incompetence of King James'
Hebrew translators. Afterwards,
attention quickly shifts to the *Bor Harah*,
or *Shithole*: the volunteers' bar, where
a bottle of Goldstar is five shekels
and the curvaceous Brazilian bartender
is friendly, until her Israeli heartthrob
saunters in toting a nine-millimeter
polished blacker than his boots. Here,
management is lax in enforcing its policy
of *no sleeping or sex on the pool table*,
through any attempt at such is ill-advised,
at least while the pony-tailed surfer
from Melbourne is polishing his *masse*.
English, of course, is the *lingua franca*
here so that Americans presumably
won't have to translate *Fuck Americans*
from Dutch, Italian or Portuguese
tabletop engravings. Business dwindles
on Fridays, when the cafeteria's basement
transforms into a clandestine disco,
boasting strobe lights and hip-hop vibes,
and the daughters of the kibbutz
are on the prowl. As festivities
reach a climax, a few risqué couples
will hop the fence at the five-star hotel,
crash the private beach for a moonlit
skinny-dip in this hallowed body of water.
Following this baptism of sorts,
the late-goers finally straggle home,
stumbling past clotheslines
sagging with crusty digging attire.
Tonight, as these archaeologists collapse
on their mattresses, their bodies tracing
dust outlines on the smooth white sheets,
fireworks explode in the distance,
and, for a moment, everyone believes
Lebanon's on another bombing run.

Courtney Angela Brkic

Passage

In the dream Ivan is lying on his back in a river, all parts of him submerged except for his face. The water is freezing and he imagines the jagged formation of ice in his bloodstream. It is dawn and he cannot remember how long he has been here, looking at the shivering trees, at his powdery breath hovering over him in clouds until fading into the white, winter sky.

He knows that in the beginning he had fought against the quiet overtaking his limbs. He remembers that he was chased here, his bullet-riddled legs moving with surprising agility. At first his blood had poured into the water. It had hovered in a pink cloud around his body and he had watched it diminish after the first seconds in the river.

No. In his sleep he shook his head. *That isn't right.* It had been dark when he knelt in the water, and then sat. It was too dark to see but he knew the bleeding had slowed from the bland taste of the water. It was no longer threaded with the heavy, sweet smell of blood.

That was when he had lain back into the frozen, silent world, a searing pain in his ears. He was waiting, and that was when dawn had come.



When they left the island, they had each taken a handful of pebbles from the beach beneath the town. Ivan had chosen them randomly, in a handful, and wrapped them in his handkerchief, squeezing the salt-water from the edges with his thumb and forefinger. Pero, his younger brother, had gathered them carefully, selecting smooth white stones, pieces of fractured coral and spiral shells. He placed them, one by one, into his pocket while Ivan stood in a white t-shirt behind him on the beach, silhouetted against the pine tree forest.



Their mother had fried bread for the journey. They were to travel by ferry and bus to Germany, where they would catch the plane for America. *Fried bread travels well*, she thought, standing over the skillet. *And tomatoes, cheese, ham.*

She placed the floury strips one by one in the oil, holding them down with her thumb for just a minute. Until her hand began to burn

from the spitting fat and tears stabbed at the backs of her eyelids.



Their grandmother, who was nearly blind, had held her palm to each man's forehead and begun to cry. The brothers shifted wordlessly from foot to foot. They looked at one another, each wondering the same thing. *Are a blind man's tears of the same substance as a seeing man's?* And when they bent to kiss her cheeks, she whispered to each one in turn. To Pero she said, "Ivan, watch over your younger brother. He's not as strong as you."

In Ivan's ear she whispered, "My child, your brother's not right since the war. But listen to him always, my little Pero."

And she had held each of their hands, smiling, and remembering the summers when they were boys and their mother had sent them to the fishing house to escape the heat in town. At night they had slept on either side of her like fish warming their bellies in the sun. Pero, tiny and pale. Ivan, sturdy and dark.

On the ride home, Pero shouted at his brother over the groan of the motorcycle. "What did she say to you?"

And Ivan shrugged, turning sideways so that his brother could see his white, straight teeth. He said something but his voice was drowned out by the wind.



When the plane took off, Pero removed the last piece of fried bread, crumpling the napkin that was translucent with oil. Ivan sat beside him in the aisle seat with his eyes shut. Pero knew his brother was not asleep and he watched him thoughtfully as he chewed.

As the airplane rose higher, burying itself in a white sky, Pero saw that the green and brown land underneath was erased. His heart began to beat quickly, rapid-fire like a bird's. He imagined himself flying parallel to the plane, lifted suddenly on gusts of wind and diving in the intervals.

Ivan imagined that he could hear the beating of his brother's heart. It seemed to be carving out a hole in his upper arm. He shifted and imagined the land fading as if he were in his boat leaving shore. *On a cloudy day, the land surrounds you and then, suddenly, ebbs. As if a curtain of smoke had suddenly descended, as if you have passed into another place completely.*



"He'll never survive," their mother had told Ivan, her face white and pinched, "You know he won't."

The mobilization orders had come that morning.

“You know he won’t,” she told him again. “What are we going to do.”

“I’ll handle it,” he told her. And he did, talking to the people he knew on the draft board. He pushed his brother’s name back two rotations.

“I wouldn’t do this for just anybody,” the man on the board said, pocketing the 100 DM note, then shook his head. “What the hell are you afraid of? It’s barely war anymore. It certainly isn’t what you remember.”

But Ivan had only filled up the office, glowering.

He remembered a defensive that had driven the Serbs back, and how they had come into a town after a massacre. They had spent a day picking up the dead and laying them on a piece of plastic sheeting to await burial. He had found the bodies of three girls behind a barn. Sisters, as he later found out, and he had lain them side by side on the sheeting. He had carried them, without realizing, in order of age.

The eldest had been dark-haired, just a little younger than his own twenty years. The middle sister had been lighter, with a bland face. He remembered that he had needed to pry them out of each other’s arms to transport them to the grave. The youngest had been blonde, a little girl, and he had watched her surprised face as he carried her.

“Take his name off,” he told them.

Word got out and sped across the island with the ferocity of a wildfire. Their neighbor, whose son had been in Ivan’s unit and who had died at the start of the war, stopped talking to them altogether.

“We’ve got to get him out,” their mother said. “I nearly lost one son, I’m not about to lose the other.”

And Pero’s face had reddened as he walked out of the room. But not before Ivan was able to catch something in his face, a slow blossoming of fear.

“He’s scared to stay, and he’s scared to go alone,” their mother said.

And Ivan noticed that his brother had not insisted, as other young men might, that he was able to fight his own battles. And he was suddenly ashamed of the fact that he had noticed, and that this thought had filled him with a certain calculating coldness.

“You’ve got to take him out,” their mother told Ivan.



But he had not expected such sharp pain for his home.

Queens was too noisy for either brother. The sounds of the street and the smells of Mexican, Chinese and kebab filled their room on hot summer nights.

"I can't fucking stand it," Pero would tell him, near tears, remembering the silence of the island.

The war, Ivan realized in those moments, would most certainly have killed him. "If we close the window, we'll suffocate," he would point out in a tone that sounded reasonable to his ears.

And Pero would turn his face to the wall, remembering their grandmother's words. They hung like a sentence over his head. *I am the weaker*, he would mouth to the wall. *I am the weaker brother*.



Their uncle, who owned a restaurant, had helped to arrange their papers. After a month, he took Ivan aside. "You're a hard worker," he told him, "but your brother is a nightmare." Ivan was promoted to waiting tables, while Pero stayed in the kitchen, his face resentful and perspiring from the clouds of steam that rose from the dishwasher.

Their uncle was an alcoholic who claimed a hard life and a wife who did not understand him. He would come to the brothers' tiny Astoria apartment, a bottle of something tucked into his pocket. And he would offer it to both brothers, sitting on their only chair, legs flung out in front of him.

"It's like the life of a sailor," he would tell them contemplatively, unscrewing the bottle. "You never achieve total happiness on either land or water. You'll never be completely happy here, but you won't be there, either."

Pero would curl into a ball, pulling the pillow over his head. Ivan would wait for his uncle to fall asleep before taking the bottle out of his hand so that it would not hit the floor with a heavy bang, waking up the Korean family that lived below them.

One night, just as he was placing it in the sink, the thick bottle causing the metal to reverberate, his uncle stirred behind him in his chair. When Ivan turned, he saw him staring at Pero's back with a scowl. "It's because you didn't have a father around. Your mother spoiled him and now look." His watery eyes turned on Ivan, "...you were just a kid then. Do you remember?"

Ivan did not answer. He bent to clear the overflowing ashtray and straightened, also looking at Pero's back. He could tell that his brother was awake from his breathing, although he did not move.

Their uncle continued, "...just a kid, and when we heard the news we ran down to your mother's place but she already knew..."

His uncle stretched out on his bed, continuing to talk. Ivan lay on the bed beside Pero and closed his eyes. *Old man*, he thought, *go to sleep or get out*.

But his uncle rose again and poured a philosophical four fingers from another bottle secreted somewhere in the folds of his coat. Ivan

tried to tune him out. He thought about the next day at work and whether he would have to iron his pants. He thought about one of the waitresses, an American girl with big breasts who wore fluffy sweaters to work before changing into a tight black skirt and white blouse. Angora, she had told him shyly in the storeroom once, and let him touch the softness of her sleeve. But his uncle was still talking, keeping up a steady stream of drunken nostalgia.

“...died the way our grandfathers did, Ivan, the way we were all meant to go...at sea...”

“It was an accident,” Ivan said sharply, his eyes flying open. He could feel Pero groan soundlessly beside him. “A concussion and he was dead before they got back to port.”

“...the way we were all meant to,” his uncle insisted. “Not here in fucking America. Not in Astoria...left your mother all alone. And you were so little, Ivan, and Pero just a baby and I knew I had to get out. Do you know that feeling, when you know you’re going to die? You can see the beginning, middle and end from where you sit and you have to move...” and he began suddenly to sing, his drunken voice warbling through the tiny apartment. “Sing with me, Ivan,” he insisted, and Ivan imagined hitting him. He imagined a trickle of blood from his uncle’s cut lip.

He was saying something about the war, about Ivan having to leave because of Pero, “...you would never have left,” he told him. “You had the right to stay.” And then he was asleep, snoring heavily and Ivan was groaning inwardly, thinking about the difficulty they would face in rousing him in the morning.

“I didn’t have the right to stay, is that it?” Pero muttered next to him in the bed.

“Shut up and go to sleep,” he told his brother. But their uncle’s words hung above him in the room, like a cloud of noxious of smoke that even sleep did not drive away.



When Pero had been five, he had an overriding fear of sea urchins. He would spend hours sitting on a rock watching their coal black bodies beneath the surface of the water. He would drop white pebbles into the water, watching them drift slowly downwards and nestle between the urchins’ spines, but he refused to pick his way between them into the sea.

The other boys, who dove from rocks and splashed unconcernedly in the water, had made fun of him. They were solid, brown-skinned boys who fell asleep during school after long nights spent fishing in their fathers’ boats. Only occasionally would they make a misstep and come up howling, the black needles embedded beneath the surface of the

skin.

In order for Pero to swim, Ivan had to clear a path for him by gently prying the urchins with his hands, dislodging them from the rock. He would then throw them back into the water at a safe distance. Only when Pero could wade in safely would he clamber down from his rock, taking Ivan's hand and easing into the water. Once submerged he could swim like a fish and the boys would have contests to see who could dive deeper and stay under longer.

Ivan was able to hold his breath for a full minute, scrabbling around the bottom, watching the legs of the other boys shining through the ceiling of water above him. Pero's legs were always the smallest and the whitest.

When it was Pero's turn he could hold his breath for surprisingly long, hands and legs working furiously to prevent him from rising to the surface. But once he had stayed down so long that his brother began to grow nervous and dove to find him drifting, face downwards, on the bottom. Panic had risen in Ivan's throat and he grabbed his brother's arm, his legs kicking furiously until they reached the air. Pero's face had been ashen and the other boys had helped to drag him back over the space he had cleared and onto a rock.

Ivan had screamed and pummeled his brother's chest while one of the other boys ran for help, and Pero had choked, finally, turning his head to the side to let a stream of water fall from his mouth onto the rock. But when his eyes opened, they were triumphant. "I stayed down longer," he told his brother in a raw whisper, as Ivan knelt above him on the rock, so relieved that he had started to cry.



The American waitress's name was Beth and she had long, brown hair that she wore in a French braid. He had been shy around her at first, ashamed of his clumsy English which was passable when taking orders but seemed to rapidly deteriorate in her vicinity. He would lift his eyes from his order pad to find her watching him from across the room. When they brushed by each other, he could not resist the temptation of touching her and let his fingertips brush across her back.

But months went by until he talked to her. One day, walking to the restaurant from the subway station, he saw her ahead in the street, hands shoved into the pockets of her coat. He observed her as she walked, not hurrying to catch up with her and she was oblivious to his presence. Rounding the corner, she slipped suddenly on a patch of ice and fell with a cry.

He broke into a jog, reaching her side as she massaged the ankle with a grimace. Wordlessly, he offered her his hand and helped her to her feet.

“Damn!” She muttered, standing on one foot. “I think I sprained it.”

His uncle gave him the car keys to drive her to the hospital for x-rays and he sat in the emergency room with her rapidly swelling foot cradled in his lap.

She kept up a steady stream of chatter, telling him about her family and how strange she felt in New York City, after having moved from the Midwest. “I can’t even imagine what it must seem like to you,” she said, finally, shaking her head.

“What do you study?” he asked, suddenly. He had heard that she was going to college part-time.

“Teaching.”

“I was very bad pupil,” he told her, smiling. “And my English is very bad.”

“No,” she told him, “you just need practice.” And she tilted her head to one side and studied him.

After a week she returned to work and started taking her meal with him in the kitchen, under Pero’s pointed looks. He asked her to a movie on the first night that they both had off, and she nodded her head. “Sure, Ivan, that would be fun.”

He liked the way she said his name, careful to pronounce it correctly. Most Americans made the “I” long, making his name sound like a subject and a verb. “I van,” they would tell him and the first time he had been confused, almost consulting a dictionary for the meaning of the verb “to van.” But she said it neatly, sparsely.

When she placed her plate in the sink and returned to work, oblivious of Pero’s scowls, Ivan looked after her with a bemused expression.

“I thought you said that you didn’t like American girls.” Pero said suddenly, after she had gone. The banging of dishes brought Ivan out of his reverie.

Ivan felt himself frown. “Don’t start with me.”

“You said they were loud and smacked their gum.” He continued.

“She isn’t loud and she doesn’t smack her gum.”

Pero turned his back and lifted the side of the industrial washer to slide out a tray of dishes and Ivan turned on his heel to leave the kitchen. When he cleared the door he heard a glass being thrown against it, shattering on the floor.



Through the passage of the year, it was the memory of specifics that made Ivan melancholy. At the end of summer, he would wake up having dreamed of the pale yellow color of figs. The insides were

red, and as sweet as honey. In winter, it was the pitch of the *bura*, the cold northerly wind that howled around his mother's stone house. New York's congested sky blocked out the light, and he also thought wistfully of the sun that baked his island like a loaf of bread.

But other memories were tied up in those sweeter ones. They crept into his dreams and left him shivering and bloody in a winter stream. So that when Pero felt nostalgic, he was unsympathetic. "*To je, tu je,*" he would tell his brother. "This is the way things are."



"I am tired of listening to you!" Pero shouted the night Ivan returned home from his date with Beth. They had watched a movie and he had walked her home before taking the N train back to their apartment. She had been sweet and warm on the front steps of her building, opening her coat to allow his hands to creep around her waist and touch her back. Her kiss had been warm and its taste had stayed in his mouth during the subway ride.

But at his brother's words, another, bitter taste replaced it. "I am tired of taking care of you," he shouted back.

There was a stunned silence from the Koreans downstairs before they began to move around their apartment again.

Pero stumbled past him and out the front door. "I'm going out."

"Put on your coat!" Ivan barked at him, but his brother ignored him and Ivan heard the stairs in the hallway shake as he descended them angrily.

Going to the window, he saw the streak of his brother's white shirt as he ran down the street. He sighed, watching until it turned a corner, and then sat down to finish writing the letter he had started to their mother. He spent several minutes looking at it, chewing the end of the pen, before starting again. "We are well and healthy," he wrote to her.



In some of Ivan's dreams, his brother is five years old and sitting on a bank beside the river. "Ivan," he calls, shivering. "Ivan, I'm ready to go."

But he cannot rise from the water. The iciness has immobilized him completely and he is unable to respond.

He can see the men creeping up behind his brother from the woods and he aches for his voice. He aches to be able to jump to his feet and hoist his brother into his arms and run. But the weight in his body is overwhelming.

He watches the men signal to each other and draw their knives. In the dream, he begins to whimper. His brother's body falls over him, into the river.



He began to spend the nights at Beth's apartment, the two of them stumbling to her street almost drunkenly after their shift. She had a large, orange cat that curled up at their heads in the bed. In her apartment, he never had his river dreams. He dreamed only that he was being suffocated by cotton, opening his eyes to find the creature on his chest.

Pero was barely speaking to him, not even looking up when he arrived at work in the mornings, until one day he didn't show up at all. Their uncle threw up his hands in disgust.

"I'll go get him," Ivan told him. "We'll be right back."

He had found the door to the apartment unlocked and Pero sitting underneath the window with a bottle. "*Braco*," Pero had said, his voice dripping with saccharine warmth. "Brother. So nice to see you again."

"You're going to work," Ivan told him, even then realizing that his brother would not be able to make the trip, far less work his shift. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm going back home."

"The hell you are." Ivan rubbed his eyes, sitting down on the bed.

"I will," he insisted, his eyes suddenly sober. "What do I have to be afraid of? I'm going to die faster here."

And Ivan had stared at him angrily. "I came because of you."

"Come back with me, then."

He shook his head slowly. No.



On the night before Ivan drove him to the airport, he dreams that he is sitting on the bank looking down into the stream. His brother's body is pale and bloodless under the water.



Inside the terminal, they embraced awkwardly. Pero looked down at his shoes and then up at his brother. "Don't you long for your home?"

And Ivan thought of his fishing boat, the little Tomos motor leaving a wake of white and light blue like a plane writing letters in the

sky. On hot days, they would thread through the maze of islands. He would navigate between them and Pero would let his legs trail in the water. And moonless nights were so black that the Milky Way actually shone in the dark sea. It had been months since he had seen a star in New York.

But he pushed the thoughts back, beneath the surface, and shook his head. The sudden picture of his brother's body on plastic sheeting rose up in his mind and he blinked back tears.

When Pero's plane took off, he was standing on the observation deck, hands shoved into his pockets. He couldn't be certain which was his brother's plane, but picked one at random to watch. Its wings tilted in the blue sky like a boat in rough seas, but it left not a trace in its wake.

Peter Melman

Choose Your Own Adventure

— for Rose Estes

Having said, "Be mine," turn to page 72.

page 72.

The fillet of sole
was exquisite,
and the creme brulée
sublime. You made
this? For me?

 And after
such a long day.

OR

Having said, "Be mine," turn to page 78.

page 78.

Our son sits at the kitchen table,
two-finger-drumming his left
temple, leafing through
pages of olives and urns,
the Parthenon & Parnassus,
becoming the scholar we've agreed
he should become.
You want Princeton,
I, anywhere but.
We speak and agree—
he tries harder at perfection than
most people we know
have succeeded in failure.
He is not our mistake.
And so when he smirks
at something I say over his visits,
over pepperoni pizza & ice cream bribes,
we know exactly the state of things;

he's nine, we're much older,
he's got people who define themselves
in how well they love him, and
we've agreed not to
ask him to choose.

We both know
these things, even
if he doesn't know them
at nine, and while
I sometimes dream
of sole, I generally
sleep okay.

Jenny Spinner

In Medias Rest

When my friend Brian, at age 25, decided he was old enough for a big bed, he and his roommates climbed onto his worn twin and rode it down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, they hauled the bed back up and went down again. In fact, they rode the bed all night. It was the most action that mattress had ever seen.

I slipped out of my childhood bed with less enthusiasm. My mattress was like my baseball glove. After much wear, it fit perfectly, and I thought breaking in a new one would be tedious. So I hauled that bed from my parent's home to college and eventually to graduate school rather than buy a new one. After graduate school, embarking on another cross-country journey, I decided to retire Old Pinky, so named because of the pink gingham spread she wore in her early years. Old Pink had served me well, in sickness and in health, in wet times and dry. Like the diaries I slipped between her mattresses, she kept all my secrets, all that my whispering-sobbing-screaming lips pressed into her quilted casing. And inside her box spring, she hid peanut butter and Saltines for years, in case, I suppose, the Russians ever bombed us. Tucked as we were into Central Illinois, the odds were greater that Pink and I would whirl away in a tornado than wither in a mushroom cloud. But neither happened. And lucky for Pink, my father wasn't ambitious enough to adopt the practices of my friend Libby's father. When Libby failed to make her bed, her dad heaved her mattress onto the front lawn, and it was her job to get it back into her second-story bedroom. In the twenty-two years Old Pink and I spent together, we only had one really nasty fight, when I fell against her metal frame (my brother's version) or was pushed (mine) and she sliced open my forehead. Pink was the one split open now, her stained cotton insides spilling onto the floor, where the cats, with no shame, picked up her pieces and carried them to the litter box.

When the time came for Pink to go, I didn't so much ride her down the stairs as she rode me. We danced awkwardly across the parking lot, me never sure where to hold on, nor where to put my feet, and I finally dragged her unceremoniously to the dumpster. When I turned to go inside, I found a trail of her insides leading me home.

I couldn't afford a new bed at the time, so my parents chipped in with a another twin. An argument for something bigger would have been in vain. I wasn't married and that was that; unmarried people don't need big beds. To my parents, a bigger bed was asking for trouble. What they didn't know was that trouble and I had been sleeping in a

twin for the last year and quarters were cramped. But I left him out of it.

Perhaps it's new love, or stupidity, that entices young lovers to sleep like sardines. Many of my married friends who met in college spent their first years together in a twin-sized dormitory bed. I never understood how they got any sleep, cramped as it was; maybe sleep wasn't the point. When I was small and religious, I often shared my bed with Jesus, and even He was no easy sleeping companion. At night, I plastered my body against the wall to give Him the good part of the bed, the soft sink in the middle. Between that awkward position and my fears of crushing Him, I didn't sleep well. When you are young, you don't want to be the one who smothered Jesus in the night. And when you are old, you just want to sleep. Somewhere in the middle, the romance of sleeping stuck to the one you love wears off, and you ask him to move a little, a little more, just a little more, yes, clear over there.

I have spent a good part of my life in search of a decent night's rest. In my family I am known as a "light sleeper." My mother says the sound of a pin dropping would awaken me; actually, I would sense the pin hovering in the air, and that slight shimmy of molecules would wake me first. It's not the quality of a bed that prevents me from sleeping well. In truth I could sleep anywhere, as long as the place was dark and quiet and nobody was messing with me. As a child on vacations with my family, I slept in the motel bathtub rather than lie awake listening to my family snore and grunt. Once I stumbled into the bathroom only to find my sister already curled in the tub, so I grudgingly took my pillow to the car where I was awakened the next morning by my father banging on the window, looking for his keys. The vacations the five of us spent in a four-person tent were torture. I might as well have slept with my ear pressed against a concert speaker. And if the noise were not enough to keep me awake, my sleep-walking brother, who tramped over us before relieving himself on one of our bags, was. I come from a long line of strange bedfellows. My great-great-grandfather Jacob Lipe not only refused to share his wife Kate's bed but also her bedroom. They each had their own double—ironically, then known as matrimonial beds—squeezed into tiny rooms on opposite sides of the house. When I asked my grandmother if she knew why, she shrugged. "Grandma was in there, Grandpa was over there, and that was that." I shrug, too. This is the holy rolling preacher who whooped and hollered at local tent revivals but inside his home, scowled at the noisy creak of a smile. When his daughter's husband left her, Jacob forced her to give up her children for adoption. And when he was eighty, his game of trying to beat the trains that ran in front of his house came to a messy end. It was the Fourth of July. The train didn't stop or even whistle, and the men who found Jacob's head face down near the tracks carried his body into the house and laid him on his bed.

After the funeral, my young grandmother was sent to keep Kate company and spent nine months in her grandfather's bed where she saw fireworks and whistled in her sleep.

My brother inherited a bed from my father's Aunt Grace, and my sister and I used to torture him with stories describing Aunt Gracie's death in the bed. Although she hadn't actually died *on* the mattress (my parents purchased that), the oak headboard was hers. But "Aunt Gracie died under your headboard" didn't sound as good as "Aunt Gracie died in your bed." Once my sister and I put a tape recorder with expiring batteries in his closet. The moans of the recorder struggling to play whatever tape was inside were meant to sound like Gracie's ghost, which they did. It was weeks before my parents coaxed him back into his own bed.

The bed my parents bought me after Old Pinky didn't stay around long enough to be christened anything other than "bed." After only a few months in a corner of my apartment, I dragged it down the hall into my storage closet where it stayed for two years. It was a crazy time in my life. My lover had left me to become a priest, and rather than sleep with my miseries, I decided not to sleep at all. When I did, out of necessity, begin to sleep again, I slept in the closet, on the floor, in a chair, on the couch, and finally on a futon, but I never slept in one place in my house for more than a few months. I was restless. Eventually, I left that house in Minnesota and moved to Connecticut. I would like to say that my inner strength or ambition brought me here, but in all likelihood, it was sleep-deprivation.

I gave away most of my stuff when I left, including my mattress, which I handed off to some monks. They didn't seem to mind that it was used. Probably they were just happy to be the sort of monks who were allowed beds, rather than straw mats for the floor. In college, my sister bought a used mattress from the Salvation Army for ten dollars, but it stank of urine so she didn't keep it long. Admittedly, the thought of buying a used mattress makes me queasy. At the least, I want a list of previous owners. While shopping recently for a mattress, I found a stack sealed in plastic bags at the back of the store; they were marked "slightly used," which made me wonder, not so much about the used as about the slightly. When I stay at friends' houses, I am always puzzled by assurances that the sheets I am to rest on have been cleaned, and I am troubled by their eagerness to convince me. "It doesn't matter," I told my friend Debbie not too long ago, trying to sound like a low-maintenance guest. "Oh," she said, "it would if you knew." But I don't know, and when I sleep on someone else's bed, I'd rather not know. I follow this same philosophy when I have no time or no quarters for laundry in between my own house guests. Only once did anyone object, and she didn't so much say anything as walk the dirty sheets to the laundry room. My mother has a way of articulating things to me

without words.

When I decided to start a new life, I thought I might as well begin with a bed. My dad and I drove around in a yellow Ryder truck looking for a mattress to haul to my new apartment. I couldn't afford to be picky because we had the truck for only six hours and because my dad had little tolerance for such matters. We hadn't even climbed out of the truck at the first mattress store when he began muttering. I looked over at a face I knew well: he was about to blow. "Dad, what? What's wrong?"

"Vultures!" he shouted. "Sickening. Just waiting for us to come in, ready to pounce on us! They burn me up!" I followed his gaze to the store window where a man in a double-breasted suit stood drooling over our business. The man turned out to be a cardboard cut-out but inside were pushy salespeople in the flesh who invited me to try out their best beds, as if lying on my back in the middle of a store with people milling around me would replicate the sleeping experience at home. "Linda" tried to convince me that buying a bed was the most important thing I had ever done. She implied that my bed was a status symbol that proved I was worth my weight in coils—and the more coils, the better. What Linda didn't seem to understand was that I'd slept on too many beds, in too many places, to be that picky or even to care: bathtubs, closets, Motel 6 beds stinking of stale Kung Pao, tents, cabins, basement floors, ship bunks, train berths, Army cots, hide-a-beds and once, an ironing board. It helps that I'm small. I used to sleep in cars, too, until at eight I opened my eyes to corn whizzing by the window because my dad, dozing at the wheel, was doing 55 in a nearby field. Once I even fell asleep crouched behind a tree, on the run from Roman soldiers in a night-time church camp game. I was a coward at ten, and rather than defend my faith or be thrown to lions in the mess hall, I balled myself up behind a tree. I thought I'd had it rough until my brother, when he was in the Navy, took me on a tour of his submarine and showed me the torpedo he slept under. As far as I know, I've never slept with a weapon, although for a time, I kept pepper spray in a drawer in the night stand.

When my dad and I left Linda bouncing on isotonic foam, the kind astronauts float on, she knew we were lying when we said we would be back. Her pity tailed us out of the store. Dad and I tried discount chains next—Bob's Better Bedding; Back Be Nimble; Foam, Sweet Foam; Night's Delight—but no one could convince me that I really needed temperature-controlled flotation support. For God's sake, I'd slept in trees. But did I know that the "low gravity effect" of the Tempur-Pedic actually reduces tossing and turning by eighty-three percent? "Listen, Bob," I wanted to say. "If I don't get a good rest, it's not the bed. Know what I mean?" But Bob didn't know. In another century, we would have duked it out with pillows until one of us fell, or

bought an expensive bed. In the end, my dad and I helped ourselves at a Sam's Club where I purchased a queen-sized Serta set for \$150 and a jumbo box of Cheerios for \$3.98.

I was surprised my dad went for the queen. I thought it daring, that it announced my womanhood. My friend Ellen has a queen-sized bed, and whenever I go into her room, I swear I smell seduction in the air. It's not that she has that many overnight guests; she doesn't. It's that Ellen feels she *deserves* a big bed, that she's old enough not to sleep in a dresser drawer, as was suggested to me when beds were scarce at a recent family gathering. In some way, I know I was compensating for the fact that I was in my late twenties and the man helping me to choose my bed was my father. In most of the stores, I barely existed. I had to wave my arms in front of the salespeople's faces, demanding they sucker me, not my dad. It was my bed. I was paying for it. The big man next to me? He was driving the truck. I pulled him aside for a conference. "What do you think about the queen?" I asked. "Well," he said slowly, pondering my womanhood, my independence, "it would be nice to have a big bed for when your mom and I visit."

We somehow managed to drag that big bed into my apartment, my dad grumbling that when I move out, I can call professionals because he's finished with moving beds. Later, after I'd left him cooling on his double at the Howard Johnson's, I came home and stared at my bed. It was something. "This is a big bed," I kept telling myself. The cats sniffed it suspiciously, looking for entry points in the netting. I climbed on, bounced up and down a few times, smacked the ceiling, tried out the left side, the right side, the head, the foot, and finally settled on the right edge, where I have slept since.

The other nine-tenths of my bed that I don't use for sleeping serve as my desk. In the tradition of bed owners of old, I also conduct affairs of state as well as take my meals there. Actually, I could probably live on my bed if I wanted to. It can sleep about five good friends horizontally, or one lover vertically, far enough from me that I can rest. And if my parents visit, and they pad into my room in the middle of the night wanting to snuggle in, it's big enough for them at the foot. They're welcome, as long as they don't snore. And if they do, well, there's always the tub. It even has temperature-controlled flotation support.

DeAnna Stephens Vaughn

Persephone beneath Phosphor

Some wildflowers
crave moonlight, but you must
still thrive on days full
of woodchip playgrounds,
of shouts
to classmates
as you dangle upside-down
from the jungle gym. Who
lets you stay up
until two, balancing
on the edge
of a truck's tailgate
in a supermarket parking
lot? I should be already be
going home
with my groceries
in the back seat, but you
could disappear,
like the earth had
swallowed you
while your parents are inside
buying menthols
and frooty loops or milk
to make you sleep. The sun
is gone and
the moon keeps secrets.
Who would be here
to remember if someone
took you? Who is around
to watch your drowsy face,
fighting sleep, lift upward
in a lunartropic trance
toward the street light? I think
you've already begun growing
away from the sun.
But for now
you could still be springtime's
daughter, seven seasons old,
with your daisyed flip-flops

and the purple sundress
your mother must have made
for you. It's too cold
now that the sun is gone. If
no one would think it
ominous,
I would tell you a bedtime story
about Demeter's daughter,
when she was safe,
and I would stop before
Hades took her
so that you could grow up
before discovering
what Helios witnessed.

Cassidy Leavy

Morphine

An analgesic is a drug acting to *relieve pain*. A narcotic is a drug that induces drowsiness, stupor, or insensibility, and *relieves pain*. A poppy is a plant having showy red flowers and rounded seed capsules. Opium is an addictive drug prepared from the juice of a poppy plant, used in medicine as an analgesic; or, something *inducing a false and unrealistic sense of contentment*. Morphine is an analgesic and narcotic drug obtained from opium and used medicinally to *relieve pain*.

--Oxford Concise English Dictionary, italics added

Opium has been used since 6000 B.C. as a pain reliever, and people began to use it recreationally to achieve mind-altering states in the 17th century. In 1803 F. W. A. Serturmer, a German chemist, first isolated morphine, a very potent derivative of opium, when he experienced a near fatal overdose. He named the drug morphine after Morpheus, the Roman god of sleep or dreams. Its effectiveness as an analgesic became overwhelmingly apparent 50 years later with the invention of the hypodermic needle. It is still considered the drug of choice for severe acute and chronic pain. It is the drug by which all other analgesics are measured. Morphine fulfilled science's need to relieve human pain.



Two years ago, on October 14, 1998, I turned my 1985 S-10 Blazer over on the driver's side. My left arm instinctively reached out of the open window in a futile attempt to stop the tilt of the 2000-pound vehicle. The arm lodged between the steel and the concrete of the highway for a grinding slide of 250 feet. The vehicle was righted, the paramedics arrived, and I was hauled inside the strikingly bright interior of an ambulance. I chose not to look at my arm. The three glasses of wine I had consumed with dinner five hours earlier prevented the paramedics from providing me with any pain medication until my blood alcohol level could be confirmed. I did not expect relief; my body's natural reactions buffered the pain. I chatted lightly with the paramedics—my major, my part-time job, my goals. Twenty minutes later morphine crept through my body, delivered by surgical tubing and a stainless steel needle. Morpheus cradled me in his lulling

arms.

Following a two-hour long ambulance ride—sirens crying, unseen lights twirling above my head—I arrived at the University of Kansas Medical Center. The damage was assessed in detail. My mother held my right hand, her head between her knees. A half-circle of nurses, interns, residents, and senior clinicians encased my left arm. The arm was free of skin in a four-inch strip from shoulder to wrist. The shoulder itself had been dislocated into a twisted, unnatural angle. The biceps shredded. The brachial artery severed. The elbow joint was shaved in half, and two of the three major nerves (the ulnar and the median) were all but demolished. They asked me to sign the amputation consent form; I asked for more morphine. Certain friends and family, were allowed into my stifling compartment in the intensive care unit, following the sixteen-hour surgery. Speech was impossible after the abrupt removal of the intubation tube; when asked how I was doing, I pointed to my still existent arm and scratched a grinning face and the word morphine on a note pad.



According to a web site on “How Opioid Drugs Work,” opioids mimic the effects of “morphine-like” substances called endorphins (though opioids are much more potent), which are normally produced by the body. Endorphins are produced at various sites and function as the body’s natural defense against pain. Endorphins act by attaching to nerve cells and restricting their activity. Morphine affects the Mu-receptors and binds with the k-receptors in the central nervous system. These actions induce euphoria, sedation, and analgesia, or pain relief. Morphine is most useful, and is considered the most effective drug, for treating the acute pain associated with trauma and the chronic pain associated with terminal illness.



When I was twelve, my great grandmother, G.G., was dying of cancer. It had begun in her ovaries, or maybe her uterus, but by the time it was discovered, a tumor the size of a grapefruit filled her lower abdomen. The doctors told us she had been sick for a very long time. For a very long time, G.G. had been telling us how wonderful she felt. I had spent endless days in her apartment eating carrot sticks and playing with the miniature porcelain dogs she kept on a wooden shelf. She let me play with them, even though they were valuable and fragile. I didn’t go sit with her in the hospital, but my mother did. She asked to have her fingernails painted, her hair fixed, and lipstick put on her papery lips: “she always wanted to look like a lady,” my mother told me later.

The doctors said there was nothing they could do but to try and make her comfortable. My mother spritzed perfume on G.G.'s fragile neck to combat the smothering scent of the hospital room, of waste. My mother manned the button that released measured amounts of morphine into G.G.'s shriveling body. Morpheus caressed her through her last pain.



Science has labored endlessly to discover, concoct, divine the best concealer for human pain. Most successful endeavors are derivatives of opium—heroin, codeine, and the praised morphine. Science continues to mull over methods of treating human psychological pain. Psychotropic (mood altering) drugs, therapy, even hypnosis, all attempt to reach the same success with human emotion as morphine does with the human body. The pain that family members of a terminally ill patient experience does not rein in its forces, even after they wave the white flag of surrender. G.G. got morphine, relief from her pain; I got a set of porcelain dogs.



Trauma patients' pain does not end with a hospital release form. Months after my wounds were healed—stitches clipped, over 250 staples snipped out, a pin extracted from my middle finger, intravenous ports removed — they said I was through the “tough part.” One night, after failing to get comfortable, I shuffled to the living room carrying my aching, motionless arm. I cautiously lowered myself to the floor, cradled my arm in my lap, and sobbed. It was not just tears; my body heaved erratically. In order to salvage my arm, the doctors had utilized unnecessary portions of the rest of my body. I cried for my mangled arm; and I cried for the swollen red scars on my back, left thigh, and my right calf. I cried because I was no longer the twenty-year-old that I was just learning to love a few months before. Where was comforting Morpheus then?



In addition to the positive effects of morphine, most medical literature mentions a multitude of negative effects. Morphine can cause dysphoria (the opposite of euphoria), a state of unease or general dissatisfaction. Sometimes this is accompanied by frightening hallucinations. Morphine may also impair mental and physical performance, decrease the sensation of hunger, inhibit the cough reflex, cause constipation and urine retention, reduce sex drive, interfere with the menstrual cycle, and possibly cause respiratory depression. Though the

morphine relieves the body's pain by masking it from the mind, the drug also seems to be systematically shutting the body down. It is the human instincts, faculties, and bodily functions that make survival—humanity—possible. Pain is human.



I spent two-and-a-half weeks propped in a hospital bed following my car accident, sustained by an almost constant supply of intravenous morphine. I guess I would say that I was “comfortable,” when considering the straggling bits of visits and dressing changes that I can recall. What I do remember is vomiting every time I was coerced into gagging down a protein drink, as I couldn't stomach anything else. I remember the nightmares. Waking up sweating and twitching, positive that there was blood splattered, butcher-style, across my hospital gown. When my mother finally convinced me that it was only the decorative pattern, bright colors of swooshed print, I promptly dropped back into sleep, leaving my mother to wonder what this numbing drug was doing inside her child's mind.

What I don't remember quite as vividly is what my friends, family, doctors, and nurses witnessed when I was in a more communicative state. I composed (and performed) songs about the number of IV holes scattered across my right arm. I arranged a fake, purple bird into my two-weeks-unwashed ponytail, for decoration. But, mostly, I slept. As my mother has said, when doctors say they are going to make a patient comfortable, “they really do feel no pain.” When she sat at G.G.'s bedside, my mother witnessed the direct correlation between coherency and the morphine dosage. I have been told that when G.G. died, it was peaceful. Her breathing slowed and shallowed until it eventually halted. But shortly before her death, she did not recognize family members due to the amount of morphine that was swirling, mixing with her blood. Sometimes, between long periods of rest, she would open her eyes and mumble a few sentences. After sitting for a week at G.G.'s bedside, and two-and-a-half weeks at mine, my mother says, “When they do say something, you hope that it's coherent, that it's the person you know and not the morphine talking.”



The relief, euphoria, and sedation that morphine provides allows a patient to sleep through pain. But, is sleeping through pain comparable to sleeping through a part of life—or even what's left of a life? There is no morphine for the aftermath. Porcelain dogs cannot heal scars. Would it be possible to accept, even embrace, pain as a vital part of being human, of being mortal? Could a trauma victim or a

terminally ill patient revel in the reality, the humanity of their pain?



I think, for a brief period of time in that ambulance, I may have embraced, reveled, in the raw humanity of my traumatic experience: the pain. The endorphins found their receptors, I communicated coherently with my paramedics, and I consciously assessed my situation. The mind and body work together to handle situations that call for more than a Band-Aid and a mother's kiss. But, my mind and body evolved much, much earlier than the conception of steel, glass, and pavement. Just as steel, glass, and concrete are the elements that crushed and shredded my left arm, they also form the structure of the hospital in which my life, and my arm, were saved. Though I trust and appreciate the body's natural reactions, given the option, I think I would still worship Morpheus—the god of sleep, morphine's namesake. I am glad I don't remember all of the pain. I still pay homage to Morpheus.

Shelle Barton, Sheyene Foster Heller, and Jennifer Henderson

"We Were Such a Generation"—Memoir, Truthfulness, and History: An Interview with Patricia Hampl

SB: You started your career as a poet and then moved into writing nonfiction with *A Romantic Education*, and I'm curious about what the difference is in process for you as a writer since you work in several genres and what you bring at the outset to a poem versus an essay versus a short story.

PH: In a way, I started as a poet and a journalist—because I made my living as a journalist. That's often lost because there's no book, but that was my daily life, so that I had those two pieces of the puzzle. I never took a prose writing course in school. I was signed up in the Writer's Workshop at Iowa, so I was a poet and they didn't let you cross over. If you said you were a poet, then you had to write in those funny lines. You couldn't switch. But in fact when I started writing nonfiction, memoir, and that kind of prose that I'm better known for, I didn't really feel that much difference at the heart of it. At the real center of the enterprise I felt like they were rather similar but that the requirements of my inquiry demanded that I go into long prose rather than something having to do with the genre itself. In other words, when you think about it a lot of people's first books of poetry—and certainly mine—are autobiographical. They're very much about using the self as an investigator or as a voice for what you see out there: my grandma, my grandpa, my mom, my dad. And really it has to do not just with what happened to me, when that "I" happens in the poetry, but about the consciousness that's taking in the world. And so really the move from poetry to memoir wasn't this big leap; it was this very small turning of the angle of attention. And it let me do things that the poem typically doesn't let a person do. The difference has to do with the way you want to go about writing something, rather than something intrinsic about the material. So I still feel the heart of things for me is the poetic impulse, or the lyric impulse, even though I'm maybe not writing as many poems.

Then the whole question of fiction is another one altogether. I think the relationship between poetry and the kind of nonfiction we're talking about is small. The leap between those two forms and fiction is maybe a little more significant because you really are allowing yourself to be more synthetic. You're allowing yourself to take pieces of puzzles and put them together not where they fit exactly but to make a whole new puzzle. So even though memoir and the novel are both the same thickness on the book, they're both in chapters and they both have a

narrative impulse, there's a bigger difference between that, at the real root for me.

JH: In an interview with *Creative Nonfiction* Jonathan Holden says that “the personal essay seems to [him] to be the genre most similar to lyric poetry when the poetry is personal, confessional—but it differs from poetry in that, whereas the conventions of poetry encourage condensation, the conventions of prose encourage digression.” As a result, “prose may be superior to poetry because of the permission prose gives the writer to digress and supply context that, in a lyric poem, would attenuate its integrity.” Do you agree?

PH: I would agree with everything except the judgement about superior/inferior. I absolutely don't subscribe to that. And I wouldn't if it were the opposite way, if someone were to say so poetry is superior—and that used to be a kind of bromide of criticism, that poetry was superior because it condensed. And I think these two statements—the one that says “poetry is superior because it condenses” and “prose is superior because it allows for digression”—tells us about the cultural times we live in more than about the relative superiority of either of those genres. And so I agree absolutely, and I think he's very articulate and exact about the fact of the matter: prose does encourage the digression, but I think that if there is a superiority, it has to do with the value we now bring to the idea of being able to “natter” on about something. So we like the personal essay not just because it tells us about a person's life, but because it allows an individual, the poor, unarmed, unguarded, individual self an opportunity to investigate something much larger. What we're interested in is not just the story but the ability of that self to contend with something that's bigger, more difficult, and in some ways maybe requiring expert information to understand. If I'm Chris Cokinos, I might say, “I don't have expert information about birds. I don't know anything about birds, but I'm going to write about this, so I learn about it.” And what we get is this quest of a person learning something from the experts, and making himself knowledgeable. Chris mentioned to me that the most important praise he received for that book, which has been very well received, was from an ornithologist who said he got it right. So his pleasure had to do with being able to translate for the rest of us material that no one else was translating. So that's my only quibble with Jonathan's point. And it may be out of context so that he's not saying it in some kind of absolute terms about superiority.

SFH: Considering the intersection of these genres, I'm curious about the use of poetic conventions in nonfiction. I've talked to some writers—Judith Kitchen for instance—who started out as a poets then

moved to nonfiction, and she believes that sometimes you can get away with using more poetic conventions in nonfiction than you could in an actual poem because you can push the envelope a little bit in the prose. Do you think that's true?

PH: Well, I haven't thought about that before, but I guess I would say that there are certain conventions in poetry that have become kind of reified, or they've become so recognizable as conventions that you can't use them any more. A good example would be the poetic conceit, which in metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century was great. They adored playing out a single image. For instance, in "The Pulley," the famous poem by Donne, he absolutely takes this image of the pulley and plays it out every which way. You see this in other poets of that age. If we see that happening in a poem, we think, "Let go already!" What we want is scatter shot images. We want to see a pile-up of images. Why? Because we're postmodern. We like the fragmentary. We don't like to see that single continuation going on. We don't trust it. It feels mechanistic to us. It doesn't feel authentic. That doesn't mean it isn't authentic, it just reflects our sense of convention; we want to have fragments hurling out, each one sending a glistening facet of whatever the reality is. In nonfiction, I would say there's some truth to be said that that notion of sticking with a metaphor (in what poetry would be called a conceit) and working it out over a long space has a satisfaction because there's an inevitable digression—as Holden pointed out—that happens anyway. So as we are constantly coming back to this central image, we have a feeling of satisfaction about it. That would be an example where I could say, yes, a seventeenth century model that doesn't work any longer in poetry probably does work in nonfiction, but I'm not sure I can think of any others.

SFH: Do you think it's true at the word level? For instance, using alliteration in prose versus using alliteration in poetry?

PH: Well, now that I don't know about because I do think that we're still living very much within the tradition of free verse. In other words, free verse is not a revolutionary modality; it's a tradition. And it's been a tradition for a century. And in that modality we had to find something other than end rhymes to work, and one of the things that came about was the excessive use of repetition, or alliteration. Even the word "the" at the beginning of a line can actually be a formal element—"The birds of the field.... The flowers of the meadow ...the...the... the...the"—that holds the poem together: internal rhyme. So I don't know that I would say that about alliteration. I don't find that formula as satisfying in nonfiction. It can be more irritating. But you could probably show me an example and I would agree, but in my own mind, it

doesn't strike me as being likely.

SB: A few days ago I was reading your essay "A Week in the Word," and there was a Buddhist saying, "We are only here now." And you say, "We are here *for* now. My conception of this is not of a heaven (and hell) in the future, but rather of an understanding of existence which encompasses history as well as being." Could you to expand on this?

PH: That was an example of those little poetic moments where language was leading me rather than thinking leading me. In other words, I've heard for a long time that phrase, "Be here now. Be here now." And it's a nice phrase. It brings you right back to being here, to really having every moment you can have as its own self. At the same time, I kept thinking, "Be here now." And then it popped into my head, "Be here for now." And there's something a little cute about that. It's like one of those seventeenth century language games. But it did attract me. When it popped into my head, I thought "Oh, that's interesting. That changes it. Just one little word, one little preposition changes it." And so I thought for a while, "Do I really believe that? Does that speak to my truth even more than 'Be here now?'" And I realized, in fact, it was cute and it was sort of a word trick, but I did believe it. In fact, I'm a history person. I'm very compelled by the relationship of now to the past and how that streams forward. History is important to me. In a Buddhist tradition, which is so riveted to history and tradition, one wouldn't even imagine that "Be here now" meant anything else but be here within the moment of this ongoing tradition. You say to an American, "Be here now" and they can trash anything because we've already got this thing about individualism. That phrase as a catch-phrase for my generation, who started all this nonsense after all in the sixties, is maybe dangerous. And for me it was much more accurate to say, "Be here for now" because it makes you feel much more connected to what was and what will be.

SFH: Back to your first memoir—you say in *A Romantic Education* that "The self-absorption that seems to be the impetus and embarrassment of autobiography turns into (and perhaps always was) a hunger for the world" or the hunger "a world." I'm interested in this because you talk about our remembering as a historical act. And in terms of your work, I find that you use lots of personal anecdotes and stories, but also you do a lot of direct analyzing using explicit reflection of what's going on. So I was wondering, is it the storytelling or this analysis that really makes remembering a historical act?

PH: For me it's the exact intersection of those two things that you've identified. I think that the reason memoir is a dynamic form today is

not because we happen to be a tell-all society—of course there are examples of that. But there are also romance novels. We have all kinds of genre novels and we don't say that's what the novel is. What I think really has given torque to the genre, has made universities suddenly make room for this genre has to do with what you've identified. Namely, that there's this thing called a story, a narrative that has got that "Then what?" and "Oh that's an interesting character." It's got all that stuff we connect with fiction, which is then interrupted or connected to a need to talk about the material. The big fiction advice is "Show, don't tell," but this is not what memoirists are embroidering on their pillows and sleeping on. It's instead "Show *and* Tell." It's the idea that you can't tell unless you can show, but you don't just show. You have to talk about it. You have to somehow reflect upon it. You have to track or respond to it, this thing that's happening. And in the intersection of these two things is the excitement we feel about this genre. Too much show and "Why aren't you writing fiction?" Too much tell and "I'm not going to listen to you because you're boring." The narration is the thing that lets you do the other. And sometimes the equation is off. Take a memoirist like Mary Carr, whom I love, but a lot of people who would say what I just said wouldn't like her. Not a lot of analysis. Very narrative. But the language is so great, so fantastic. The sheer writerly ability is so great that we don't care. We feel that a revelation of her generation is happening in that narration, and as a result her experience becomes historical even though she doesn't go on about history. So it isn't like a formula: "Make sure have 30% of this followed by 30% of that!" There is room for people like her, and then there's room for people like Czeslaw Milosz, in *Native Realm*, who gives you precious little story, thank you. In fact, I don't think he gives you quite enough, but never mind. He doesn't mind. He is going to give you mainly analysis and just a primer coat of personal narration. We don't find out if he sleeps around; we don't find out much about his mom and dad; we don't find out much about him at all. He positions himself as an intellectual in his era, and then he's off with his era. And then you have Mary Carr telling us everything she can about her personal life. Both of them, I would argue, are doing historical work, one of them far more narratively than the other.

Now, there are some people who would criticize Mary Carr, "How could she remember all of this? She's making this up." And this brings up one of the other big questions about memoir, which has to do with this veracity, as well as ethical and moral issues related to the genre, which are insoluble to my mind. I don't know that we can ever resolve these issues because if we are working with consciousness itself, not with fact, we're dealing with not what "happened" but with what "has happened." That is to say *not* what happened out there: we all agree that happened. But rather something happened and then "I"

reflect on it and perceive it, and I don't just think about it, I actually constellate it as an act, which in narrative terms means that I change it. Now, conscious invention is a whole other thing. And we sometimes run into that as a problem, too. Maybe you know the memoir by Rogoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize. A large part of the reason she won this was because it was a document that told this unbelievable story. "I Rogoberta Menchú. I'm an Indian in Guatemala, and here's what happens to my people." And she describes graphically the governmental murders of members of her family. Big best seller. Enormous regard for her. And it turns out that at least one of the deaths, her brother, is not true. He's alive and well and living somewhere else. What happens? Well, they don't take her Nobel Prize away. And her defense is a very interesting one: "How can anyone dare to question me about the way I choose to use the experience of my people to make a true case?" Her father, in fact, was killed. There were members of her family killed. "How dare you deny me the right to make this story?" It's an interesting defense. It goes way outside of our tidy little conventions that we like to say have to do with morality and the truth. Part of the excitement of this form is that we are living in the middle of deciding what it's going to be and learning not only how to write it but how to read it. How do we read this form? We may have made a big mistake when we put memoir into that big, baggy category of nonfiction. Once we did that, we put it right next to the newspaper, and we pretty much all know what we want the newspaper to be. If they say, "George Bush dropped dead," we don't want to find out tomorrow that he's alive, right? We want to think he's gone. If we put those same exact strictures on memoir, if we think the rules are exactly the same, we're going to be disappointed.

JH: In your book *I Could Tell You Stories*, and in other interviews I've heard you give, you've talked about the American memoir being somewhat like psychoanalysis or psychotherapy—free association—and I'm wondering if this is what you're getting at in terms of there being no tenable line: "What is true? What isn't?" Is it because we are dealing with consciousness?

PH: I think that's it. And I go back to Keats in this regard because my line is really through poetry rather than through memoir. When I think about my relationship to literature, I go back to Keats and actually no further. If I go back to Wordsworth, I need all those footnotes. I don't feel I'm dealing with a guy who's engaged in the same enterprise—quite. There's something about Keats; he seems to be the first person who completely understands that the tool is consciousness itself. So he is the figure I go back to in looking at this relationship. I myself am not too interested in psychoanalysis in my own writing, but at the same

time I would say that American literature is more given to paying attention to that than some other literatures are. When you think about the abstruse formula for psychology, the Freudian model, which grows up in the hotbed of the Austro-Hungarian empire, in the early part of the twentieth century: Where would you expect that to find its fertile growing place? America? It feels very strange in this kind of extraordinarily other culture. But in fact it fits because we are so much a people of the self. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What a goofy thing to form a country on. No other country is formed on the pursuit of happiness, which presumes individuality. That's the great, astonishing, radical gift of America to human history probably. And it's also our curse. It's the reason we don't have any decent railroads in this country; we won't all go on the same timetable. We all want to get in our car and cram ourselves onto these freeways and use up our gas and smell up our environment and screw up everything because we're after the pursuit of happiness. So I think that whole psychoanalytic underlay has to do with something quite simple, which is we really trust or want to know about the individual self.

I'm thinking about the roots of memoir, too—autobiography. Let's take Augustine's *Confessions*, from 397, over sixteen hundred years ago. That book is filled with all kinds of scriptural language because in Augustus' time—I tried to write about that in *I Could Tell You Stories*—the idea that you would only write your own words was kind of like, “Why would you do that?” It had to do with being written. You would of course show that you had within you (and you didn't look it up, you had it memorized) the *Psalms*, in particular. But also other scriptural things, and other things from secular sources, like the Greeks. You would take those lines and feed them into your own text. And what would happen would be instead of a reader saying, “Uh-uh! Plagiarism. Stole that!” the reader would feel a sort of chamber music effect that we're not just hearing, this one solo read saying it's language, but we're getting all these other voices in there. And that's the job of a writer in that era. Whereas we would say plagiarism, they say what are you talking about? Just as the example, which is really useful to think about, that Rogaberta Menchú is saying, “Wait a minute. I never said this was just about me. I've found a narrative way to represent things that really did happen in my culture. The other thing to say—to be really simple about this—for us, the readers in the American world as we see it now, the real rule is make your contract clear with the reader. So, for example, nobody got after Maxine Hong Kingston for creating fictional elements in her memoir. Why? Because she made it very clear that that was part of the whole cultural world that she was investigating. So they didn't say, “Well, did that really happen?” or “That sounds like magical realism. I mean, how come you put that in here?” She made it clear that she was representing the myths and stories that af-

fected her and her family and her whole culture. So the rules were clear, and those of us who are deadhead, flat-footed realists could read the book and see exactly how those things were functioning and didn't find ourselves saying, "She made it up!"

SFH: Actually, a few people have talked about issues of truthfulness in the case of *The Woman Warrior* because after the book came out and after it was reviewed, Maxine Hong Kingston wrote this very long essay talking about all the misreadings by "white" reviewers and how they were reading these myths as exoticizations, when really she was intending something else because she was changing the myths in the book. But she didn't tell you she was consciously changing the myths in the book. She told you that in interviews later on. So, for instance, she transfers the scars of a general Ngak Fei to the back of Fa Mu Lan when she tells the Fa Mu Lan story, but she doesn't indicate that in the book. You have to find that out on your own. And in interviews she says, "I took his power for women. That's why I changed it." Which makes sense. But it makes one wonder how the reader is supposed to read that myth and whether there isn't something maybe a little dangerous, or even something lost rather than gained, by the author not acknowledging these changes within the book.

PH: That's a really good example, which I didn't know. But let me say this: There's a book coming out early 2001, and I don't know the title of it, but it's going to be from Anchor/Doubleday by Carol Bly, and in it will be two chapters: "Lying in Memoir" and "Lying in Poetry." She's an old friend of mine, and she's always on my case about these issues because she thinks I'm a liar, too. And when I'm responding to these issues, I sometimes am speaking to her—although I'll feel like I'll know if I'm speaking to her once I read these two chapters. Anyway, she is very hard-lined about fact and fiction. She would have no trouble in saying to you, "That's a lie. That is a simple lie and should not be done." And I find it hard in some ways to argue with that. But the question would be, What would have happened if she'd just stuck with the original myth? Why did she do that? Was it a simple technical thing? In my own experience, let me show you a way in which I have lied, so that you can then decide if you think I've lied. I'll give you two examples. One is kind of simple. If you read *A Romantic Education*, the original book that was published in 1981, it becomes clear that I encourage you to think that there are two trips. I say I went, and then in nineteen seventy-something I went back. So you hear that I went back. I make it clear that I went and I went back. In fact, I went three times. And I divide the experiences of those three trips into two, sheerly for narrative purposes. There was a reason for me to go back, in narrative terms, which had to do with the idea that this person couldn't stay away,

needed to go back. If I went back a third time, it would lose that sense of the power of going back the second time. It would be like, “Ok, she went a third time. Did she go a fourth time? A fifth?” And so sort of divvied up. I also in one occasion—only on one—had a companion, and I didn’t write him into the text at all because he had no connection with anything, and in fact was not there for most of what I was doing. So that’s a case of a sin of omission. So I’ve got one of synthesis (of synthesizing time) and one of omission.

And now I’ve got another one, in *Virgin Time*—my Catholic background book, where I took like five trips and made it into one. That’s honest. Nobody would have any argument with that. But in one part of that book there’s a trip I take, a sort of pilgrimage with a bunch of nuns. There were like forty of them. There’s no way, in narrative terms, you can contend with forty individuals. And indeed, in real life, when you go on such a trip, you don’t get to know forty of them. But every now and again, one of the forty you don’t make your main character says something that is indicative of the entire group. Inconveniently, a non-character makes a comment that stands for something that is good for everybody. Take the comment, give it to one of my characters. Lie! That’s what’s called creating a composite character. And I did do that. And that is absolutely verboten in journalism. You get your Pulitzer Prize taken away if you do that. Admittedly, in my case, it was a very minor statement. But there are people, and I think Carol Bly would be one, who would say, “Slippery slope! You start doing that and you’re in big trouble.” You read a book like *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, the author of *The English Patient*—I happen not to like *The English Patient*, either the book or the movie, but I was thrilled that it made a hit because it meant that this book I love, *Running in the Family*, is always going to be in print because he’s become a major author. It probably would have been out of print otherwise. In this book, at one point he says at the back, “If anybody wonders about the veracity of this book”—and he says it very nicely—“all I can say is that in Sri Lanka,” which is where his memoir takes place, “no one would let the truth stand in the way of a good story.” Or something like that. Now this would also probably enrage Carol Bly. But what bothers me is that the people who think that all you need to do is to locate where a fact has been produced that you then, by limiting what can be done in memoir, you have then gotten to the truth. That’s what I think is the second-generation problem. The first-generation problem is to really decide how much leeway we’re going to allow and what rules we’re going to apply. And I think it’s up for grabs right now. I don’t think that we know, and part of the reason we don’t know is that the genre is only now defining itself as a genre. It’s not what it used to be. It’s not the memoirs of an old, famous, venerable person still left standing who gets to tell the tale at the end and settle scores. It’s now

become the quest literature of mid-life, and with that in mind, it's going to make new rules. And so what are the rules? I'm not sure what they are yet, but I do feel that those people who decide they know, while they may have a first-generation answer, they don't have an ongoing second-generation answer to the real question of, "What are the conventions that willy-nilly we're building here?" So I guess I'd go on case-by-case instances. If somebody is really inventing, I'd say to them, "Why the heck aren't you writing a novel?" or "Why aren't you revealing to us that you're inventing?" I think it would be interesting to find out why they're doing that. On the other hand, if someone denies a writer the right to make certain incremental changes, I guess I feel that that's a mistake, too. Because when I read a memoir and I feel the fluency of narration, I know that that writer is telling me I've collapsed time, I've done this, I've done that, but basically we're on target here.

SFH: So would you say that if it's in a memoir it's okay to do some changing around, whereas maybe in the essay, which is a shorter examination, you might be required to give explicit cues to reader. What I'm thinking of is "Memory and Imagination." You start out with an anecdote, and later in the essay you say that thinking about this now you know that some things were changed. For instance, the music book wasn't the red Thompson Music Book that you wanted it to be. In your essay, you said that you wouldn't publish this, but not because of the lies. If you changed that and it was a different essay in which you'd used the selection, would you publish it with the lies? And what's accomplished—this isn't supposed to be an accusatory question—but I'm wondering what's accomplished by just putting those altered facts out there and not reflecting on them versus putting those out there and saying, "Ok, I realize it wasn't really the red Thompson Music Book, but that was the book I really wanted, the book with pictures, the book that was some symbol of what I desired at that time"?

PH: Well, narrative needs to be declarative. It needs to say "X" rather than "Y." So *where* you tell that you didn't actually have the red Thompson Book is important. If the reader hasn't had time to absorb the fact, the visual fact of the Thompson Book, in that moment of time that's being narrated you can't make those turns just willy-nilly and expect the reader to even know what your agenda is. It really is as if you're singing in a different voice. But I took it seriously that I would not choose to publish that memoir as a memoir, just as if it were the way it was. And it is partly because of the lies that I wouldn't do it. Once you know that it is inaccurate, then you're drawn to figuring out exactly what I did in that essay. So there's a sort of game going on in the essay. The fact of the matter is I really did write that in order to write the thing that follows. In other words, it wasn't like afterwards I discovered, "Oh, my,

my! Who could have imagined this?” I actually wrote it, and as I was writing it I recognized what I was doing, and so I used it for that purpose and that purpose only. That’s why it’s where it is. I do think though—and I’m not saying anything original—that memory is a great falsifier, and that’s why it’s a great fascinator. It’s our most intimate and unbidden narrative power. The other one is dreams. Dreams don’t interest me as much. Memory is fascinating to me partly because it does connect things in a story form. Wow! Stop and think about how incredible that is. Here we go to school to learn how to write narrative, but in fact memory is an automatic formulator of story. Everybody does it. Illiterates do it. My dog probably does it. She remembers exactly where I gave her that last treat. It’s an extraordinary faculty of mind.

But notice the assurance with which people make these critiques. That’s to me the worrisome part. Not that they’re entirely wrong, but that they’re so assured that there is this thing called a “fact” and that it can be found like a lost sock, and that once you’ve found it that’s all you’ve got to do, state a fact. And I think that misrepresents entirely the way the faculty of memory works, no matter what you subscribe to. “It was a pearly gray day” is very different from saying, “It’s a horse shit day out there.” “It’s a pearly gray day” is very different, even from saying, “It’s a rainy day.” We all of a sudden know, “Oh, I guess it’s beautiful. There must be something soft and lovely about it.” That is so important, and it has to do with style and voice. And I guess you can tell that these things do matter to me. A lot. I do care about the truth. And I’m personally bothered as if I was on trial—not by you—but by whomever on this issue of truth versus invention.

JH: Could I change the subject for just a moment? In “Czeslaw Milosz and Memory” from *I Could Tell You Stories*, you articulate the differences between American memoir—the notion “that the personal or family past, plumbed and reabsorbed as conscious narrative...clarifies, even reveals ‘the present moment’”—and the European memoir—in which a memoir’s “worth lies in the power [one’s origin] gives one to detach oneself from the present moment.” Do you see that there’s some happy medium between the two? And do you see your work fitting into an American-type memoir or a European type?

PH: Well, it’s interesting that you’d pick out that particular passage. My husband hates that passage. He’s always said, “I don’t understand why you have to dump on the Americans. Why do you think Europeans are better?” And I tell him it’s not that I think they are better, but I think they have something we need. It’s almost like a vitamin that they’ve got. And mind you, I think they could use some of what we’ve got. Oh, I’m an American writer. There’s no question about that, end of

story. There's no way I'm a European writer at all. But I do like this ability to lose the self in the representative. And my particular generation was particularly easy to lose ourselves in that because we were such a generation. I think I even say that somewhere in *A Romantic Education*: "We were such a generation." We are still such a generation. Everywhere we go, the big bulge of us demographically, with our petulance and our youth, and our indulgence in our middle years. Probably we're going to be very demanding in old age; as you wheel us around, we're going to be kvetching right to the nursing home. Even my ophthalmologist said to me as I was complaining about needing bifocals, "Well, you know you won't have to wait too long. The baby boomers won't put up with bifocals. There's huge research going on to make very useful bifocal contact lenses." I guess they already exist, but they're not as good as they're going to be. So wherever we are, we're constantly reinforced that we're this generation. Then we have these three huge events or movements that we also (like Al Gore) take credit for. The first is the Civil Rights Movement; the second is the Women's Movement; and of course then the big, dramatic arena of the Vietnam War. So you put all three of those together, and it was very easy for somebody like me to see myself as member of a generation, as a point in history, rather than just as me with my mom and my dad and my story.

SB: A little less than a year ago you told *Image* that you were turning towards fiction and are working on a collection of short stories. Why fiction now after so much time?

PH: First of all, I have written a story or two now and again, so it isn't as if I suddenly woke up and thought, "Hmm, there's this thing called fiction." But part of it is practical. I'm not writing a novel because my life probably wouldn't allow me to finish it in any reasonable time because of certain responsibilities I have. It's just the way my life is organized. And I happen to adore the short story. I suppose there is a poetic connection here. There's a way in which a short story can end in the same way a poem can end. There's a way in which the end of a short story can have this kind of "Click" that doesn't just close things down but open things up, the same way the end of a poem can be. You know that famous James Wright poem, "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm at Pine Island in Minnesota" that ends with "I have wasted my life." Everything is about lying in a hammock and looking at a chicken hawk and noticing a cow pie, and it's a very short poem that seems to be looking...and the last line disconnected from everything else it would seem, is "I have wasted my life." Talk about "Be here now." You're in this moment and all his life is filtered through that instant. It's absolutely gorgeous. Stories can do that, too. So maybe I'm

heading towards a lyric thing again. The other thing is that I'm having a wee of a time making things up: If I say someone's divorced, they're divorced. End of story. I've really been let out of the cage of this question about fact and fiction, and now I'm just making things up and using them any which way. It's kind of fun. I'm really loving writing them.

The piece I'm reading tonight is "What She Couldn't Tell," which is the one about my Czech teacher. In this essay, there's a scene with an actress, and at the end of this important conversation, it says, "...her lovely eyes, wistful and wry, knowing she would never play opposite Albert Finney again. 'He used to call me cupcake,' she said. 'We joked around.'" So in this story I'm writing, I start out with a scene in which this Czech actress is going to the location for the scene she's playing with the American actor, and he walks by her and says, "Hi, cupcake." And for my own amusement I linked one of my last pieces of memoir—not to say that I'll never write memoir again—and I gave the same exchange in real life to the story. So that's the fun for me. And just in practical terms, I know I could finish these, so I can hope to have a book in a year or so, which I want to do. My old friend and classmate, Garrison Keeler, called me about a year ago and he said, "You've got to stop writing these memoirs. You don't want to be known as a memoirist, do you? You've got to write some fiction." So maybe I'm obeying his command.

Contributors

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Jennifer Henderson is finishing her first year of graduate school at Kansas State University where she is a Seaton Fellow studying poetry, creative nonfiction, and cultural studies.

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John Weslie McClurg is currently enrolled in the MFA program at The University of Maryland, where he studies under the poets Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly. He recently moved to the D.C. area from Athens, Ohio, is recently married, and, most importantly, just got a cat that he named (according to Eliot's naming of cats principle) "Goo."

Peter Melman is currently pursuing a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He has published in *Puerto Del Sol*, *Mississippi Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Jeopardy Magazine*, *Southwestern Review*, and *Louisiana Literature*. He has an article forthcoming in *English Language Notes*.

Rosemary Z. Monaco teaches English and Communications at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. She has recently completed a collection of short stories entitled "Girl Missing and Other Stories." There really is a Nameless Creek, Indiana.

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Jenny Spinner is a doctoral student in English at the University of Connecticut, where she also serves as director of the Creative Writing Program. She received an MFA in nonfiction writing from Penn State and an MA in English from the University of Connecticut. Her dissertation is an anthology of women essayists from the 17th century to the present, where she also finds herself one of those rare and loyal lovers of the essay.

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