

THREE RIVERS REVIEW

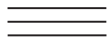
OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

VOLUME XV

1995 – 2010
CELEBRATING FIFTEEN YEARS
OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

THREE
RIVERS
REVIEW
OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

VOLUME XV



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH HONORS COLLEGE

Three Rivers Review 2010
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Three Rivers Review of Undergraduate Literature is an annual student-run publication of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. It seeks to enliven, foster and publish the best undergraduate fiction and poetry in the Greater Pittsburgh area. It accepts submissions, from September 15 to January 15 of each academic year, from undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, all University of Pittsburgh Branch Campuses, and all institutions of post-secondary, undergraduate education in the Greater Pittsburgh area. Inquiry and submissions can be sent by post to: Editor, *Three Rivers Review*, 3505 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. Submissions can also be e-mailed as attachments in Microsoft Word (.doc compatible) files to: ThreeRiversReview@gmail.com. Submission requirements are: a maximum of 15 pages fiction or 5 poems. All submissions must be accompanied by a cover sheet including name, academic year, academic institution, mailing address, e-mail address, submission titles, and a press-ready biographical statement. Submitted work is not guaranteed to be returned. Authors will be contacted as to the status of their work no later than two (2) months following current Volume's submission deadline.

Three Rivers Review wishes to sincerely thank Dean G. Alec Stewart, Karen Billingsley & the University Honors College, Jeff Oaks, *Collision Literary Magazine*, The Frame Gallery - A Student-Run Art Space & Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh English Department, Caren Marcus, Kristofer Collins, Brian Scullion, Camiele White, Paula Bohince, Olympia Vernon, Anne Sanow, and Gerald Stern.

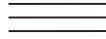
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"Roses" by Gerald Stern originally appears in his book *American Sonnets* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2002) and is reprinted herein with the author's permission.

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VOLUME XV



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CONTENTS

POETRY

2009 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

WINNER: Madeleine Barnes

Night Runner	13
Side Effects	15
Grasp	16
Notes on Mothering	17
Child Mad Enough	18

RUNNER-UP: Hannah Aizenman

Litany (a study, a prayer, a flirtation)	19
Counting Your Teeth	20
Myth	22
Give Up Your Shosts	24
Mythmaking	26

STAFF SELECTION: Alicia Salvadeo

Like Heterolalia	27
The Flower Tent, or Seven Visions of Kore	29

Grettelyn Nypaver

Harakiri	32
----------	----

Austin Moyer

Holiday	33
---------	----

FICTION

2009 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

WINNER: Scott Krzywonos

The Night Jo Flied	37
--------------------	----

RUNNER-UP: Liam Sweeney

Strange Ways of Kissing	47
-------------------------	----

STAFF SELECTION: Sarah Hogg

Never Enough Poison in the World	61
----------------------------------	----

Christina Seymour

Pause and Circumstance	70
------------------------	----

Christopher Stokum	
Kneelers	74
Greg Trietley	
The Fantastic Life of Ed Shorecroft	83

COMMENTARY

INTERVIEW: Gerald Stern	96
POEM: Roses	100
INTERVIEW: Anne Sanow	101
CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES	113

EDITOR'S NOTE

The magazine you are holding in your hands is a product of team effort, joint leadership, and the constant need to say: this is what we care about as writers and this is how we will honor it. Since 1995, *Three Rivers Review* has gone through 15 different volumes, 28 issues, and more writers, staff members, and editors than we can count. However, through these numerous editions, there was always a constant: our love, respect, and devotion to literary writing.

Looking back at our seven semesters of involvement with *Three Rivers Review*, we are both very proud of the accomplishments of the magazine and its staff. The evolution of this publication has been in the style and structure that you see in front of you today, as well as in the diversity of the content it includes. What started as a small, in-house, Pitt Honors College journal called *Thirst*, is now a well-circulating publication that has sent representatives to AWP conferences and receives submissions from dozens of universities in and around Pittsburgh. If anything, this volume of *Three Rivers Review* is a testament to the fact that the quality and mission of a literary magazine are not necessary constant, and that each person that impacts this publication leaves his or her mark on the history of this project.

Before you enjoy Volume XV, we would like to take a moment and thank the people who have given us the support we needed to grow and to develop *TRR* into what it is today. These people are: Pitt Faculty Advisor Jeff Oaks, who has shown his support of *TRR* by always leaving his office door open to us; the University of Pittsburgh Honors College Dean, Alec Stewart, who has provided us with the space, as well as the secure funding, without which this magazine would not exist; and especially, to his assistant Karen Billingsley who has been for us, as well as for the editors that preceded us, someone we can turn to at anytime—someone who cares as much as we do about this publication and about seeing that it reaches its full potential. An very special thanks goes out to the noteworthy writers who participated in this edition: Anne Sanow, Gerald Stern, and our contest judges; poet and Pitt Alumna Paula Bohince and novelist

Olympia Vernon.

Also, we would like to thank every staff member that dedicated hours to reading and reviewing these submissions. Nothing made us more confident in the work we did than walking, on the night of a meeting, into a room full of laughter and excitement. Thank you for sharing our vision of this publication and for making this a very enjoyable experience. Walking away from something that has shaped our writing experience at Pitt will be very difficult, but we are certain that we are leaving this magazine in the competent hands of editors and staff members who will cherish and carry on the legacy that we have had the honor of serving .

Last but not least, as two people who were young writers before we ever became editors, we would like to thank all the undergraduate writers who have trusted us enough with their material. We fully appreciate how hard it is to put your work out there; to see our mailboxes filling up with submissions every semester has been the most thrilling, exciting aspect of our work. Thank you to those who have valued our opinions and supported our work as a publication. It is the work that undergraduate writers submit that makes this magazine what it is.

In the end, we are two undergraduate writers and editors and the publication you are about to read is the culmination of what was, for us, a fantastic learning experience. Thank you for stopping by a table at an event, or on your way to class, or wherever you may have been, and picking up this edition of *Three Rivers Review*. As readers, you have been the horizon we have always worked towards.

Nour Abdelghani & Joel W. Coggins
Editors-in-Chief
Three Rivers Review

POETRY

2009 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

JUDGE'S REMARKS

Madeleine Barnes's breathtaking poems are built with a musical complexity and emotional clarity that allows deep connection and wonderment. She works in varying poetic modes with ease; she seems to instinctively realize what form will perfectly reflect the specific intelligence of her subjects. That each of her poems feels absolutely fresh, and felt, is remarkable. This poet has a phenomenal ear and sense of pacing, including restraint. The poems read aloud illuminate her vast skills. I found Ms. Barnes's language to be vivid without being ornamental: each word is essential, and true. The poet disappears inside the poems, moving invisibly, shaping the reading experience with quiet confidence and control. That the poems feel so natural, so spontaneous, is a testament to her many gifts. I am genuinely moved by her work and thrilled to introduce her to a larger audience.

I greatly admire the ambition of Hannah Aizenman's series: her restless and roaming mind, her dynamic reach, her sophisticated musical structures. In a voice at moments darkly humorous, at others questioning and vulnerable, it is always believable and immensely readable. This poet captures and keeps our attention throughout her long lines and the breadth of her references. The controlled urgency of Ms. Aizenman's poems is impressive. It is a pleasure to recognize her poems.

Paula Bohince

Sarabande Books Poet

Incident at the Edge of Bayonet Woods (2008)

1998 *Three Rivers Review* Poetry Prize recipient

WINNER: Madeleine Barnes

NIGHT RUNNER

“When a thing ceases to be moved, it does not therefore at the same time cease to be movable...”

– Aristotle

Sleepless, I’m never sure how to wash stars

from my hair, each follicle rinsed with those barbs,
headache after headache calling tendons
into motion: night runner, I ran.

I juxtaposed ankle to tar, I sprinted
the imagination’s stadium.

I fell and fractured a metatarsal bone. So what,
I fell,
I stood up, kept walking, ripped space from cuticle,
my brain stem crumbling infinitesimal sparks into ash, ash, ash.

There is anguish in movement but I had to move.
What use are studies and predictions

to force, the flash in my muscle that says *here, now*,
who am I? That’s who. I stood up. What can be mended
when you, too, dissolve into pixels, 1 gram

of imagistic fragments? What’s left? 6-8 weeks,
elevate the foot, sit still while the earth quakes?

Motion, anemia, osteoporosis, night runner unbeats

the heart into living, where is calcium in space?
How will I know what remains

if I stop, if the ache ends? Will I forget
how you look? Get me up. I am one ache away

from understanding. I couldn't move, didn't know what I was comprised of until it had to be repaired.

SIDE EFFECTS

You're caught in this loophole, a story with no pictures.

(It begins with a shock table, head braced, counting
down).

Electrodes stuck firmly to the forehead. *Ten, nine.*

Bi-lateral, targeting both sides of the brain, convulsions
softened

with sedatives, what's the word? *Four, three.*

Picture a flamethrower shot into a cavern, eye sockets
igniting.

Memory, see also: flinching

in chemicals. Infantile stillness, jaw relaxed,
the nervous system

trying to reset. Do you know what day it is? *Clear.*

Picture this, a spider breathing, mute tremendous breath.
Can you respond?

Most patients don't remember seizing, in fact,

nothing you remember is possible. Feather
in a coma,

teeth buzzing. Blank unwired screen, what's your

mood, 1-10? Last resort, it takes one shock,
you fold the dark.

GRASP

after Franz Wright

Before she left, he saw her
and when she dressed
and when she took her coat
Because he did not know her
stay warm he wants to say

arrow keep returning
to your bow directionless, God knows
she left herself untitled at his bedside
she took her coat
he wants to scream
Because he did not know her

he loved her later on
as just a conjured word
haplessness he loved
in himself
and when she stood
and when she stepped outside
Because he heard her

wait, he wants to say
like intersecting wind
like employing frost
in slowing down a wound
and when she flinched
and when she turned her face
from that forgiveness

he saw her grasp
as if she was returning
and when she looked at him
Because he saw it kill her
he'd try again to say it
but when she looked
she saw herself
ruining his hands

NOTES ON MOTHERING

Wherever I am, you are. *Wherever I am.*

Your distance from me is a matter of recalling.
You're here, mass at my core, your body,
equation with no remainder.

Your body in trajectory.

Against a bank of snow you're looking for me,
floating outward. When and where? How do I tell you?

Nothing to hold in that blank projection but transience,
again, take hold of my absence and shake it

you're here, and I saved you

from looking, from seeing right through
your own skin, my god, from trying to know
the right time and place

to tell someone you can't take care of them.

CHILD MAD ENOUGH

What do you want,
child mad enough
to try? You couldn't

be smaller.
Malnourished hand
in the moon,

scarred and flowering:
proof you can hear,
you can see.

The cosmos
are attentive.
Break the pact

with your body.
You are not that garnish.
Break it off,

that twisted weld
no longer armor.
The body waits,

calling you back
when you're ready.
You've done nothing

unforgivable, say it,
honor your body,
transform many times.

Change is your flint,
use it to renew. Say it,
you want to live.

RUNNER-UP: Hannah Aizenman

LITANY (A STUDY, A PRAYER, A FLIRTATION)

It's the one where I wake to find my hands have disappeared.
It's the one where you've left, and left
nothing behind: not sadness, not love—only space,
a smell, a half-drunk beer on my windowsill.

(The girls in the stories received silver hands instead.
Where are my silver hands? I ask, and *Who will bring me lilies?*)

My angel in absentia. Consider flight: the precise anatomy
of a winged man. Consider delicacy of structure;
consider model airplanes, consider the bones of birds.
Consider light, and lightness (*lumen luminarium levitas*).
Consider Icarus. Consider proximity to the sun.

Consider Orpheus. The myths we collect are ones of failure;
I wonder if you've forgotten my face yet.
I wonder if you would look back.

To walk the line between myth and medicine:
you might be called sanguine, and I melancholic. But as creatures
of a new and unnamed science, our sicknesses have nothing
to do with blood or bile. Our imbalances are ones of

ink and milk; of too many words, or not enough.

I examine the mathematics of your being gone,
the obscure equation for the opposite of romance
(the x being—what? —black eyes, black holes?
—a formaldehyde heart?).

I'm asking the question *Is there anything left to solve for?*
My angel in absentia, I'm defining distance:
the light from dead stars, the synaptic leap.

Where are my silver hands?
And who will bring me lilies?

COUNTING YOUR TEETH

Moon tooth, moth tooth, bird tooth, rain tooth;
the heartbroken one, the misanthrope, the one
that'd be good in a fight. Teeth like cigarette butts,
teeth like atoms, algebraic expressions. Loose tooth,
lost tooth; the one your mother saved in a little box
with the ring from her first marriage and a lock of
your brother's hair. Secret tooth, story tooth, tooth
of sadness, rooted deep and yellowing. My fingers
in your mouth—tooth of desire, tooth after
disaster—I'm thinking of things burning, barns
and hearts, entire cities on fire. This one is the time
we drove to the beach in the middle of the night.
This one is the time I thought I was pregnant,
stayed in bed for a week, and you kept saying we'd
be fine. Glass tooth broken on the kitchen counter.
Garden tooth wilting as winter approaches. The
pathological liar, the mad scientist, his failed
experiment. *Hold me tight, you're saying, tighter,
tighter*, until my arms hurt, until I'm sure you can't
breathe, but I'm still not holding tight enough.
Teeth like the tiles of the bathroom floor,
cold against my cheek when I'm weak from
vomiting and still too drunk to stand up.
Teeth like pills, teeth like myths, teeth like the
ones that got away. I'm dreaming of teeth—they're
falling from the sky; someone's throwing them
at my window; I find them buried in the sand
where seashells should be. This one works a
nine to five. This one's waiting tables at a
greasy spoon. This one's busking on a street
corner. This one says *fuck it* and hitchhikes to
California. My fingers in your mouth—you're
asking me why, you're asking what I'm doing,
and instead of *surgery* I say *sculpture*, *spelunking*.
I'm an artist. I'm an explorer. I'm putting things
together, not taking them apart. I keep telling you
I'm sick and it's like you can't hear me. I've got
writer's block. I'm lost at sea. I'm shouting in

the dark. I'm standing naked onstage and I don't know how I got here; everyone's applauding—you might be in the audience or you might not. Traffic tooth, chess tooth, tooth made out of ice or aluminum foil. Beauty tooth, bomb tooth; teeth lined up like tombstones, teeth twisting in your head like screws. This one listens but doesn't believe; this one's got amnesia or maybe Alzheimer's. You keep your memories in mason jars. They're lined up on a shelf; they're floating in formaldehyde. They're glowing like fireflies; you've poked holes in the lids to let the air in. You're afraid of drowning. You're afraid of flying. You're quitting smoking. There's a pattern here somewhere but I can't quite point it out—something about breathing, your delicate lungs like paper. I'm trying to operate the machine of your body but there are so many parts you've kept hidden; once I find them, they've rusted and there's nothing I can do. I'm inventing a religion and your teeth are its gods. I'm trying to read music but your teeth are the notes and they flutter off the page like birds. This is the part where we can't connect, where I speak in poems and you in equations, where we're facing each other with our hands pressed together, where we're trying to conduct electricity through a broken circuit. Tooth of desperation. Tooth of failure. *Listen*, I say, and you don't. *Be quiet*, you say, and I won't. This one is all the drugs we've ever taken. This one is your car wreck, the bad one, when you went off the bridge and later called it an accident. Here we are again, lost in an empty city. Here we are again, lying frozen in the snow, our angels forgotten. Here we are again, tangled together in bed. Here we are. This is the novocaine before the root canal. This is the root canal itself. My fingers in your mouth—I'm *trying*, I'm *trying*. I just want you to swallow me whole.

MYTH

I should feed you pomegranate juice, D. says, keep you underground. You can escape in
the spring.

(Consider: Hades, a highway; the feeling of not knowing where you'll wake up, or with whom.)

Verlaine says, The poet is a madman lost in adventure.
Kerouac says, Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?

Later, D. will tell me: I'm traveling; I don't want you to get attached.

Now, he says: School is hazardous to your health. Have lots of sex. Live different lives
all the time.

I say, I'm trying; I'm someone new every day. He says, Who are you now? I say,

Who are you?

The last I will see of him is a Greyhound bus disappearing at one in the morning,

exhaust rising in the still-warm air (the cold will come soon; for now I live in

my own underworld—

nestled in the warm black lung of a steel city whose body looms skeletal and still in the dark).

Lou Reed says, Take a walk on the wild side.

One night I light a cigarette, and D. says, You shouldn't do that. It's a bourgeois habit—

any smoker feeds the worst capitalist machine. I blow smoke in his face.

When he is gone, I smoke all the time; read Marx with a bloodless heart (he says, You have
nothing to lose but your chains).

D. should feed me pomegranate juice, but does not.
No Kore after all; I am Eurydice instead—lost somewhere along
the way without the comfort

of any glance over his shoulder. There's the occasional phone call
from New York or Portland,
but we will lose touch, and when, in the supermarket produce
aisle, I see seeds spilling forth from
 red flesh,

I consider soft white hands which are constantly unfolding;
consider fruit, the opposite of bone.

GIVE UP YOUR GHOSTS

“Rosabelle – answer – tell – pray, answer – look – tell –
answer, answer – tell.”

– Harry Houdini

I’m thinking of all of the things I have swallowed:
smoke and semen and especially sadness (whose,
it’s hard to tell; mine or some lover’s or a stranger’s
on the street). In the meantime, it’s vaudeville,

the theatre of desperation; the knotted wooden stage
and the sagging proscenium—I’m watching you
perform, or maybe vice versa. Regardless, it’s
simple—it’s curtain call and one of us is left lonely
in bed, sheets wrinkled and creeping off the corner
of the mattress, gray morning spilling into the room.

I’m thinking in windows and badly drawn birds,
modes of escape; I’m a rudimentary runaway, with
more than one suitcase and my stomach full of lead.

I’m constantly aware of negative space: your palm
rests in the valley of my hipbones; you touch the
hollow at the bottom of my throat; you stare into
my mouth; your fingers move between my legs—

all I can think is what isn’t there. I’ve written
the love poems, the myths and the dreams;
I worry I’ve got nothing left but goodbyes.

I want to leave you shouting secrets at the spot where
I stood, to leave no evidence, the emptiness pregnant
with what was there, with what might have been.

This is more and less than sleight of hand; if
it’s cards, it’s tarot: I, the Queen of Cups; no—

I, the Hanged Man. I'm glassy-eyed and feverish,
strung up somewhere between sorrow and
sickness—you're across the table, waiting for
your fortune as if it were your breakfast.

The art of escape comes slowly, in pieces,
the steady click of locks like clockwork:
it begins with the absence of mind, where I
spend hours writing lines and crossing them out;
next, absence of heart, where you speak and
I can't hear it, only want to tell you that I don't
care; all I've got left is the absence of body—

the part where you're left with your disbelief,
unblinking, your breath suspended (now you're
the Hanged Man—crucial; the audience must
question itself)—and you're the one waiting,

sleeping with a shadow.
If I destroy, it will be by disappearing.
I'm working on my vanishing act.

MYTHMAKING

We build them from the improbability of want, the broken needles, the visible seams, the scant rhythm-click of bodies and dreams, bone and camera, muscle and birth: kaleidoscopic earth, the passing of ghosts from one mouth to another. It begins in the South, in the summer, air heavy, legs bare: Alabama, the wetness of becoming, the sameness of beginning (once and once and once). It's fingers in hair, instinctive phrenology, release and pull, heartstring activity, reading a skull. We find it again in the cold, a steel city up North, the damp darkness of the jaw-cave, tongue feeling old stories etched on walls, the reel of the unknown, the distant pearl-drip of water, evidence of life, evidence of the unconscious. We are the collision of East and West, of latitude, longitude, and the possible exaction of space and time, of beast and being: the flesh, the face, the fact of the skeleton. These are the hands that burst from within us: hands of milk, they are peach-eating hands. They mold the landscapes; they hold and form and farm the clay of creation. They are violent, gentle, only half-awake: they are storms, they are fears, they are secrets and dissections. Here, the connection of tooth and elbow, of arrow and armor, of chance and mistake. We're building by bedsheet, white and wrinkled; we're building by heat, by might, by sleep. We build by the accident of breath on neck, of hip and hook. We do not speak. Our language is one of touch and look, the steady hum of breaking and making: history machine, human machine, sewing machine. We stitch them from the things we carry, dental floss and dirty socks; we stitch them from the things we carry, loss and lock and dream of flight. We build them, fallible, from the imaginary: mind-beings, love-beings, structures of light.

STAFF SELECTION: Alicia Salvadeo

LIKE HETEROLALIA

As if the limp of candle flame
knows better, knows more ground than the dog,

than kissy waters spitting
at each other's lips

(The Nile Flows, and
pretty saints rake coughing clothes for hours
against harmonical bibs;)

As if the predawn moans
down windowlight, Sunday morning

As if our tongues move
under budded roses

if you take my meaning

like scattered rain means
wedding veil

and cavalcade
is the act of spreading oneself thinly,

raw shadow crossing the carpet,
sacred wine from Ica

(Peru, whence sails he
to starve wholly in Paris,
Peru, what is Bread?)

purple wine grapeblood pouring like vinethread
Bottleneck rests

in Chopping Block's arms, the latter
admitting suppers and scars

(Perfumed toes,
I'll comb you with My Hair
up there, down here, [in here].)

The dog pulled a skull from the parted dirt of Time
by the whites of well-worn maxillae, and I knew

how many times I'd been lied to this morning,
the day before,

the nights and the nights and

I knew
how many times I'd thrown myself beneath you

if you take my meaning

this morning, the day before, after my prayers

the nights and the nights and

balding, black-eyed susans
begin to bend westward with the roses, finally

(The Nile Flows
cool into Mare Nostrils and
cold out from my Mouth—
Saints, too, separate the clothes by color.)

We get out of bed. We feed the dog.
We wear our shoes until there are holes,

and when there are holes
we wait.

THE FLOWER TENT, OR SEVEN VISIONS OF KORE

I.

The morning is warm, the meal
still sticks in my throat, unyielding
to my swallow. I cannot sing.
It is also dim. A headless bird perches
on my thin shoulder, chirping
through the chip in its wing
a message from the shamefaced sun.

II.

I am a working woman
now.

I make
some kind of wage,
and when I deadhead
the petunias and
mums,

I don't wear gloves.

III.

On certain days I work with Dan.
On others I work with his wife, a woman
whose fine etchings lure downwards
her smile's far corners.
As we eat at noon, she spends
the quiet spell talking of her son
and how she loves to be tired.

I bite headlong the peach
I brought from home—sweet, but strange

as I swallow: its ridged wrinkled stone is
reft, and as I tear away its flesh
the inner pericarp
falls apart.

IV.

Ripped open like a finely woven
silken heaven split,
as if dawning on this heady
thing that the time of year was summer,
the seedcoat falls away
from the translucent curl.

V.

From overhead I soak
flowers
baking in pots on blacktop

for thirty seconds
on "flood" until water
overflows from the pot's bottom
to the busy road.

I'm not ready for you yet.

VI.

Draped maiden with no head, what songs seep from your open
neck!

VII.

Cold spills from the shower's long neck, heals
my blushing cheeks, my thin red

shoulders, and for an ineffable instant,
my fraught body—

but it is not enough to wash
away that bird's heliacal wing-notes, nor
do the withered heads
of the petunias and
mums

fall from behind seamless eyelids
to puddle at the drain.

Grettelyn Nypaver

HARAKIRI

Peace brings death in the belly, like harakiri.

Ground intestines, human sausages, exploding red,
seeping through white; red crawling out, over,
colonizing dirt in a saturation of soil-soaked earth,
spreading gore, granting life through and through
the out-flowing of life so red, so thoroughly alive,
so gradual in its grappling disembowelment.

White winters when red blooms,
branching, tree-like, reaching for every corner
of snow, until each chill feels fingers, stretching,
blinding red as a blood vessel burst in the cornea;
albine overwhelmed by exacerbated veins.

To grim eyes, to hardscrabble life, death will suffice,
short. To be red in quick, painful mastery,
the flash red, as of fire (though hottest fire is white),
this, above all, is desirable to maintain unstained.
Tears are fire, and men fear both equally;
a woman's tears, the final terror that kills

(the absolute here is red). Ambivalence is a virtue,
like being stalked blossoms into backwash
from a suspicious mind. The theoretical assassin
intends victory, but underestimates desperation;
wind and women's tears, tear resolution.

Guttural grunts tell of facades, massacres in red,
issuing underlines, leveling grass that grows from tears,
changing its color, stalk by stalk, to poppies.

Austin Moyer

HOLIDAY

For a Friend

The conduits and symbols of love will fill
and empty in step with the wink of our tongue;
neurons will burst open as your spinal cord twists
into a tesla coil, the walls of the temple shrine

unraveling. There will be only words, spoken
in morse code, in dots and dashes, images
and photoreels, taste and sound underwhelming
in their edict, their muddled signs and prophesy.

We will hawk for Oligarchs, haunt cylindrical thought
for fun; euthanize desire with the static emanating
from our fingertips; taste, then spit up, philosophy
and beliefs, live like nothing, like nothing at all.

And I will hang your hopes like a cowbell
about my neck, the sun growing jealous
of our foreheads & we will forget who we are
or why it mattered. Let the temper of this air

leave you breathless, the sentence of this moment become
your nothingness. Do not deal in prayer
or petals of ash, dim when compared
to their counterparts. Embrace only the moon

drawing static along the bottom curve of my iris,
the blood siphoned from beneath our tongue, the mercury
marking what's left, fossilized points and lines.
Abandon the fuel, the reality that tethers you,

unclothe, delineate, go mad, magnify the architecture
of empty space, my palm print; set loose the funnel
of crows in your throat, let my carcass of iron torture
your compass needle, and you will have your holiday.

FICTION

2009 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

JUDGE'S REMARKS

"The Night Jo Flied" has all the traits of a strong bear. It is grandeur in its description of the southerner and her religion and death. In that place, a large and bloody reality towers above the reader and manages to sustain some sort of Energy that fully engages its observer.

Liam Sweeney's "Strange Ways of Kissing" is a subtle magnet that pulls at its reader with all the tenacity of a hum; and, it is there luring its listener at odd turns, until finally landing in the nest of one's memory.

Olympia Vernon
Grove Press Author
Eden (2002)
Logic (2004)
A Killing in This Town (2006)

WINNER: Scott Krzywonos

THE NIGHT JO FLIED

Rare was it that the children of the Robert E. Lee schoolhouse stayed after school to do *anything*, let alone listen to a peer spin a story. But about a dozen children stayed because they wanted to hear what Todd, the new boy, had begun in class before the teacher stopped him.

Show-and-tell that day had been chaotic. Todd's show—a picture he had drawn of a girl flying by an orange moon—was made valuable by his tell—a story of a girl he once saw fly. The teacher cut him off, explaining that tall tales helped no one and that he could tell the story after school if he wanted to.

And so, by popular demand, Todd began to tell the story to the other seven-year-olds.

"Now I can tell you this story, but you gotta promise not to laugh because this ain't a funny story," he said. "Nobody never believed that Jo flied that night, except of course the people who was involved, like me and Bobby, who know it's true because we was there and saw it. So don't laugh or nothing, and don't say, 'Todd, there ain't no way that's right,' because it is right. So there."

"When this all happen, Todd?" one in the crowd asked.

"Ten days ago," he said. "Right before I moved here. I didn't even get a chance to talk to Bobby about it, on account of I moved."

"Who's Bobby?" the same kid asked.

"Listen up and ya'll can find out." He took a deep breath and began.

"Well, we was sitting on the blueberry cliff after playing ball one evening, which is the place in Bluff County where we always spent our evenings during on the weekend. It was a real nice place because, for one, there was always blueberries, and for another, there never was parents, so all us kids could cuss and push each other and one kid even chewed but then he stopped because his mother found out. The other kids—there was probably about twenty of us altogether after the ball game—they was still catching or batting or something, maybe catching fireflies, I don't know. But me and Bobby was looking right at the sunset because the clouds was blocking it just right and it made them orange, like

cheese, sort of, or wheat.”

“You sissy,” one of the boys in the audience said. “You sound like my mama.”

“Well, we wasn’t *actually* looking at the sunset, you munch-head. And if you wanna go then go. I ain’t gonna stop you.”

The heckler stood still.

“Right, that’s what I thought. Now like I said, we wasn’t looking at the sun for pleasure reasons. That’s something girls like to do. But we was tired from playing ball all day so we was just sitting, I guess, you’d say, and looking, and since the sun was the only thing worth looking at we looked at it. But we ain’t girls so don’t you get mistaken because we was looking at the sunset. Looking ain’t no crime, so don’t you make fun.

“But we was sitting there when Jo came up from the back of us and sat down and said nothing. Now this was strange, because usually Jo would come up and yell at you or hit you or lick her finger and stick it right in your ear so it was real wet or crush the blueberries you had in your hand so it got all purple and sticky. But she was just silent, and Bobby, he looked at me confused, and I shrugged, because I didn’t know why she was so quiet, so Bobby asked (and here Todd used a new voice for each speaker):

“‘Where was you today, Jo? We played ball and you wasn’t there.’

“‘Shut up, you Yankee scum,’ Jo said, not even looking at him. She was looking at the sunset too.

“‘Don’t you call me scum, Jo.’ Bobby was angry. He usually kept his cool, but this was too much, I think. But he never denied he was a Yankee, cause he was and we all knew it. He was from New England or New York or New Hampshire—it was someplace New, that’s all I know. But boy was he good at ball. He could throw, bat, catch. He was just good.

“Me and Jo and Bobby was all real good friends. Best friends, I guess you’d say, even though I have short hair and am short and Bobby has long hair and is tall and Jo, well, Jo was a girl, but she kind of had a boy’s name so it was okay with us. We went to Sunday school together when we wasn’t playing ball. We always walked together, just us, nobody else. We even had a club that met once in a while, usually on Tuesdays or something,

and we would talk about things that we never talked about with nobody, like about how Bobby's folks really wanted to go back to the North or about how Jo's daddy beat her up sometimes or about how one time I saw a girl naked in a picture in a magazine. We called ourselves the Secret Club, on account of it was a Secret and we was a Club.

"But we was there, away from the other kids, and Bobby was real offended at being called scum because he ain't scum and so he went over to Jo to push her a little, not hard, but just to let her know who's boss, and when he did she fell and when she looked up she had a big black eye right on her face.

"Now this made me stand up and say to Bobby, 'Bobby, you is Yankee scum for giving that girl a black eye.' He was still angry.

"'I didn't give her that,' he said. 'She must've had that already, because I didn't do that to her.'

"Jo didn't say nothing, just stared off still, like she was real upset, so I took Bobby aside. 'You ain't allowed to push girls, Bobby, you know that. Not never, not even if they hit you. Jo's a girl. And she's only six, so you really ain't allowed to hit her anyway, seeing as she's younger than us.'

"Before Bobby was even ready to answer Jo yelled at us, 'I'm five and three-quarters, you dumb goon, so learn to count your numbers. And Bobby ain't the one who did this'—she pointed at her eye, like this, with her finger—'so you just shut your mouth.'

"Now this sure did surprise me because I was thinking that he *for sure* gave her that black eye, on account of his strong pitching arm and all. But Jo ain't never lied, so I knew it was true. And it was just like Jo read my mind, because she then swore, 'Jesus, Todd, I ain't never told no lies,' and that was the end of it. So we all went home, except for Jo, who just sat there and kept looking at the cliff, at the sun, thinking or something, or maybe just looking like me and Bobby was doing before. But she was quiet while she watched it and she didn't move—she didn't even eat no blueberries.

"At supper that night I told Grandpa and Daddy about how Jo had a big black eye and how it wasn't even Bobby who gave it to her, even though he was the one who pushed her.

"'Well, then, Todd,' Grandpa asked. 'How did she get it?'

"I ain't no idea," I told him, honest. "Maybe she fell. She ain't said why."

"At that point Grandpa said to Daddy, 'I told you that Calvin was a no good man. You've got to go over there and set him straight.'"

"My Daddy just shook his head and shoved a piece of steak in his mouth and chewed. Whenever he chewed he always was thinking. That's what he said: isn't nothing better than a steak for a man's brain. That's why we ate steak so often, I think. That and we lived on a cattle ranch.

"But my Daddy just chewed, thinking it over, I guess, whether or not Grandpa was right about Calvin. Finally, he said, 'I will not tell a man how to run his family.'"

"Who's Calvin?" The heckler asked.

"Listen and you'll know. I said that before. Listen.

"Calvin was Jo's daddy. He made his own whiskey and barely farmed and lived in a house that nobody's taken care of for about a hundred years, looks like. But anyways, Calvin was not a nice man. He was always yelling at us if we tried to play catch in his yard or if we went digging for crawlers at night so we could fish in the morning. And there ain't no reason he should've been so angry at us for playing catch or digging for crawlers. He said it messed up his farm but there really isn't no farm to speak of. He must've just been angry because, like my Daddy said, all that whiskey was too bad for a man to drink by himself."

"He sounds like a right goon," said the heckler to the other children."

They nodded.

"Sometimes Jo would stay late after school with Miss Beverly, our teacher, and some days would even come to school with her. Now normally this meant you was a brownnoser yellowbelly who was afraid to do bad, but seeing as Miss Beverly was always giving Jo real stern looks and would correct her when she used the Lord's name in vain—well, Jo wasn't no brownnosed yellowbelly is all I'm saying.

"One day Jo came to school with her arm all limp at one side and she couldn't write or nothing, so we—me and Bobby—we asked her about it at recess time.

"There ain't nothing wrong with it," she said, angry.

"Sure there is," I told her. "I ain't no fool. Jo, you ain't

even able to swing a bat.'

"'You can't play pitcher, either,' Bobby said. 'So if you can't do these things you can't play with us.' Bobby didn't mean this, of course. He was just trying to get Jo to talk and tell us about her gimp arm.

"Jo spit. 'Then,' she yelled, 'I'm leaving, Bobby. I'm only like this because of my daddy, so it ain't my fault.'

"And that was the story, really. Her daddy done pushed her when he was real drunk and her arm was gimpy for a day before Miss Beverly found out and took her to the doctor so it would get all better.

"So anyways, back to my story about Jo's black eye, which must've been the biggest and blackest in all of Bluff County, probably ever, or at least since the War.

"Well, I was still at the dinner table with my folks. My Daddy had just said, 'I will not tell a man how to run his family,' after chewing his steak. And then my Grandpa said to me, 'Todd, are you finished?' and I said yes, even though I wasn't, and then he said, 'Can you go upstairs to bed?' and I said yes even though I wasn't tired. I did all of this because his voice sounded serious, like he needed to talk to my Daddy in private, and because the steak was burnt and I was tired anyways.

"I slept real good that night until I woke up because someone yelled in a loud whisper, 'Todd, you dumb toad.' I knew it was Jo, so I opened the window and let her in. She climbed in and it took her a while even though the window is real close to the ground. She was limping. I thought she hurt herself climbing, maybe, but Jo didn't like you pointing out her injuries, I didn't say nothing.

"She was all sweaty and breathing heavy. She was bleeding a little under her chin, I think, but it was hard to see her face because she was wearing a burlap sack over her head like a hood because it was raining.

"'What do you want?' I asked.

"'We've gotta have the last meeting of the Secret Club soon, seeing that you're leaving Bluff and all.'

"'We'll do that tomorrow or something,' I said to her. I was really sleepy so I wasn't in the mood for no meeting discussions or nothing.

"'No, we has got to have it now. I found out something

real important and we gotta discuss it. It's about what we learned in Sunday school, about Jesus flying and miracles and stuff. We gotta talk about it right now.'

"'No way,' I told her. But she climbed in my bed at that point and her clothes smelled like whiskey a little bit and asked me, 'No, can we have it now? It's real important.'

"'No,' I said. But then she punched me in the belly so I would say yes, which I did after the third punch."

"You let a girl hit you like that?" the heckler said.

"I was doing it because she was my friend, so you just keep quiet or go home."

The heckler was again quieted. Todd continued.

"'And we gotta get Bobby, too,' Jo said, 'so I'll go get him and you put on some clothes and let's meet at the tree in a little bit.'

"So I got dressed and waited at our tree for about ten minutes, even though it was raining a little bit, and they wasn't showing up so I was about to leave altogether when I heard them coming towards me. It was really windy and I could see Bobby's long hair in the wind but I wasn't able to see Jo's hair because of that sack on her head. The light from the moon—it was a full moon that night, orange, and real big, like a dinner plate—well, that light shined a little light even through the rain, so that's how I could see it was Bobby and Jo coming. She was walking funny, and her arm was all limp again. I didn't notice that part when she was in my house, I guess, because there was no moon in my house to make any light.

"'Where you been?' I asked.

"'Getting this goon right here,' she told me, pointing at Bobby. 'He ain't wanna come.'

"'Well, me neither,' I said. 'It's really early. Or late.'

"'Or just plain rude, Jo,' said Bobby. 'What's so important?'

"'You remember about Jesus, how he flied that one time?'

"'Dammit,' I said. 'I don't want no lesson. We is already learned this in Sunday school.'

"'I know we is already learned it,' she said. 'I wanna know if you remember it.'

"'Yeah, we remember it,' said Bobby. 'Now why?'

"'Well, I can fly now, too.'

"'Now I knew this was lies, I did, so I said, 'Do it, then,'

right as Bobby said, 'No you can't.'

"I can too, Bobby. And I will. I'm gonna fly off that cliff. And I ain't coming back.'

"Now remember we was standing under the tree, so I couldn't see Jo's face but I knew she was serious. Her hood covered her forehead and all, and her face was in the shadows, but I could tell by how she said it—how she said it—that she was serious. Bobby didn't seem to agree with me, though, so he said:

"This is stupid and I'm leaving.'

"You is the stupid one,' Jo told him and pushed him right in the chest so he fell to the ground.

"When he was on the ground he looked at me and I knew he was thinking of how I told him he ain't allowed to hit girls even if they hit first so he said to her, 'I'm still leaving,' and he walked way.

"Now I wanted to see Jo fly, but Jo lived east of Bingham Street and me and Bobby lived west of it, and I didn't wanna walk home by myself on account of it being dark, so I walked with Bobby for a few feet until Jo ran out of the tree's shadow and grabbed our shoulders and said, 'Please,' and in the moonlight I could see her face and I saw it was all beat up.

"Now Jo ain't never said please anything unless she was catching and our umpire called a strike a ball and then she'd say, 'Oh, pa-leese' just like that. But if she is saying please as in manners, well, you had to do it.

"Me and Bobby, after we saw her face all beat up and bloody and fresh—well, we looked at each other but we didn't say nothing, knowing full well that it was bad news and probably from her daddy and that it'd be proper to say nothing.

"She walked to the cliff. 'I'm going now,' she yelled at us, her hair blowing all over.

"We gotta stop her,' said Bobby, looking real scared.

"We ain't gotta do nothing, Bobby,' I said, but he said, 'Jo, don't!' at the same time and I guess she heard him because she didn't jump right then.

"You think I ain't able to do it?' I heard her yell back at us, even though it was hard to hear with all that wind.

"No, I think you can't fly, Jo,' Bobby said, running towards her. She met him in the middle and I followed.

"Jesus did it. I can too. And if I ain't, I'll just go to heaven

with my momma anyways, so there.'

"Bobby had nothing to say because she was right, so he just repeated what he said before which was:

"You can't fly, Jo. Only Jesus can fly. Would you get swallowed by a whale just because Jonah got swallowed by a whale?"

"There ain't no whales in Bluff County, carpetbagger' she said.

"I think you can fly,' I said, finally, sick of Bobby not believing her. 'As long as you got faith.'

"Yeah, Bobby,' Jo said. 'Get faith.' "

"People can't fly," said the heckler.

"They can too," said Todd. "I seen it. So don't keep yelling during the story."

"Yeah," said another.

The children were now listening attentively.

"Keep it shut. Now, Bobby ain't had no more ideas, so he sighed real heavy and said, 'Well, okay, but don't get hurt.'

"She just looked at us for a second, right in the eyes, and then said, 'Good.' But before she could walk away I said to her, 'Wait,' and I got some blueberries from a bush and said, 'Eat these if you get hungry while you're flying,' and she said, 'Thanks,' which is the first time Jo ever said 'Please' and 'Thanks' in the same conversation. And because Jo was using manners I knew something was up.

"So Jo turned away, not scared or nothing, walking to the edge. The moon shined a lot of light, like I said, and we could see her whole body as it walked to that cliff and we stood under that tree, and we saw her hair getting wet and blowing and her leg limping and her arm lazy and her face beaten and her body just sore and tired.

"And then she got to the edge and she looked over and then threw up a little bit and she jumped off.

"Now like I said, there ain't nobody who believes this story except me and Bobby because everybody says to me, they say, 'Todd, she died down there. She's dead.' The police, they say they found her someplace below, her arm all funny and her head cut open. One guy even says he saw a wolf eating her, just a little one before he scared it off. But there ain't no way they found her because when they had a funeral at her Daddy's house there

was just a box, no person or nothing, and they said no one was allowed to look in it even though she was in there. So she ain't dead, and anyone who says otherwise is a liar or stupid or both. I know she ain't dead because me and Bobby saw her fly.

"When she jumped she jumped so high that for a second it looked like she was just stuck right in the moon—just that big orange circle in the sky and her in the middle. But then she flied up, real slow, more like how an angel flies than how a turkey vulture flies, I think, like she was getting pulled up by a rope or something.

"And me and Bobby just stood there, not talking or nothing, because we ain't never seen no one fly."

"How'd she fly if she ain't got wings?" the heckler asked.

One child spoke up. "She had faith, dummy. Didn't you listen?"

"Did she jump on purpose?" another child asked.

"Ya'll sure are deaf." Todd said. "I said she jumped on purpose, but she didn't do it to get hurt. She did it to fly. A miracle, like Jesus. Or Jonah. She had faith."

The children nodded their heads. They fully understood the concept. Todd continued.

"Miss Beverly was asking for a few days if I wanted to talk about it or something and I always just told her the story I told you, which is the truth. Bobby would nod his head yes when she asked if it was true, but I knew she didn't believe it. My Daddy and Grandpa never wanna believe it either, even though I told them. They said it isn't possible for a girl to fly, but I say miracles can happen sometimes. They always tell us that, parents and teachers and other people, that miracles can happen, but they say they never say that they happen when they do happen. Well, I seen one, a miracle, so I know they're real.

"That's it, really. Jo flied away. End of story. And it's a real bad thing, too, because she was the best catcher we had, even though she was a girl and was only five-and-three-quarters."

The children were uncomfortably silent. One finally asked, "Was that picture of her, Todd?"

"Yeah, that was her." He held it up. "That's what it looked like. Just up in that moon, flying, right to the sky."

Silence again. A few fireflies began lighting the air.

"We're gonna go now, Todd," one child spoke up. "It's

almost dark and we ain't supposed to be late for supper."

Todd did not respond. He stood there, staring at his picture of Jo, oblivious to the sounds of the other children leaving and laughing.

STRANGE WAYS OF KISSING

Since the handshake and formal introduction Sunday morning, the question of Mr. Snyder's blindness had overwhelmed Charlie. It wasn't as though Mr. Snyder had a sinister sort of milky film over his irises as you often see in movies. What bothered Charlie was the staring at blankness. It was like an arrow that led Charlie nowhere. He understood, of course, that a blind man must point his head one way, and that it is of no social consequence to a conversation which way the head of a blind man is pointed. Nonetheless, as an imaginative boy of twelve, Charlie began to construct detailed theories as to why Mr. Snyder looked where he looked.

He knew that Mr. Snyder had been in the army. And so, as one might expect, the first theory he developed had to do with warfare. Charlie imagined an enemy capturing Mr. Snyder. They would have wanted information. After fruitless interrogations they eventually lay Mr. Snyder down in what looked to Charlie very much like a dentist's chair, clamped his eyes open, and poured in sizzling, steaming poison. Charlie didn't like this theory. Mr. Snyder was a nice man, a friend of his mother's, and the idea that his eyes had been burned out in war disturbed the image of Mr. Snyder lounging and drinking iced tea with his mother on the patio.

Charlie considered the possibility that a simple disease had managed to blind Mr. Snyder. Germs that had been resting on a dirty paper cup that had fallen on the floor may have found their way into Mr. Snyder's mouth. They must have made their way north, to his brain. Eventually, they plunged into his eyes and ruined them. "Yes," Charlie thought, "but how boring. Even if the vendor dropped the cup on the ground, he wouldn't have known he was blinding someone. It must be something else, something with more of a story."

In his final theory, Charlie stopped for a moment to consider the image of Mr. Snyder. Mr. Snyder would stare away into the distance when he spoke instead of looking straight at the person he was talking to. Charlie tried to imagine what could cause this in a person when his mom came out into the garden. There was some connection, he thought, between the two. "If I

lost something I cared about so much, maybe I wouldn't be able to look at anything around me. Maybe I would only be able to look to the distance, because I was always waiting for it to come back." Charlie thought about what could be so important, and he concluded that only losing his mother, whom he loved more than anything else, could cause such an affliction. This is what Charlie came to believe.

Charlie, his mother Susan, and his father Tom, all lived outside a small town called Highton. The few houses in this particular neighborhood exist with one outstanding benefit — they are only a short walk from a beach along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. The driveways of the houses wind like tributaries, eventually meeting the red clay road, Brugen St., which leads directly to the Atlantic. The area ought to have been more popular. However, the beach remained unkempt and the houses sparse due to the obstinate wood that wove itself into immovable knots. Over the years, developers who ventured into the area rarely succeeded in clearing enough land to build a foundation. One such developer, after damaging his backhoe on a stubborn root, nicknamed the patch of land "Russian Acres," stating, "Napoleon and Hitler couldn't have downed these fuckers." Thus, what would have been prime real estate for old money and corporate New York became home only to a stoic few, who weathered the tree branch crashes, unmanageable icy driveways and constant infestations of mice and mosquitoes and gnats.

The mice were hardly a problem after Susan adopted a pair of outdoor cats, one white and black and the other with golden fur. Charlie learned a method of evading the mosquitoes and gnats, which served him well for the last few summers. He'd be on the lawn with his soccer ball, juggling and trapping against a wall, always moving to keep them chasing him. Then, when he grew thoroughly tired and felt the itch of a mosquito's saliva left over after a bite, he would slouch over and rest in the grass, too low to be found by what he called, "flyers." Then he'd snoop in the grass, parting blades and lifting leaves until he found crawling bugs. He'd push his thumb down slowly and feel his own flesh indent, and the insect's tiny thrashing legs, squirming thorax, brittle broken antennae. He'd continue to push until he felt the crack of the exoskeleton, the release of the pressure. Then he'd feel the slight moisture on him of all the precious insides that

kept it alive. This process could take anywhere from 30 seconds to a minute. Charlie enjoyed the time he spent squashing bugs, and never let their panic rush him through the routine.

The day Charlie developed his theory on Mr. Snyder's blindness was a day filled with such activities. A hot summer day, during which Charlie had tired quickly and fallen to the grass, and Mr. Snyder had walked from his neighboring house to chat with Susan. The neighborhood had noticed this recent development of friendship between Mr. Snyder and Susan, at least the perceptive ones had. But then, the perceptive ones had also discovered the rumor that Tom had a mistress in Rhode Island, and what's more Susan knew about it. And because of this, a friendship that would have been considered inappropriate became innocent. Everyone understood that a life so stressed demands a confidant, and often acts as a catalyst for those relationships that would have blossomed later without the rush. What Susan had managed to keep to herself, with the exception of Mr. Snyder, was that this mistress was pregnant. Mr. Snyder was helping Susan cope with the realization that she had become mother to the first family in a pair.

Mr. Snyder would say his usual, "How've ya been, Sue?" And Susan, as usual, would have the iced tea ready on the patio. Susan realized that having the tea brewed, iced, pitched and patioed for the moment Mr. Snyder arrived might have seemed desperate. She didn't care. The thought of even the slightest sort of dishonesty, even the sort of dishonesty in which you make your good deeds seem coincidental instead of planned, was unacceptable to Susan. It may have been that she didn't want to hide her desperation, which she had already made clear to Mr. Snyder anyway. She poured the tea and responded with an,

"Oh you know." The inflections were always sung, with the first syllable being one tone, the second slightly higher and the third returning to the first. She sang it in a minor key, it seemed.

"He's going back to her soon."

"Soon? Good! You should be glad. He eats all the nice cheese when he's home."

"He does! Doesn't he?" Susan said with a sort of gasping laugh.

"Well listen, Elizabeth has been teaching herself the violin, and she's awful, but I'm afraid to tell her and she wants

to show off to a real audience. Maybe after he leaves I'll cook you dinner and in return you can suggest she take up, oh I don't know, bowling or something." Mr. Snyder said.

"It's a deal, Jerry. How are things with Elizabeth? I'm always unloading on you about Tom. I feel like I never hear much about her."

"She's tired. Her patients wipe her out every day. She gets home and hardly makes it to the bed. Then she wakes up in the middle of the night starving, which is when she eats and plays the violin...after I'm asleep...you can see my problem, I'm sure."

Elizabeth was Mr. Snyder's British wife. She was assigned to him as a nurse after the war. She seemed callous to the rest of the neighbors, who took her husband's blindness very seriously. She had been caught a number of times sighing at a chore he required of her. Mr. Snyder would stop in now and then on a neighbor's porch with a story of a broken mug and an infuriated wife. She was ugly, as well. Most of the neighborhood blamed these misfortunes on her nationality, and if they ever came across someone mentioning London as a cold city they would say, "You're absolutely right! I know one of them, not an ounce of warmth in her!"

It was now, during a lull in the conversation, that Susan decided it was the right time to introduce Charlie to Mr. Snyder. She called for him and he came promptly from crushing insects.

"Charlie, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Snyder." Susan said, "he's been over a few times and I know you've seen him, but it's time to give him a good hand shake and say hi." Susan had learned it was best to prompt Charlie this way, or he would sometimes stare and not be sure what to do. This was the first time that Charlie noticed how Mr. Snyder stared the wrong way when he talked to people. It was later that night that Charlie determined Mr. Snyder had tragically lost his mother and therefore could not focus his eyes, as they were always searching elsewhere for her.

Two days had passed. It was Tuesday. After falling into a sort of fascination with the tragic fable he had developed, Charlie vowed to pretend to be Mr. Snyder for an indefinite period of time. This choice wasn't made as any sort of sacrifice, or tribute to the honorable loss of a sense. It was simply an exercise of curiosity. Charlie was fond of pretending to be other people. Being other people helped him to never get sick of himself. When pretending

to be Mr. Snyder, he didn't close his eyes, as you might expect someone imitating a blind person would. He didn't close his eyes because Mr. Snyder's eyes weren't closed. He kept them open, but didn't allow his neck to turn as it naturally would, in order to see different things. Instead, he pointed his head one way, and then went about his business with out changing its angle in any degree. He used his peripheral vision significantly. At the top of the stairs he began to pretend. He'd turn to walk to his room, keeping his eyes pointed strictly forward. He unfocused his eyes, and at his bedroom door reached for the handle. Most of the pretending occurred in the privacy of Charlie's room, where he could avoid embarrassment and questioning. However, after two days Charlie felt confident in both his ability to behave normally and his reasons for pretending to be Mr. Snyder in the first place. So when his mother called him out to the garden, Charlie determined that he would continue to act as Mr. Snyder, even in her presence.

Susan was weeding at the side of the house when she called for Charlie. He came, turning the corner and looking at the horizon, eyes fixed forward. Susan had her head down, focused on a weed, so she didn't notice immediately. Still looking down she said, "Oh good, Charlie, I need you to carry these weeds over to the garbage," pointing at black plastic bags full of dandelions, crab grass, thick spiky things, some poison ivy, "Then I need you to go around the house and collect all the garbage and bring it to the end of the driveway." It was then that she noticed Charlie wasn't looking at her. He was nodding in agreement, but staring off behind and to the left at a hedge. "What are you looking at, honey?" she asked.

"I'm pretending to be Mr. Snyder," he said.

"Well do you think you can still manage your chores, Mr. Snyder?"

"Sure I can. I have this whole house memorized," he said, picking up the bags with his head cocked upward awkwardly. His mother said before he walked away, "Then clean up for dinner, and wear something nice. Your father's going on a business trip tomorrow and you won't see him for a while."

Susan, despite the shame and hate that filled her, wasn't able to let her husband leave. She wished she could lock the door when he walked out, but marriage forced her into a sort of blind loyalty, the same blind loyalty she had expected of Tom. It was the

type of loyalty that was blind to his infidelity--when some would think it should be dependent on it. In any case, she had managed in a hellish rage to keep Tom from leaving for the last few days. She knew that this wouldn't work for long. Susan knelt in the soil and wondered if appealing to his lust was a possibility, and then felt a rising sickness at the thought of it. In any case, she knew she needed someone to watch Charlie for her. After a shower she called Mr. Snyder.

"Hey Jerry, I've got a huge favor to ask. Are you busy tomorrow afternoon?" She was afraid Tom would be gone by the evening.

"Free all day, Sue. What'd you have in mind?" Mr. Snyder said.

"I was wondering if you could go for a walk with Charlie. I just want some time alone with Tom, he says he's going to leave tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'll have him walk me to the beach. Don't worry about a thing." They agreed to leave at noon. Susan found Charlie and sat him down in the living room.

"Charlie, I've got a big job for you tomorrow. It's going to be a lot of responsibility," Susan said.

"Okay," Charlie said tentatively, "What is it?"

"Mr. Snyder would like to take a walk to the beach, but he needs someone to walk with him, to keep him company and make sure he can find his way back. He thought maybe you could take him. It would be a big help. How about it?"

"Sure mom, I'll walk him," Charlie said, secretly thrilled at the chance to help Mr. Snyder, whom Charlie had come to respect through his playful acting. Charlie thought for the rest of the night about what Mr. Snyder would say when he revealed the theory.

Passing red clay underfoot, Mr. Snyder walked down Brugen St., his hands clasped behind him and shoulders straight. Charlie walked next to him watching the dirt and occasionally, Mr. Snyder. It was only a short time before Mr. Snyder broke the silence with what he knew to be a dull topic, "So Charlie, are you excited for Middle School?"

"Yeah, I guess," Charlie sounded automated. "But everyone says it'll be harder."

"It probably will," Mr. Snyder said. Then, after reminding himself to be encouraging, he added, "But you'll get smarter as well, so you won't even notice the difference." Another silence ensued. Mr. Snyder wasn't used to talking to children. He'd never had any of his own, and they seemed to never have anything to say, and to never want to say anything. However, after a few moments passed, he was struck with an idea for conversation.

"Charlie, a few times when I've been over to talk with your mother I've asked where you've been. She says you're slumped over in the dirt, like you're investigating something. What's that all about?" The question caught Charlie by surprise. He knew the gravity of the offense of torturing insects wasn't anything like that of torturing real people, or bigger animals for that matter. Yet, he wasn't entirely sure if it was, objectively, a grave act.

"I'm inspecting bugs," Charlie explained. "Grasshoppers are my favorite to watch." Charlie was sticking close to the truth. Grasshoppers were, in fact, his favorite to crush. They were difficult to pin, but if he managed to get his thumb on them the legs would release like catapults over and over into the ground. They were also big enough to provide a satisfying crunch, whereas even the big black ants can't be heard when the exoskeleton cracks.

"So, you have an interest in entomology?" Mr. Snyder said, "the study of insects. I'll have to get you a book next time I go out with Elizabeth."

"Thanks, Mr. Snyder." Charlie was getting nervous. He didn't know how long he could maintain a conversation about insects when the extent of his interest was feeling their insides. He jumped, perhaps with unnecessary abruptness, to this: "I know why you're blind Mr. Snyder." Charlie had been waiting to bring this up since last evening, so even though he sensed that the change in direction hadn't been subtle, he was, nonetheless, happy with the choice. That is, until he saw Mr. Snyder's distorted face. He rushed on, "I mean, I have an idea. Did you lose your mom?" Charlie felt cold embarrassment and blood rushing to his head. Mr. Snyder looked surprised and slightly disgusted. After a few moments Charlie organized his thoughts and began to explain.

"What I mean is that the other day I was talking to you, and I was surprised that you weren't looking at me. I understand that you can't see me, but it got me thinking about the way you were looking and why someone would look that way. I know you

just can't see, but while I was thinking about it I realized why someone would do tha--"

"Do what?" Mr. Snyder asked.

"Look off in the distance like that, instead of at what's right in front of you," Charlie said. After a look of amused approbation from Mr. Snyder, Charlie decided it was safe to continue, "I thought of a lot of different things it could have been, but I settled on that you must have lost someone you loved so much. So much that you're always looking for her everywhere, and you can't focus on anything right in front of you. And the only person I could think of that I would miss that much is my mom. That's why I thought it was your mom."

Mr. Snyder's face was blank for seconds, as it bobbed up and down with each step toward the approaching ocean. Eventually he muttered, "So it's as if everything is in the foreground." He said it to himself — and then with a change in inflection made it apparent that he was addressing Charlie, and said, "and for you, everything is in the background, isn't it?" Charlie maintained silence and the two stepped off the clay and eventually on to the beach.

Charlie wasn't satisfied with Mr. Snyder's answer. While he didn't understand exactly where his obsession with this theory came from, it seemed, by the confidence of his answer that Mr. Snyder did. And yet, there was no way to understand the answer. Charlie decided to pry further.

"How did you lose your sight, Mr. Snyder?" But Charlie was once again disappointed. Mr. Snyder didn't want to talk about it. After further persistence, Mr. Snyder said, "It's a nasty story. I wouldn't burden a child with a story like that." Mr. Snyder, having seen many awful things in his life, had a great deal of respect for innocence, both the small amount left in him, and the abundance of it that was in Charlie. However, he hadn't considered the disregard an inexperienced person such as Charlie would have for innocence. As he himself said, for Charlie, everything is in the background. This is how Charlie's mind began to search for a way to force the story. It didn't take long before Charlie realized the kind of power he had in this situation. He thought back to what his mother had said, 'make sure he can find his way back.'

The water was cold over their feet while the two walked down the strip of wet sand, a darker shade than the fluffy dry stuff

they had just gotten through. The beach was empty, and there were mussel shells, knotted seaweed, and driftwood strewn over the sands that separated the trees from the water. Charlie considered the threat he was about to make. There was danger in it, he knew, how much danger was uncertain. But Charlie was determined to learn what was being kept from him. He felt entitled, after three days of imitation to some kind of truth. "Mr. Snyder," he said in a soft voice, "Maybe you should tell me now how you went blind, because I'm the one who has to walk you back, and if I wanted to I could just go back by myself, and then what would you do?" The two stood for moments. Mr. Snyder seemed to be staring out to sea. Charlie wasn't sure what to do. He'd never had this kind of control over an adult before. Silence remained between them until Mr. Snyder heard Charlie's feet pushing sand as he walked away.

"Charlie," Mr. Snyder said. "This is much too early in your life to be exercising power over those you believe to be helpless."

Charlie stopped walking, and turned to listen.

Mr. Snyder continued, "I say 'believe' to be helpless because I, in fact, am not helpless. I know how many steps I've walked from our driveway, and while it would take me slightly longer to get home without you, it would only be the most minor inconvenience." Mr. Snyder took a step forward, and with sound estimation placed his hand on the young boy's shoulder. "However, to teach you a lesson, perhaps I will tell you the story of how I went blind as we walk home." And Mr. Snyder took the first step with Charlie's shoulder under his arm.

"You know I was in the army, Charlie?" Mr. Snyder asked.

"Yes, that was the first thing I thought of," Charlie said.

"Well I didn't go blind in the army. I was shot, twice, before I was discharged and hospitalized. I nearly died, Charlie, but they saved me in the hospital. Elizabeth was assigned to be my nurse. That's where we met. Did you know that?"

"No, sir." Charlie didn't understand why he suddenly felt the impulse to say 'sir.' He had never felt the need before. He assumed it was due to the context of war.

"Elizabeth took care of me in the hospital. I couldn't walk to the bathroom at first. I couldn't eat solid food, I couldn't even take a deep breath. Without someone like Elizabeth, I wouldn't have been able to get better. Do you understand?"

Charlie said yes. The waves continued to run cold over his feet. Cold embarrassment had crept back into his blood.

"When I was able to lift myself out of bed the hospital sent me home." He had a larky grin on his face. "My mom was dead, Charlie. My folks had been gone for a long time. You were on to something there I think, strangely enough." Mr. Snyder had assumed a trance like state as he told the story. "I wasn't ready to leave, and so Elizabeth took me in. She left the hospital, she took care of me when I needed it more than anything." The canopy of leaves shaded the two as they left the beach and began to walk back on Brugen St.

"It was then that I began to lose my eyesight. At first I lost sight in my left eye for a few minutes. It came back, and then was gone again after an hour. On our way to the doctor both eyes went blind, flashed on and off, and then didn't flash back on. I remember the last thing I saw—it was noon and we were passing the church on Broad St. You know the one?"

"Yes, St. Sebastian's. That's where we go to church."

"I could see all the people walking out of church. It was a nice thing to see. Everyone was dressed up and the bells were ringing. Then my sight was gone, and the bells continued to ring. That was so strange, I remember, hearing the only evidence of that last image fade into the distance. Tests came back positive for methanol, but no one could explain why. Do you know anything about methanol, Charlie?" Charlie shook his head, and then remembering that Mr. Snyder couldn't see him, muttered, "No."

"It's a chemical used in some household products, like window washer fluid. Ingesting ten milliliters can cause blindness. You should stay away from that stuff." Mr. Snyder still had his hand on Charlie's shoulder, and gave it a slight squeeze. "Want to know why I was ingesting this poison, Charlie?"

"Sure," Charlie said.

"Elizabeth poisoned me." Mr. Snyder said in a sort of triumphant and ironic voice, like a lawyer or a man on a commercial. He continued, "I didn't know right away. She kept taking care of me while I was blind, and she kept the secret. After a few months a romance developed between us, and by the end of the year we were engaged. She would joke, saying something like, 'I might as well love you if I can never leave you.' I couldn't believe her charity, her dedication to me. It was two years later

that she finally broke down and told me, after we were married. We were sitting in a parking space about to go into a burger joint and she started to cry. We sat there for so long. She sobbed and uttered the beginnings of syllables to words that she couldn't finish. And then finally she managed to say: "I made you blind." Charlie put his hand in his hair and pulled it a little, and squeezed his eyes shut, the way one does in order to experience just a slight amount of pain while watching the scary part of a movie.

"I left her after that. I had nowhere to go, but I couldn't stand to be near her. She begged for me to stay, claiming she did what she did out of love. 'You would have left me so long ago otherwise. How could I let you walk away?'" Mr. Snyder said, mimicking the British accent. "I hardly had enough money for an apartment, so I called a few friends. No one had the means to take care of a blind person. After half a year I was begging. When Elizabeth tracked me down again I had managed to get a bed in a Halfway House. Someone had stolen my shoes. It didn't take much convincing before I decided to go back with her. She said she owed me a lifetime of service and that serving me was her life's purpose. I still felt some love for her, despite everything. I know it's hard to understand how we can live together, but we live comfortably, and we've established some level of normalcy over the last few years." Mr. Snyder cleared his throat, and with finality said, "So there you are, Charlie. The story of how I went blind."

Charlie felt ill, and wanted to go home more than anything. However, when they came to the fork leading to Mr. Snyder's house, Mr. Snyder, who was on the outside of Charlie, veered left and with a subtle nudge of the shoulder, steered Charlie's feet in the direction of his house. Mr. Snyder knew the walk had been truncated, and therefore he would need to keep Charlie for lunch in order to provide Susan enough time to do whatever it was she needed to do.

The house was clean, with potted plants scattered throughout the rooms. They walked through the foyer to the kitchen where Elizabeth was cooking.

"Hey boys, how was the walk?" She asked.

"It was cloudy." Mr. Snyder said, "Elizabeth, I'd like to introduce you to our neighbor Charlie. Charlie, this is my wife Elizabeth." Elizabeth turned around. There was something about

her face that was stunning and boring at the same time. Charlie noticed, most distinctly, the way the skin over her cheeks were on a sort of wrinkled plateau from her lips, and they seemed to hang down and encircle her lips in some way. Her lips themselves were thin and pale. And yet she smiled with some kind of happiness: her mouth half-heartedly, but her eyes sincerely, giving full creases to the premature wrinkles that could be seen.

"It's very nice to meet you, Charlie." Elizabeth said, stretching out her hand. "I'm making some lunch, would you like anything?" Charlie was silent, and Mr. Snyder interjected, "How about a grilled cheese and some soup?" Charlie nodded and took a seat at the kitchen table. Mr. Snyder went to the refrigerator and started pulling things out.

"I've already got the tomatoes out, Jerry," She said, and then asked Charlie, "Do you like ham and tomato on your grilled cheese? That's how I usually make them." Elizabeth opened a cabinet filled with spices. Her hand danced with hasty indecision in the cabinet until she settled on the right two, and turned around to season the soup. "Was this how she had done it?" Charlie wondered. "It must have tasted bad if she put it in soup. Then again, if she knew what to mix with it maybe he wouldn't have noticed." Charlie hadn't realized that he never answered the question. Elizabeth's voice grew more stern, "What would you like, Charlie?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm not hungry, may I go home now?"

"Don't be silly, Charlie," Mr. Snyder said, and turning his voice to Elizabeth, added, "He'll take it all." Elizabeth began to fry the sandwich. Charlie couldn't help but enjoy the smell of the sizzling butter that filled the room.

"You won't be sorry," she said. "The tomatoes have just come into season, and their perfectly ripe." Mr. Snyder walked from the refrigerator to the kitchen table, and passing Elizabeth, laid a soft kiss on her cheek. Then he pulled up a chair next to Charlie. He asked Charlie about soccer. Charlie stared at Elizabeth's face, at her cheek. He wasn't horrified anymore, even confused would be the wrong word. He was like a student genuinely interested in his subject. He felt as though he had been placed in a puzzle, and he was looking for possible solutions. What was the nature of the problem? This was what Charlie began to consider first. What did

it mean to give someone a kiss?

They ate their food mostly in silence, with the occasional question and answer from the couple to Charlie. Charlie answered the questions with as few words as possible. The sandwich tasted fine. The soup, on the other hand, he could swear tasted strange. He focused on every spoonful. Was that a bitter taste? Or was it sour? Charlie couldn't decide what was wrong with it, but he was sure it didn't taste right. Halfway through the bowl Charlie asked again if he could go.

"Not until you finish what's in front of you," Elizabeth said. Charlie swallowed another spoonful of soup, and another, until he finally finished the bowl. He brought the dishes to the sink, and without asking to be excused walked out the front door and down the driveway, back to Brugen St. From there he ran home.

Once he reached his own driveway, Charlie slowed to a walk. He wondered if he had been rude. He hadn't meant to be, leaving like that, but Charlie had things to think about, things he couldn't think about while Mr. Snyder and Elizabeth were sitting there asking him questions about soccer and school and food. It had grown more humid since the walk on the beach, and the mosquitoes and gnats were back in numbers. Charlie made it to the yard thinking about that kiss on the cheek, which was just like the way his mother kissed him on the cheek. It was then that he heard his mother yelling at his father to get out of her house. Charlie, not sure what to do, stepped into the corner of his yard and lay down to keep the mosquitoes off him. The door opened and Charlie's father seemed to fly out. Charlie was watching from his belly, elbows on the ground and hands propping up his head. His mother was wielding a ceramic mug like a weapon. Tom ran to the car, muttering something under his breath. Charlie saw his mother standing in the doorway, eyes squinting and red, mouth taugth in that sobbing fashion that resembles a laugh. She was holding herself and her body was shaking. Tom turned the car on, looked to his right through the window, and to his surprise he saw Charlie there, lying in the grass. The car stalled. Tom rolled down the window and shouted, "Bye Charlie! Take care of your mom while I'm gone. I love you." He turned the engine back on and turned his head around to the left to watch the driveway as

he pulled out in reverse. Charlie watched the back of his head until the car wound around a bend in the trees. He listened to the sound of the motor shrinking until it was nothing.

Susan walked back inside. Charlie, noticing a grasshopper jump above the plane of the grass, got on his hands and knees and scrambled over to the place that it landed. He saw it, paused, clinging to a single bending blade. Charlie snatched it from the grass, and with it pinched between two fingers crashed back onto his belly to play with it. He held the grasshopper to the ground with his thumb and watched the legs catapulting themselves into the ground while the grasshopper struggled. But instead of crushing him, Charlie pinched one of the legs with the fingers of his other hand. With a quick tug he pulled the leg off the grasshopper. He released it and it attempted to hop with the remaining leg, but instead it slid pathetically through the dirt in a sort of panicked lurch. Charlie pulled the other leg off. The grasshopper lay on its side, like a torpedo, still. It was then that a smaller cricket also hopped by. Charlie did the same to the cricket, whose smaller legs were more difficult to pull off. He then lined them up and made their faces touch, as if they were kissing.

NEVER ENOUGH POISON IN THE WORLD

It would be an act of genocide if they were people, you think, as scores of sugar ants meet a watery demise in your kitchen sink. Why couldn't they have stayed outside? You detest killing anything. You imagine an Ant General approaching the faucet with a tiny white flag, begging for a treaty. He tells you that thousands of lives depend on a peace agreement between your house and his. You put a finger to your chin as you thoughtfully consider, and a moment later, you declare a conditional ceasefire. So long as they stay out of your country, the house, they may live. The Ant General marches closer to you, bold in the wake of the newly won treaty. He acts insulted that they may not ever enter the house, even early in the morning before you wake up. He only wants the bits of food in the drain, the things you weren't going to eat. You begin reasoning with the Ant General, explaining that this is stealing. Again, he acts insulted and indignantly argues that you had already thrown it away. Finally, you become angry and grab the spray nozzle on the sink. If he doesn't like the deal, of course you could just end the agreement now. Scuttling back a few paces, he nods in agreement to your treaty and he thanks you profusely as twenty or so ants scurry back to their entry crack.

Now you are serving ants. Ants! Where does it stop? Even the ants have a stronger will than you do. You are Cinderella, constantly faced with impossible chores. You sweep up piles of flour for your husband, Evan, without a hint of discontent. You sort thousands of lentils for your greedy boss, Jeremy, staying late into evenings without overtime pay. You have no magic doll, no friendly birds, no enchanted tree to assist you. You are simply Cinderella without a hint of magic or fortune.

Evan arrives home even later than you and grimaces when you tell him about the ants. You explain the treaty, and he looks at you as if you are crazy. He doesn't understand the war, how far you have gone to wipe out the ants. You have sprinkled salt, cornmeal, and cinnamon outside of the kitchen window until it smelled like a Thanksgiving recipe. You have tried, despite his negligence, to keep food in airtight containers and the sink free of dishes. As he shakes his head at your strange tenacity, you remind him that slimy, food-dappled dishes should not be left in the sink

as a veritable buffet to fatten their queen and all her subjects. You remember the early days, when he used to accommodate your displeasure and execute any invading bugs for you, but now, what once was charming to him is an inconvenience.

Evan asks what is for dinner, and no matter what you say, he will not want it. Cinderella has been known to make two dinners on the same evening simply because he refused to eat what she had prepared.

“Cassoulet,” you reply, trying to sound hopeful.

He rolls his eyes and throws his hands in the air, “Good grief, Camille, what’s it take to get a real meal around here? Cassou-what? What is that?”

“It’s actually pretty hearty. I think you’ll like it—”

“Whatever,” he gives up, not even sampling the dish you made.

Rummaging through the pantry like a ravenous thief, he discovers a box of Mac ‘n’ Cheese and contemplatively reads the back. He shakes his head and sighs, and finally, he reaches for the bread.

“Why don’t you just call someone to zap ‘em with some spray or poison or something?” he suggests as he prepares a sandwich, unsatisfied with cassoulet for dinner. There is enough poison in the world, you explain. You want to try everything else first, every environmentally kind option that will rid you of them. The implication of his question is, of course, “why are you bothering me with this?” Your “lessons,” as he calls them, in tidiness are lost on deaf ears and you watch him eat his plateless sandwich over the counter, trailing an ant banquet of crumbs across the granite. As usual, he shrugs his muscular shoulders as you raise your sponge aloft and declare that you are not his maid and do not deserve to be treated as such.

As usual, he responds, “Don’t worry about it then. You’re the only one who cares,” and he takes his lumbering exit to shed his layers of white-collared misery and don a much less impressive college sweatshirt and jeans.

He has left a wake of business clothes leading to the bedroom, and you would follow the trail, picking up the expensive blue button-up shirt and coordinating tie that you bought him last Christmas. But you don’t really want to watch his eyes roll and his face scrunch into any variety of smirks as he listens to

you. When you return to the kitchen from shouting reminders up the stairs to him, the ants have not yet discovered the un-wiped banquet, and you hastily dispose of his crumbs, pleased that the ants have kept the terms of the treaty thus far.

Evan swings the back door open with a bang and shouts “goodbye” over his shoulder. As his car crunches up the gravel driveway, remember that he is a good man, a hard worker, and a true companion. That is why you married him. How many times has he stood up for you and supported your artistic desires when no one else would have bothered? He may not be Martha Stewart, but he’s loyal, a rare enough quality these days.

Approximately ten minutes after he leaves, the house phone rings. It is his mother. Did he know she was going to call and strategically plan his exit? Why is he always missing when she calls? You will spend the next hour listening to her woes and her dissatisfaction with the minutiae of her world.

“Oh, hi, I wasn’t expecting you to call,” you coat your voice in honey to disguise your disappointment.

“Camille,” she rasps, as you imagine the stench of her cigarettes choking you through the phone. “I met a woman so much like you the other day at the grocery store. She was heavy-set, like you. Well, she was standing behind the meat counter, smacking her gum—you know, kind of like you do—and it was louder than I was talking. I was trying to explain what kind of meat I wanted, but I could barely hear myself think over all that smacking. I could hardly take it, let me tell you.”

“Mmmhmm,” is your staple response; anything else will exponentially lengthen the conversation. You imagine her long cigarette holder balanced delicately between her bony, crooked fingers.

“You know what she said when I asked her to stop smacking? She said, ‘Ok, whatever,’ just like you do, I mean the same exact way, and her jellyroll kept pushing her shirt up. I finally had to leave because I was so disgusted. I bet she was childless, too. I should have gotten her number for you,” she continues as you tap your foot and stare at the second hand on the kitchen clock. “How’s Evan’s studying coming? The GRE is coming up faster than he thinks, but I’m sure he’ll pass with flying colors.”

“Oh, he’s working hard,” you lie. He has neglected

studying for the past several weeks.

"Has he moved all that painting junk into the garage yet? Your office is so small, and I'm sure he needs the space to spread out," she mentions for the hundredth time this month. The last time she visited, she had tried to rearrange the entire house. Thankfully, Evan distracted her by taking her out.

"No, I use my painting things," you begin, but she cuts you off.

"Well, paintings don't pay your bills or increase your salary like an MBA does."

She spends several minutes extolling the glories of an MBA and priding herself that her son was getting a graduate degree. Finally, she starts to wind down and you hear a pause coming.

"Well, I have to go, Mom," you hate calling her "mom" but she insists. "I have to be somewhere."

"Tell Evan I called," she says, and when you hang up the phone feels poisonous.

You want to detox from the phone call with a big glass of wine and your painting, but you pause on your way to your office and look around the house. Undisturbed chaos sits openly on every surface and it is time for Cinderella to emerge. You gather papers into ordered piles for Evan to sort later and you run laundry even though it is his turn. Since you are already at work, you dust, vacuum, and clean the bathroom. Maybe when he returns, he'll appreciate the clean smell of the house. You imagine him grinning and hugging you as he inhales the scent of Lemon Fresh Pledge. In the same imaginary scene, he tells you how lucky he is to have you in his life and presents a surprise bottle of wine and a bouquet of roses for you. Cinderella works faster when she thinks Prince Charming is coming for her.

You have fallen asleep paying the bills when Evan returns from smoking cigars and drinking imported beer with his equally domestically challenged friends, whose wives grin and bear this with ascetic devotion, every bit the Cinderella you are. You wonder if they have ever battled ants. He kicks off his sneakers in the hallway to serve as future speed bumps for you. He rolls his eyes and cringes when you sleepily embrace him. Cinderella waits for Prince Charming's flowers and wine, but Evan plops on the couch, his musty cigar stench enveloping you, and he turns

on SportsCenter. He asks for leftover cassoulet, and Cinderella slouches to the kitchen to fetch it. Most of the time, you hate Cinderella.

You watch for ants as you microwave the cassoulet, careful not to spread any morsels beyond your work area. In the living room, Evan is cursing at his favorite football team and when you ask what just happened, he throws his hands helplessly in the air, devoid of any explanatory language. He consumes beer after beer, belches after eating, passes out on the couch, and fills the air around him with toxic, gaseous odors. It's best not to wake him on nights like this.

As still as a marble statue in your bed, you think about the fact that your inner monologue is in second person. Even you can't handle being too close to you. As you ponder this, in the dark, it suddenly strikes you. The inner voice you've heard chiding you, cajoling you, begging you to take care of yourself, to throw off the leeches that daily feed off of your lifeblood— this is the voice of Sleeping Beauty. She is the artist, the thinker, the health nut, the indulgent free spirit. She is yearning to awaken, to feel your consciousness kissing her into existence once more, banning your subservience to the dungeon. It didn't use to be this way. Once, there was no Cinderella, no Sleeping Beauty, just Camille, but over ten years, the best part of you fell dormant somewhere deep inside of you, leaving Cinderella to face the world and the slow devolving of your marriage.

The next morning, you see that the ants have violated the terms of their agreement, and two hundred of them are defiantly carousing in the dry, empty sink. How dare they? Evan enters the kitchen and greets you in his boxers, a layer of body odor crowning the scent of last night. You are too angry to be sweet.

"They came back," you shout.

"Whoa, there. Not so loud in the morning, ok?" he yawns as he starts the coffeemaker and scratches himself. "Who's back?"

"The ants! Look, they're all over the sink!" There are too many to rinse down the drain. They have covered every surface surrounding the sink in outright mutiny against your decree.

"You mean you haven't called someone yet? I thought you were going to do that yesterday," he says, indignant.

"I hadn't planned on it, but—"

There were so many of them, just living off of what you don't

want, feeding on what you've thrown away. Who are you to kill them?

"Well, you better, or we'll never get rid of them." His hands have settled into fists at his side and his bloodshot eyes are impatiently waiting for some action on your part. He won't hear any more complaints from you until you've solved this, his way. There are holes in his t-shirt that expose his reddening chest. After a silent, full-minute-long standoff, you exhale, drop your shoulders, and shake your head, staring at the faux-limestone linoleum.

"Maybe there isn't enough poison in the world," you mumble watching the ants multiply and begin exploring the other counters.

"What the hell does that mean? Just call the Orkin man and be done with it." The firmness in his voice seals the ants' fate. He won't relent now. He has a point to make about just who is in charge here.

You shudder at being put in the position to take so many lives, but he won't stop staring at you until you take care of it. As you unwind the vacuum cord, you dial the number in the yellow pages. You hope the fleeting vacuum massacre is painless.

When you arrive home from work, you must greet the exterminator you have been forced to call. Laughing, he says that Texas has never had a shortage of ants. He eyes your protruding curves and licks his lips.

After explaining his routine, he grins, winks, and says, "I probably shouldn't give you this, but I know you're going to need more than what I've done today. Take this bottle and spray it around the windows and doors in a week or so, just to make sure. But be careful. Don't get it on your clothing. Wash your hands immediately if the liquid touches you. If you touch your eye with this on your hand, you'll probably go blind."

As soon as he leaves, you stick the clear bottle with its bright red label under the sink. You sigh, relieved that the long war is over, but saddened that you had to resort to poison.

Monday arrives, and it is your birthday. You have curled your stringy brown hair and worn a new red skirt to work, and the elderly woman in accounting and the giggly intern from the university both pay you compliments. At your desk, Jeremy hovers over you clutching a "World's Greatest Dad" coffee

mug, and you wonder if he bought it for himself. After filling your inbox with “priority action items,” he gives you a list that includes errands like picking up his dry cleaning. You consider your predecessor’s warning about becoming a “work wife” and decide that it is too late to prevent that.

“Don’t forget that you’re supposed to stay late tonight and finish your quarterlies,” Jeremy reminds you, as you start typing the inane reports. “If you don’t have those on my desk, perfected and signed, by Wednesday, you might as well look for another job.”

The only reason the quarterlies matter is because Jeremy’s boss assesses his progress on the basis of the reports. They have no bearing on your job whatsoever and Jeremy could easily type them himself, but he never stays one minute past office hours. Sleeping Beauty dreams of telling him to fuck off, but Cinderella meagerly suggests that you stay late tomorrow since today is your birthday.

“After all, they aren’t due until Wednesday and I’ll work on them during lunch too, if I need to. I know how important they are,” you hear yourself using the same honeyed voice you use with Evan’s mother.

Jeremy strokes his unevenly shaved jaw, and patches of stubble glare at you from his second chin as his hairy fingers grip the handle of his lying coffee mug. Is there such a thing as a “World’s Greatest Jackass” coffee mug? After two minutes of silent deliberation, he acquiesces to your compromise, but not without implying that you will someday be obliged to repay this generous favor.

“And in fact,” he leans even closer over you, placing a meaty hand on your shoulder, “you can even leave early today, since you probably have plans tonight. And don’t say I never gave you a birthday present,” he winks as he struts to his corner office with a view, leaving a putrid coffee-breath odor clinging to the air around you.

You decide not to call and tell Evan about today’s work arrangement. It has been a number of years since he surprised you for your birthday and, in fact, you can only remember a couple of birthdays in your ten years together that he did surprise you. But he has been so secretive for the last couple of weeks, sneaking in at strange hours and making cell phone calls to numbers you

don't recognize, that you know he is up to something for your big 3-0. When you get home at three o'clock, you do not park in the garage, and you open the back door as silently as possible, peeping with held breath into the seemingly ant-less kitchen. There are no sweet odors of baking cake lingering in the air, no recipes laid out for a birthday dinner. It's ok, thinks Cinderella, he must have done something.

As you progress towards the living room, you notice a gorgeous Louis Vuitton handbag on the table. It's a little bit big for your taste, but you could learn to like it. It is the real thing; you can tell. But on second glance, you notice that it is heavily used. As you open it, you see the fragments of another life crammed inside it and that is when you hear the faint moaning upstairs. A woman is calling his name in a rhythmic, breathy lilt.

You freeze. This was unexpected. The reality of the purse, the voice, and the absence of a birthday present hit you with overwhelming force. Anger washes over you. Cinderella shrinks into a corner making foolish excuses about your weight gain and constantly nagging him. After everything you've done, everything you've seen him through, after ten years, this is how you are repaid? The noise upstairs escalates, and you can't remember him moaning like that for you. Cinderella may be whimpering in the corner, but the anger and panic rouse Sleeping Beauty to life better than any kiss.

Awakened Beauty walks calmly to the sink where the melting ant bodies floating on soapy film only fuel her ire. She snatches the ant poison with its glaring red label and she considers dousing the purse with poison. The afternoon sun illuminates the room with revealing brightness as she rifles through the gaping Louis, and you watch from Cinderella's corner, suspended between horror and awe.

Two hundred dollars stacked in crisp twenties lie neatly next to a plastic photo of a buxom blonde, whose license informs you that she is five years younger and sixty pounds lighter than you. She has blue eyes. Awakened Beauty never hesitates. She knows you deserve the woman's money for this betrayal. It slides into your own purse with ease. Maybe there is never enough poison in the world.

You were going to leave, the stolen money your only revenge, but then you hear him say it.

“I love you, baby,” the exact same way he says it to you.
But she’s not you.

The poison trembles in your hand and before you know it, your feet are on the stairs. Awakened Beauty is laughing hysterically, urging you to climb faster. You are silent as you enter the bedroom. She jumps off of him like a frightened cat, but it is too late. All of your rage is directed to your fingertips on the nozzle of the poison as you aim for them. It is only as you sprint down the stairs, leaving them screaming and rubbing at their eyes, that your words catch up with you. Obscenities hurl towards the bedroom from your lips as you run back through the living room and kitchen. You are still screaming in your car where no one can hear you.

Surprisingly your bank allows you to empty your entire savings and checking account, and eight thousand dollars settles in your purse next to your birthday money from the blonde. Now there is no Cinderella, no Sleeping Beauty, only Camille. As you head for the border, you imagine what Evan will say to his mistress while red and blue lights reflect off of the wet pavement near the barren anthills.

Christina Seymour

PAUSE AND CIRCUMSTANCE

I can't put my hand on my stomach. Don't put your hand on your stomach. It's beating; my stomach is pulsing, pounding, with a heartbeat. I don't know if it's mine or its. I remember as a child, lying on my mother's chest, slipping to sleep by the soft lull of her heart, but mine is not a mother's heart. Mine is a giant clock ticking away the moments until the entire contents of my womb flow out of me; and into a jar.

I know too much to be well-adjusted. I know about the vicious car crashes that kill people just like me, about evil disasters that massacre entire cities. I know how tiny a baby's feet are at ten weeks. I know what Oprah has for breakfast during her "spiritual cleanse," the tiniest details of her exercise plan, and that I shouldn't sit for long periods of time in a hot-tub or under a laptop. I know that tap water can give you cancer, that spring water is just filtered tap water, and how cell phones can create tumors. I know that airplanes are safer than driving, somehow, according to some statistics somewhere. I hardly know the whys. I know that the president walks his dog twice a day, but I don't know why this is relevant to know. I thought I knew—inside and out—how to have sex without getting pregnant—condoms, pills, shots, diaphragm, foam, fucking pulling out every time; fuck. I know my girlfriend resents me because I got her pregnant, that I feel like less of a man, like a child, because I didn't protect her from this pain. I know I'm worn down. I know I can hardly focus on the road in front of me because I haven't slept in ten weeks because a collection of cells has been growing inside her. A life. A life that will ruin my life unless we do this. And I hardly know what all of this unknowing and knowing means as I drive absent mindedly with my heart in my throat.

"Are you ready for this?"

"How can I be ready for this?" He can't even grasp how hard this is. So many opinions weigh my heart down to my stomach and flood the tiny space this baby made for itself. I wish it would overflow and a crashing wave would peacefully sway the baby to death, back to the blackness from where it came. A hurricane could hit, ripping the walls of my uterus, bloating my abdomen so far out that it feels like a balloon about to explode into tiny red shredded pieces of what I used to be. Everyone said I was lucky to have a judge that even approved my

abortion but I don't feel lucky. His huge face gawks down at me still, contorting his mouth into a wet, wriggling earthworm that wants to douse me in foul mucus for making this decision. I have no one now, and Drew can't even begin to understand my body, this pain.

The thickness of guilt in the car makes me too tense to breathe and the heavy trees past the window make me dizzy as they float by like I'm in a TV screen, like I'm living a life to be watched, like I'm a character, like I didn't make this decision.

Sometimes I look at her and see everything I used to, the small stature of someone like me, just as regular as me, comfortable, a little messy, but still beautiful with wisps of brown hair framing her molten eyes and lips. She sits so perched, strapped into the seat like this isn't the most drastic, the most preoccupying, the most not-even-need-to-wear-my-seatbelt decision she's ever made. I love her like this. But when the broken shadows of the trees along the highway creep across her face, I see a stranger—a hard stranger who will never know me because she hates me.

"I was just asking, May. You don't have to turn everything I say into something else. I'm here. I'm driving us three hours to the clinic, and I've been with you every step of the way. I'm here. I'll be *there*. This hurts me, too."

He doesn't get it! Why is he making this about him when it's entirely me who has to do this!

"You don't get it, Drew. You don't understand what I'm going through. I feel like my head is so full of opinions and actions, and decisions, and possibilities. It's not fair that I'm the one. Nothing makes any sense anymore! I'm the one going through everything." My sobs blur the word everything into nothing but sound.

It's like I'm in the car with a total stranger. I know his face, I see the nestled eyes and stretched mouth and wide arms that have helped me and held me so many times when things mattered, but never this much and never so little. We aren't even connecting anymore. We don't get each other. He doesn't understand that he helped create this tiny baby in my stomach and now I live with it. And I have to kill it. Me.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry I argued. We have to do this for each other. I love you." I say it. What does it mean anymore?

"I love you, too."

She reaches to the steering wheel and grabs my hand, large in comparison to hers, and guides it down to her leg. She pats the still surface of mine and then grasps my fingers so tightly.

We look at each other for a brief second of pity. Her eyes are glazed with redness and tears. I do love her. I wipe a droplet from her cheek and look to the road. We're close.

For the half-hour of waiting in the operation room, I have only the company of Drew, this stranger I've loved for years, and a long, serrated, hollow tube, glaring up at me from the table like it wants to terrify me.

The beating returns to my abdomen, like pulsating menstrual cramps, as the doctor walks into the room with a shot in his hand, anesthetic. He says a few things about how there shouldn't be much pain during the operation and how considerable cramping afterward is normal, but his name, his detailed description of the procedure is static.

I'm given the anesthetic and everyone's quiet. When I had my wisdom teeth removed, the nurse soothed me into blackout by asking about my painted fingernails, but in this room, all three brains are phased by simultaneity: discomfort, isolation, disgust. I float into the high of the drug, but the clock stays straight on the wall, ticking, beating, burning into my memory.

"Lie back."

I feel pinching. I hear the mechanical hum of a vacuum, and I sing a song to myself. I sing Duran Duran's "Hungry like the Wolf" because it's the first thing to pop in my head. I sing it slowly, waveringly. "In touch with the ground I'm lost and I'm found." If I abandon this awful song to search for another one, I have to risk pausing to feel the present. The distant vacuum sound swells the room and makes my head feel like a marshmallow, expanding into a soft gush of coagulated sugar. "Mouth is a live all running inside. And I'm Hungry like the wolf." Drew is looking away, at the art on the walls, a poster of the stages of pregnancy, I cry. "I'm on the hunt I'm after you. I smell like I sound. I'm lost and I'm found." I forget the song—I make myself. My eyes see glass through the tears as I gaze at the speckles on the ceiling, so distant as stars from the earth—sucking, scraping inside me, like noise—and it's done.

"All done. Okay, May? You just rest here, and the nurse will escort you to the post-operation waiting room."

I feel like my stomach is creeping up my throat, but at least it's over, all I can focus on is May. I'm too sick to focus on anything else. I take her hand, and she grabs it, so hard, and collapses into me. "I'm here." I guide her into the post-operation waiting room for her to sleep off the anesthesia, but she won't sleep. She sits

on the tan leather bed with her eyes open wider than I've ever seen them, staring at the blank white wall. Her hands grasp her stomach as I coddle her from beside.

She nods, turning her head slightly toward mine, and mumbles, "It's still beating." She tightens her arms around her abdomen. The only thing I can say, "I know." But I don't. All I know is that we have to wait because that's what room we're in.

Christopher Stokum

KNEELERS

I went to watch my wife's uncle preach six months after we were married. It was my second time around, marriage-wise, and my wife's too, so we'd skipped the ceremony and gotten married at the courthouse. Her uncle, being a priest, wasn't so supportive of it, and he wasn't happy that I was divorced – Tess was a widow – but he was a timid guy, so he never said anything to me directly about either issue.

I hadn't wanted to go, but Tess talked me into it. She said I could at least try to make good with her uncle since after all, he'd pretty much raised her and paid for her schooling out at the community college and all. She'd gone and lived with her uncle after her parents had died, when she was ten or so. She made me feel kind of bad about not wanting to go, so we ended up driving out to the church one Sunday. I started sweating soon as I got inside. I sweated through the whole service, to tell you the truth. I'm not a suit-wearing man. They make those collars too damn tight.

Hank took the pulpit like he was afraid of what it might do to him – that's Tess's uncle, Hank – and he stammered a bit before he got started. He was built small, with narrow shoulders and a funny stoop that made his robes bunch up in the front. Once he started talking he seemed to loosen up some, and the congregation settled and stopped sneezing and shifting and making the pews squeak.

Soon after the service started, Tess got a queer grin on her face that I hadn't seen before. I'd call it proud. She closed her eyes now and then, and nodded a little when Hank said something smart about love and compassion and so on. Tess was wearing a dress I hadn't seen before. She said her uncle'd got it for her, this flower print thing that came down almost to her knees when she was standing. Up top it was about as conservative as you'd expect a priest to like. The bottom had pulled up a little when she'd sat, about halfway up her thigh. She still had some respectable legs, no cellulite or anything and smooth enough. I would've liked her to do some more running or aerobics to keep them tighter, but they were okay. Part of a bruise I thought had faded was showing near the hem of her dress, a sickly yellow half-moon. I

couldn't recall what it was exactly that she did to get it, though I'm sure she remembered. That's what bruises and scrapes are for, my dad used to tell me, to help you remember what you've done. I waited for her to close her eyes again, and I reached out a finger and traced a wavy line up the inside of her leg real lightly. Goose bumps came up as soon as I touched her—I mean right off. She jerked away and clenched her jaw, keeping her eyes straight ahead. She slid a few inches away like I wouldn't notice, and like I'd care if I did.

I let my eyes wander around the place, over the folks in the audience and the decorations and all. It smelled like cough medicine and apples in there, and I don't think the woman in front of me had washed her hair since Bunker Hill. My eyes walked their way up the wall. I'd always wanted to be an architect. There's something special in the way a building fits together, the way the walls come up off of the foundation, the way the roof sits on top. It takes a certain touch to do it right, I've noticed, and there's a lot of guys designing buildings now that get it all wrong. They don't see how the parts have got to work together, how the walls have got to do more than just come out of the ground and hold up the roof. They've got to work with the roof, right, and the roof has got to work with them. It's a hard thing to explain. But each part has got to respect the other ones. That's what's important. My dad told me once that I should expect folks to give me respect, so long as I intend to give it to them. It's got to be mutual. Same's true with buildings. These guys they've got drawing the blueprints up now, they don't see that.

The ceiling of a Catholic church is a strange thing. I've only been in two, and one was when I was a kid, so I don't have much experience to speak of, but this one was strange. It didn't fit, really. It seemed like a transplanted limb of a different skin color, you know? The rest of the place was fancy—I mean *fancy* with all this stonework and stained glass and these gold-plated candlesticks. But the ceiling, though, the ceiling was bare. Just goose-ass white, with some real basic crown molding around the edges. I guess they don't want anything in the way when they're looking to God.

Hank stopped talking. I hadn't been paying much attention, not for a while. The pews started creaking again and everybody, in unison, like it had been rehearsed, started moving

forward, kneeling on those cushioned boards. A few old ladies and this one relic of a guy stayed in their seats. It was an interesting thing to watch this room kneeling all at once while I was sitting there: these heads, some of them balding, some permed, some spattered with sweat or blemishes, these heads all dropping down. It felt like I was taking off, you know, watching them all drop out like that – like I was leaving the ground, leaving them behind.

Tess tugged at my pant leg as Hank started into a prayer. I stayed where I was. She tugged again, harder, and turned to look at me. She had the roundest eyes I've ever seen, I think. Just perfectly round.

"Robert, please," she said. I shook my head.

"Jesus, was that place hot."

We hadn't spoken after the service, not on our way out of the church, not when we went to say hello to her cousin who'd had a pussy handshake for a grown man, not on the way to the car. I was feeling better, though, with my tie off and my collar undone and the window down.

"You hear me?" I said. "That place was hot."

"I heard you," said Tess.

"All right, then." She wasn't like that, not usually. She was calm, and she was steady. That's why I married her, because she was steady. My first wife was an emotional circus, a total mess. She always thought I wanted to know how she was feeling, always. I could be watching T.V., taking a shower, it didn't matter. I could be sitting on the toilet, and she'd come on in and let me know what was going on in that batty head of hers. Tess was always the same, man, always level. She'd run off a couple of times back when we were dating. I'd had to call her and listen to her tell me about my problems, like I didn't know them well enough on my own. I'd let her talk herself out. It never came to me apologizing or begging that I can remember. See, she still missed her father, a military guy, and she needed a man around to sort of take his place and keep her from feeling too badly about it, so she'd always come back. Hank wasn't what you'd call a man, if you follow. He was living his life for somebody else. Like I said though, I married her because she was level, because she always came on back. I mean, that's one of the reasons I married her. There were other things,

too.

"What's your problem?" I said. The wind was blowing into the car, whipping her hair around. She had the prettiest hair I've seen, just the color of a sorrel. She'd been fussing with keeping it back since we got on the highway. "Why don't you roll the window up, huh?"

"I thought you said you were hot," she murmured.

"I said the church was hot," I said, "and I asked you what your problem was."

"Fuck you, Robert."

"Jesus," I said. The car beeped. It had one of those sensors that could tell if everybody was wearing a seatbelt or not. When I put groceries in the front seat, I had to buckle the belt first so it wouldn't beep every twenty-five seconds on the drive home. I counted one time that I forgot to buckle it first, counted how often it beeped so it wouldn't make me jump every time it did. You know, so I could expect it. The sensor had broken on our way to church, and the thing wouldn't stop whether the seatbelt was buckled or not.

"Why wouldn't you kneel?" Tess said.

"Oh, come on," I said, "is that what this is about?"

"I asked you to come to see my uncle," she said, "to watch him preach so maybe he wouldn't think you were such a fucker."

"Watch your mouth," I said, "and I did."

"You did what?"

"I watched him preach," I said. She grunted and slouched in her seat and closed her eyes. Her hand came around and clicked her seatbelt button. The belt slid across her chest, across the expanse of priest-approved flower print fabric that really looked awful on her. It made her chest look small, and it was small, but the dress hid what she had. Did Hank know I hated flower print? He probably could've guessed it. Did he know that I liked to look at his niece's chest?

"I don't see what the big deal is, hun," I said. She was rubbing her knee with her hand. I reached out and laid my hand on hers, gently as I could. She slipped hers out from under mine and started digging in her purse. I wrapped my hand back around the wheel.

"I know you don't," she said.

"Well, then tell me what it is."

"Forget it."

"Don't you blow me off," I said. "Tell me." She pulled a tissue from her purse, sat up in her seat and blew her nose. My ex-wife had had this habit of blowing her nose when she was getting upset, which was pretty frequently, so her nose was always red and kind of irritated around the nostrils. That used to make me madder than anything, her blowing her nose and making it more and more red. Tess tossed the tissue out of the window.

I asked her if she wanted to stop off to get something to eat. She didn't answer, but I pulled off anyway at the next exit and found a sit-down place that wasn't too expensive. There's no point in spending big money on food.

We had some pie after the food, and some coffee. The pie was decent enough, but the coffee had this underlying meaty taste, like it had been filtered through a pot roast, and there was a thin, oily film on the outside of the cup. Tess was drinking decaf since it was after two. She said she couldn't get to sleep if she had high-test later than that, and that it upset her stomach and made her too tense and jittery to screw. If she had decaf, though, she generally fell asleep before I could get anything started.

"Tell me why you didn't kneel," she said. I chewed my pie and looked at her. The waitress came around and I asked her for a toothpick. I was having raspberry pie, or blackberry, maybe. Regardless, those seeds are awful.

"You want anything else while we're here?"

"Robert," she said, "why didn't you kneel?"

"Nothing, then," I said to the waitress. She was a cute thing, maybe nineteen or twenty. She smiled and went to get my toothpick. She had real crooked teeth that looked like they were crowding in to try to get out of her mouth. Still cute, though, even with the teeth. "You could've waited until she'd gone," I said. "Do we have to do this now?"

There weren't many people at the restaurant, just a nice little nuclear family a few tables over and an elderly couple and some guys about my age at the counter. The old folks hadn't said a word to each other since we got there, not one, they just sat and chewed and looked around. The man kept looking over at Tess, staring at her legs while he worked his food with his gums. I couldn't tell if he was turned-on or concerned, about the bruise

maybe, if it was showing again. It was a gruesome thing. It hadn't looked all that bad when it was fresh, but it was getting worse before it got better. I thought about saying something to the old guy, but he noticed me watching and looked away in a hurry. One of the guys at the counter asked the waitress for her number. She gave him that polite not-in-your-life-or-mine laugh that all good waitresses better looking than a donkey have ready.

"Tess," I said, "you know me. You know me, hun. I don't kneel. It's not something I do."

"Everybody's got to kneel sometimes, even if it's to tie a shoe."

"Or suck a dick, right? I just don't kneel for anybody. Hank? No. The pope? No. God? Huh-uh. That's how I am. That's all."

"This isn't about submission," she said. Her voice was getting higher. It'd jumped a whole-step, at least, maybe more. "I'm not asking you to beg and neither is my uncle. My uncle isn't your father, Robert."

"What'd you say?"

She stiffened a bit in her chair.

"I said that my uncle isn't like your father. Hank doesn't want you to be afraid of him. He's not like that."

"And what do you know about my father?" I was trying to keep my voice low, conversational, I really was. I didn't want to upset the other people there at the restaurant. There wouldn't have been any point in doing that.

"Robert, please, just listen," she said. "Please."

"I told you not to bring him up," I said.

"Robert."

I caught her wrist before she could take her hand off of the table. She had fine wrists. They were so pale on the bottom, almost translucent. The veins running up toward her palms and the flutes between her tendons made her wrists look like Corinthian columns. They were lovely.

"Robert," she said again, softer. She blinked once, twice, trying to keep the moisture from escaping out onto her lashes. She sucked her bottom lip in and bit it hard. She didn't whimper, really. She sat still, looking right at me, her eyes fully round. I told you she was steady. I didn't say anything at all, didn't have to, just watched her and held her wrist. Her hand started turning

red, and then white. She winced and I watched her teeth split her lip a little, watched the blood pool up around the bottoms of her incisors. Some of it fell down past her chin, onto her dress, just a drop of it. It looked garish there on the flowers, kind of showy and disgusting. I think they were supposed to be sunflowers. Could be daisies, but I'd guess sunflowers. She let out a cry when her lip split, and I dropped her wrist and let her get up and step back away from our table.

"Honey, are you okay?" the old man asked. He was half-standing, or maybe fully standing. You can't tell with geezers sometimes. His voice was louder than I would've guessed; it almost didn't seem right coming out of him. It almost seemed like a voice-over, like in one of those movies. "Somebody should call the police," he said.

"Hey man, sit down," I said, but he didn't. He kept his eyes on Tess. She was moving toward the door now, moving with measured steps. She was considering each one, I could see it, considering what each step meant. I stood. "Man, I said sit down."

The waitress had come with my toothpick and more coffee at some point. She was standing a couple of tables down, near the nuclear family, and they were all watching me, and they looked scared, the waitress and the family. Some of the guys at the bar were turned around on their stools, looking my way.

Tess seemed to resolve something then, internally, and she started moving faster. I followed her, watching the geezer until he sat again. As we passed the counter one of the guys, the one who'd wanted the phone number, stepped out in front of me, between Tess and I.

"Maybe you'd better let her go, bud," he said.

I told him I'd kill his kids with a hatchet if he didn't get out of the way.

Tess was halfway across the parking lot when I got outside. A cloud was partially covering the sun, making its light a soft grey-gold. Tess looked good, and I mean really good, in that dress in that kind of half-light. She'd stopped walking. She was standing, looking out away from me toward the highway. I took out a cigarette and lit it, snuffed it out, went inside and dropped some money on the counter and apologized for causing a scene and all, came out, relit the cigarette.

My elbow was starting to ache. It always does when it gets late in the day, you know? My dad shut my arm in a door a couple of times back when I was a kid, and I think it was probably broken, but I never had it looked at. My aunt, my dad's sister, worked over at the hospital in the emergency room. If he would've taken me in there half the times I needed to go, half the times he snuffed his cigar on my leg or chipped one of my teeth or walloped me with a belt until he was sure it'd scar, my aunt would've turned him in, I'm sure, and they would've taken me and put me in foster care, and they would've put him in rehab or jail, or maybe both. I don't know how those arrangements work.

I smoked the cigarette down just about to the filter leaning against the restaurant, watching my wife stand out there in the lot. The place was built real well. You'd be surprised how many places like that are built well, roadside places that nobody really thinks about. The architect had known what he was doing. It's all about respect, like I said, about the walls being considerate of the roof, knowing its weak spots, and about the foundation working with the walls. I'm not talking about structural integrity, here. I'm not worried these buildings are going to fall or anything. All these architects know well enough how to make something that isn't going to fall, even the bad ones and the ignorant ones. But there's something wrong with some of these buildings, something that makes you kind of sick, almost, like waking up with a charley horse. It's because there's no respect. That's all really, but most guys don't get it.

I ground the butt into the wall, watching the runaway embers fly off and fizzle in the air, and dropped it onto the pavement. The elderly couple came out through the door, and I glared at them until they passed, and then I turned back into the restaurant and got a few napkins for Tess' lip. I knew how to work with her and make things alright. I knew her well enough to know her strong spots and her faults. I knew just where I could put pressure and where I should go easy – what any man should know about his wife.

Tess wasn't in the lot when I stepped back outside. I didn't have to look long to know she'd left: there weren't many cars there and there weren't many places she could've been hiding. I stood and looked out at the highway for a while, watching the cars. I was too far away from them to hear anything but the occasional

semis that groaned past. I got in the car and waited about a half an hour out in front of the restaurant, smoked a couple more cigarettes. There weren't many places she could've been going, just Hank's or her cousin's, or maybe her sister's, though that was out in New Bedford, which isn't all that close.

"Where'd you go, hun?" I said, my words falling flat on the dash. I fell into kind of a rough patch after my first wife left, stopped showing up for work and started drinking a bit too much for my own good. I got laid off after a few weeks of that, and I had some trouble paying the rent on my place. A rough patch, you know? I met Tess not long after I lost my job, and I pulled myself together again. I wouldn't say I need a woman to get by, but the support is nice.

Sitting in the car there, my mind started working some. I started wondering what I'd think if I ran into myself somewhere, if I sat down next to myself in a bar or something and got to talking. Would I think that a man with a crooked nose and a gut was worth my time? Would I think that I was cold and cocky and dumb? It's a funny way to think, I know, but sometimes you can't help it. Sometimes – well, sometimes things get a little funny without you noticing. Sometimes things just kind of get away from you.

Greg Trietley

THE FANTASTIC LIFE OF ED SHORECRAFT

“Mr. Shorecroft?” Dr. Raymondson had said. “Sir, could you come in today? It’s about your test results.”

The words had repeated themselves over and over in Ed’s mind. Ed had sat in Dr. Raymondson’s tiny examination room in a humiliating hospital gown. The doctor had looked him over one more time, shining a light into his tired brown eyes and telling him to take out his dentures, stick out his tongue and say “ah.” He had put up the scans on the empty white wall, and he and Ed had solemnly nodded together at the golf-ball sized lump in his lung. “You can take off the hospital gown,” the doctor said. “We won’t need any further tests.”

Now, a week after what the calendar had called a routine checkup, Ed sat in his apartment, a cramped little two-room place on the third floor of a low-rent high-rise. One dim lamp cast forty-watt shadows on his face. He shivered. The cold always snuck in through the main room’s one window, leaving him and Baxter fighting over the fleece blanket. Ed would move to a nicer place if he had the energy, but his nephew insisted that he stay where he was. An hour away when the highway wasn’t jammed, it gave him an excuse not to visit.

The landlord will never fix the draft, Ed thought. Slumped over his desk, he kept his stockinged feet from touching the cold hardwood floor. Medical papers he didn’t comprehend and medical bills he didn’t understand covered his desktop calendar. With nothing to do and very little time left to do it, Ed stared out the window. A few snowflakes began to fall.

“It’s looking pretty gloomy out there, Baxter,” Ed said.

Baxter barked as the poor newlyweds next door hurried in from the cold. The golden retriever had followed Ed home one evening ten years earlier. Ed had walked to the corner to mail his electric bill when he had seen the dog. He had judged by his grayish-yellow coat and jerky gait that he wouldn’t live too much longer. Now the two were each other’s only company.

When staring outside grew tiresome, Ed turned his attention to his bare walls. All that hung on them were a generic landscape painting he had purchased at the Adams County Fair years earlier and a *Vertigo* poster left by the tenants before him.

Ed's mind drifted. A more interesting man would have photographs hanging, he thought. Staring at the damp plaster, he thought back to Dr. Raymondson's office. Copy after copy of those test results, with their cloudy, golf-ball sized lump, hung themselves up on the wall of Ed's mind.

"Baxter," Ed said. "Doing anything fun?"

Baxter lifted his head out of his posh dog bed, a fluffy blue thing with more pillows than Ed's own bed, and looked at his friend. He yawned.

"Thought so."

Ed thought about what he could do. He could go for a walk. No, it was far too cold. He could watch some television. No, his rabbit ears didn't work anymore, and he didn't care enough to find out why. He could read a good book. No, he hadn't read a good book in over fifty years, only many bad books and a few mediocre ones. He could take Baxter out for a walk. No, it was far too cold.

"I should start writing these things down." He had done so little in the past week and not much more in the seventy-seven years beforehand. "You know, Baxter, that doesn't sound like too bad an idea."

Ideas swirled in his mind about what he could do tomorrow, or the day after, or whenever the damn snow stopped falling. He pushed the papers off his desk and shoved the desktop calendar off with them. He reached for a sheet of paper from his bottom drawer and dug around for a pen, scaring Baxter with the joyous yelp he made when he found one.

He had so many things he wanted to do. He wanted to go for a walk. He wanted to go for a jog. He wanted to sprint down the street.

"If I'm going to make this list, I should make it a proper one," Ed said. "Baxter, I think this is a time for the typewriter." He shuffled over to the closet and dug out a brown box labeled "PERENNIAL UNSOLDINGS." Unsoldings, a word Ed had invented in his free time, described the possessions that went unsold at the yearly street sale. Perennial meant he was a bad salesman.

Sandwiched between a moldy copy of The Tenth Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Community—Ed was pretty sure he inherited that along with the *Vertigo* poster—and a board

game called Go To the Head of the Class that was missing pieces, Ed's typewriter sat under a layer of dust. With a weak breath that came out as a cough and a wheeze, Ed cleared off the dust and plopped the contraption on his desk. He smiled, remembering when he had purchased it and had used it every day until it fell off his desk. The "q" and "1" keys had snapped off, and he never bothered to fix them.

He cranked the paper through the feed roller and cracked his fingers. His bony index fingers jabbed at each key and typed out his list's title.

ED'S FANTASTIC LIST OF THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE THING ED DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT HAPPENS

"Are you ready, Baxter?"

Baxter woofed.

"That's a good boy."

NUMBER ONE:

Adventures ran through his mind. "How about skydiving? Skydiving sounds wonderful," Ed said. "I've never skydived. Or is it skydove? Let's not type that one until I know what the right word is."

NUMBER ONE: LOOK UP CORRECT PAST TENSE OF DIVE.

Ed moved on, trying to sort out the ideas in his mind. He thought of a good number two, and a number three and four and five after that. He stared out the window at the falling snow and wished he could get away. Yes, that is what he'd do. He'd get away.

NUMBER TWO: FLY IN A PLANE.

He had never flown. Flying to Hawaii or Florida or Alaska sounded fun. Ed thought for a moment. No, Alaska didn't sound fun. Far too cold for him and Baxter there.

"Flying can't be number two," Ed decided. Baxter rose from his bed to stretch out his back. "If skydiving is on my list, there's no point in flying again after that."

Baxter howled for his squeaking monkey chew toy that sat all the way across the room. Neither member of the apartment wanted to get up, so the two friends engaged in a brief staring contest before Ed sauntered over, grabbed the monkey covered in

saliva, and tossed it into Baxter's bed. He sat back down, out of breath.

"I don't think we can travel at all," Ed said. "Imagine me strolling down the boardwalk of Coney Island!" He chuckled at the thought of wearing a bright-colored polo shirt and khaki shorts that didn't cover the knee. He didn't even own a nice pair of sandals, and his skin would burn after five minutes in the sun. Ed looked out the window again. The snow was really coming down. He clicked on the radio. A travel ban was in effect. It's okay, Ed thought, he wasn't planning on leaving.

~~NUMBER TWO: FLY IN A PLANE.~~ NUMBER TWO:
BAKE A CAKE.

Ed had never baked a cake. Back in the 50s, for a lark, Ed took a nice lady named Emma out on a date to a night cooking class at the Adams County Community College. The evening ended abruptly when Ed's attempt at opening the 10-pound bag of flour ended with Emma's fine checkered dress covered in a thick layer of Gold Medal's finest.

The more he thought about it, the less he wanted to relive it. The cake would probably taste terrible anyway. Baxter would probably make him bake a terrible flavor like banana or red velvet. Besides, he could just go to the supermarket tomorrow and buy one of those nice cakes in the bakery section for ten dollars.

Baxter howled once more. The neighbors were heading out again despite the radio's pleas.

"Quiet, Baxter," Ed said. "I know Dr. Raymondson said no more cake. Just swear you won't tell."

Baxter stared at his friend.

"Fine," Ed said. "No cake."

~~NUMBER TWO: FLY IN A PLANE.~~ NUMBER TWO:
BAKE A CAKE. POT BROWNIES.

Ed had never tried any drugs in his youth. By the time marijuana got big in the 60s, Ed was already a little too old for it. But nobody would mind if poor old Mr. Shorecroft tried it now, Ed thought. He wanted to have some fun before the thing he didn't want to talk about happened.

Ed looked at Baxter and started laughing. "Could you imagine me with a little of that stuff in me?" Baxter sneezed. "I know! I wouldn't even know where to get any of it." And with that, he backspaced over number two and crossed it out.

Snow continued to fall outside Ed's window as night approached. Idea after idea popped into Ed's mind, and idea after idea Ed ruled out for one reason or another. Number two: paint a painting. No, he could never be as good as the man from the fair. Number two: enjoy the sunset. No, there was no sun to see recently. Number two: befriend the couple next door. No, he didn't want to burden them when that thing he didn't want to talk about happened. Number two: complete college degree. Ed had dropped out sophomore year when his savings ran out. No, that would take too much time.

By the end of the night, the pristine sheet of paper Ed had fed into the roller was a garbled mess of strikethroughs and doubled-over type. He still only had one item, and it didn't even require him to leave the room to achieve it.

Number two: pick up golf. Ed had never golfed before. It seemed enjoyable. In the spring, if he lasted that long, he'd go out and borrow some clubs from his nephew. Yes, that's what he'd do.

NUMBER TWO: PICK UP GOLF.

Ed slid the roller back to the right to start the next line, but a bell dinged to tell him the paper ran out. Nonetheless, he stared contently at his bare walls, fantasizing about chipping one in for birdie or driving one 250 yards right down the fairway. But his visions of The Masters morphed into scans of the mass in his lung. They projected against the vast empty space of his walls. He could feel the golf-ball sized lump pounding in his chest.

He crumpled up his list and threw it on the floor. An uncomfortable sleep overtook him.

Several feet of snow piled up at the front steps of the apartment complex. The storm kept raging, and the radio said it would go on for at least a second week. The landlord had yet to shovel, and Baxter heard the newlyweds grumble about falling on the steps every time they came home from the pub or the opera or the flicks or wherever they went that night. He barked at them, and that usually quieted them down.

Ed sat at his desk with his arms crossed, staring at his friend for hours at a time. He still couldn't get the rabbit ears to work. The paperless typewriter haunted him. Its two ribbon spools acted like unblinking eyes that watched the sick man and waited for the thing Ed didn't want to talk about to happen.

"This needs to be done with," Ed said.

Baxter rose from his bed to retrieve his chew toy, which had somehow ended up back across the room, and shook off his loose fur by Ed's desk. The hairs in the air tickled Ed's nose, and he sneezed and coughed into his white handkerchief. A splotch of red stared back at him.

"Go lie back down, Baxter," Ed said. "It'll be all right."

Ed looked back at the typewriter's ominous stare. He ruffled through his desk drawer as he had before and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper. He began typing:

ED'S FANTASTIC LIST OF THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE
THING ED DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT HAPPENS.

"No."

~~ED'S FANTASTIC LIST OF THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE
THING ED DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT HAPPENS: THE
FANTASTIC LIFE OF ED SHORECROFT.~~

Ed cracked back his fingers and started to type. Ed Shorecroft was born in 1932 into the rich Shorecroft fortune. His parents, Magnus and Geraldine, ran a wildly successful chocolate factory. Ed received tours of the factory weekly. Geraldine bought him a fine pair of blue overalls, and he received all the chocolate he wanted. As a result, he was always happy. His parents took him to carnivals and parades in the town park. His mother told him a different bedtime story about mythical beasts and far-off worlds every night, and he believed them all into his adolescence.

Ed wrote twenty pages that night. He wrote about how he picked up a golf club in '54 and shot a round of 68 the first time. In his story, he ate a delicious triple-chocolate cake and gave some of it to his friends named Dryston and MacDonald and Jean-Luc. He chased an energetic Baxter around a sunny park. He skydived.

Ed passed out at his desk, bony fingers numb from punching the keys so hard. The snow continued to fall outside.

The storm passed. The radio told Ed and Baxter that some side roads in the city were still impassable, but that they should

be clear by the evening. It told the two friends about all sorts of weather records, but Ed didn't hear them too well.

Ten thousand residents on the outskirts of town were out of power, but Ed's apartment stayed dimly lit and kept heating to fight off the draft. That afternoon, Ed bundled himself in the puffiest coat he owned, wrapped a scarf around his neck four too many times and stepped outside. He had to visit the pharmacist down the road to pick up his bimonthly supply of medication.

Baxter walked unfettered beside Ed to Johnson's Family Market, a local place that enjoyed seeing Baxter roam its aisles. The pharmacy counter hid itself in the back of the store, tucked behind big Christmas displays with glowing plastic reindeer and even bigger displays for the new sale on paper towels. Ed stood patiently in line for his refill—sixty generic-brand blue pills with a name too long to pronounce and a taste like the end of a thermometer. They weren't helping him, but there was no harm in following Dr. Raymondson's orders.

The woman behind Ed in line tapped him on the shoulder. "I can't help noticing that you and I have the same pills," she said, shaking her nearly-empty bottle. "What are you in for?" She wore a blinding pink parka and enormous purple earmuffs and talked too loudly for the usually quiet pharmacy department of Johnson's.

Ed said nothing, enamored by the woman's white hair. Her startlingly blue eyes grabbed his attention, and her pale skin glowed in the store's fluorescent lights. She must blend right in with the snowdrifts, Ed thought.

"I'm taking them for this thing I have," she went on. "Doc says the pain'll go away if I take them with these red ones, which taste sort of like sawdust but I don't mind, and those yellow ones like that guy over there has. Those taste sweet. They might just be sugar pills, though."

"Oh," Ed said. "My doctor has me on these, but they don't change anything." The woman expected Ed to go on, but he had nothing to say.

"You're a real charmer," she said. She chuckled. "You know, you're allowed to talk to me. I won't go dying on you just yet."

The pharmacist brought Ed his pills. He turned to leave.

"Goodbye," she shouted out. "If the blue ones don't work

out, switch to the yellow stuff. They taste like cake!"

Ed would have jogged back to his apartment if he had the strength. She's enthralling and fascinating, captivating and intriguing, Ed thought. She was perfect for his story. He had to start writing. With Ed shuffling behind Baxter, the two friends made it home in record time.

He didn't even catch his breath before he jumped into the story.

"She'll be my character's romantic interest," Ed said. "We'll make her the enigmatic partner of Ed, endlessly devoted to fighting for what's right. It's going to be brilliant."

There was no emotion or love in Ed's voice, only a resolve to keep writing his tale. Ed cracked back his fingers and began. Her name was Tawny—yes, Tawny, that would be her name—and she was born in the panhandle of Florida. She loved to read as a child. She went to Harvard but dropped out because it stifled her creativity. Her family owned a peanut butter factory and made only smooth peanut butter because she didn't like the crunchy kind. When she got older, she began to run daily. She loved to run. She ran in snow and in rain and in wind. When the doctors told her she had no cartilage left in her knees, she kept running anyway. She suffered from shin splints, which hurt, but she kept running until she met Ed in the park one day. They laughed about the beautiful weather and complimented each other on looking so healthy. He asked her out to a movie one night, and she agreed. They saw *Vertigo* but didn't like it, so he offered to buy her dinner. "Yes," she said. "But I only eat at one place."

Ed stepped back from the typewriter and called over to his friend. "Baxter! What kind of food do you think Tawny would enjoy?"

Baxter gnawed on his chew toy.

"Well you're no help." Ed couldn't make up his mind. Would she like Chinese food? No, she wouldn't like sweet and sour sauce. What about Italian food? No, too starchy. Thai food? No, she wasn't wild like that. Indian? Perhaps. Ed didn't know.

He slid his chair out from the desk and went to bed, paragraph unfinished.

Snowstorms came and went. Ed had a routine checkup

with Dr. Raymondson, who wanted to see him. The doctor ruffled through his cupboard of instruments in the too-small examination room and tested Ed's reflexes. The scans were the same, except Dr. Raymondson used some other size comparison instead of "golf ball" this time. It didn't make a difference. He said he wanted to switch Ed to some different pills. The painkilling effect of the blue ones had worn off, Ed had told him. Dr. Raymondson gave him a script for some five-syllable pills and sent him on his way. Ed didn't tell the doctor about the blood. He didn't want to worry him.

"Hello, Mr. Shorecroft," the pharmacist at Johnson's said, looking at his prescription. "New pills I see." She turned and went to the back room, and in the downtime Ed browsed the half-off calendars.

A finger tapped Ed's shoulder from behind. He did not turn around.

"Hello, Mr. Shorecroft," a woman's voice whispered into Ed's ear. "Mr. Shorecroft. That's a classy name. It beats Briczinski."

Her breath tickled the back of Ed's neck. He knew who it was. It was his Tawny. He wanted to ask her where she would eat, but Baxter nudged his leg to remind him that she was not Tawny. She was just a pale old woman who wasn't named Tawny and didn't own a peanut butter factory.

But she could be Tawny, Ed thought. She could be. And he wanted to finish his story before the thing he didn't want to talk about happened.

Ed turned around. "Excuse me, Miss Brinciski."

"Briczinski."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. Now what would you like to be excused for, Mr. Shorecroft?"

"I am curious," Ed said. "If you were to go out to dinner to one place, and only one place, what place would that be?"

The woman thought the question over. "Are you asking me out?"

Ed froze. He wasn't asking her out. He didn't know this woman. She wasn't Tawny. He wanted to interject, but only a whimper came out of his mouth.

"You're asking me out!" She said. "Oh, you hopeless

romantic!”

Ed and the woman stood at the giant storefront of Bradbury’s Texas Steakhouse. An enormous neon cowboy hat illuminated the woman’s face, and Ed laughed at the plastic cacti that dotted the restaurant’s interior.

A teenager dressed like a cowgirl came and seated them at a too-large table and served them too-large glasses of Diet Coke. Every time the woman looked at Ed, Ed looked at the menu. The brisket looked good, and he ordered that for himself and a New York strip steak for the woman. She wasn’t Tawny. She didn’t love to run like he wanted to run. He had nothing to say to her, but he broke the silence out of obligation.

“I’m on the yellow pills now. They do taste a little like cake.”

“Maybe if you left a cake out for two weeks and doused it in spoiled milk.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just stopped taking the yellow pills. No real point anymore.” Ed saw that her skin had become much paler. It frightened him.

The cowgirl dropped off their steaks, and Ed dug right in. He hadn’t eaten a good meal in so long, let alone a steak meal. He wanted to cram it all into his mouth at once, but he only crammed a quarter of it in his mouth at once out of respect for the woman. He glanced at her in between bites. She struggled to swallow each piece of her steak, and she washed each bite down with Diet Coke to keep from coughing.

Ed shoved another chunk of his delicious steak down his throat, but it went down the wrong pipe. He started to cough. Diet Coke didn’t stop it. He covered his mouth with his hands, begging the woman’s pardon for his hacking and wheezing.

“I don’t feel well,” Ed said. “This steak has to be rancid.”

“Oh my god,” the woman said. “Look at your hands.”

He did. They were covered with blood.

She took him home, guiding his weak body up the stairs to his apartment.

Ed sat hunched over his desk, coughing and wheezing endlessly. He didn’t want her in his apartment. He didn’t want to

burden her and put her through the thing he didn't want to talk about. He just wanted to write his story. He knew now. Tawny went to one place and only one place, and it was the Kafka Cafe, a small cozy place that served divine vegetarian food and coffee and never made anyone leave unhappy. The woman in his apartment now wasn't Tawny.

"Can I get you some water?" The woman's black, drawn-on eyebrows furrowed in worry. "How long do you have?"

He didn't want to talk about it. It was his life and his problem, not hers or Dr. Raymondson's or the poor newlyweds' next door. "Remember when you called me a hopeless romantic? This would be the hopeless part."

The woman helped Ed up and guided him into his bedroom, a small, cold, dingy thing that didn't even have a window or a lamp. It had only a blanketless bed—Baxter won the battle for the fleece that day—and a pillow that hadn't been fluffed in months. She set him down on the bed.

"Tell me about yourself," she said.

There's nothing to tell, Ed thought. "I don't have a story."

"Everybody has a story."

"Not me. I have a draft and a dying dog."

The woman left the bedroom to introduce herself to Baxter, who lay in the main room. She scratched him behind his ears, and he panted in excitement. Loose gray-yellow hairs fell off his coat. After a few minutes, he grew tired of the petting and rose to fetch his squeaking monkey chew toy, which had somehow migrated back across the room. The woman followed him to the desk.

"What's this?" She picked up Ed's tale.

~~ED'S FANTASTIC LIST OF THINGS TO DO BEFORE THE THING ED DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT HAPPENS. THE FANTASTIC LIFE OF ED SHORECROFT.~~

She shouted across the apartment. "And you said you didn't have a story."

"Don't read that," Ed called out in between strained breaths. "It's not finished."

But the woman didn't hear. She read about Ed's fantastic life. She read about the chocolate factory and his friends named

Dryston and MacDonald and Jean-Luc. She read of skydiving and golfing. She read about bullfighting and trapeze acts at the carnival. She read about Tawny. When she finished, she returned to the bedroom and sat beside Ed.

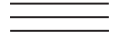
"Ed Shorecroft," the woman said to herself. "You have lived a fascinating life." She held Ed's hand for comfort. She told him how much Tawny reminded her of herself, and all the things she wanted to do but never did. If it weren't for her condition, she would have loved to go for runs in the park. She read novels all the time in high school but hadn't read a good book since then. She even thought about applying to Harvard if it weren't for her grades and the high tuition.

It's not real, Ed thought. I never skydove, skydived. I never went to a carnival. There's no chocolate factory, and you don't own a peanut butter factory. You are Tawny about as much as I'm Ed.

Ed rose from the bed and walked over to the window. His legs felt weak, so he pulled up his desk chair and sat down. Snow began to fall again, and Baxter howled at the brash newlyweds who were heading out even though the radio warned them not to. Ed closed his eyes and grumbled about the draft. "It's so cold," he said. "It's so cold and dark."

Tawny stood beside him and watched him as he fell into a deep sleep. She watched the snow fall outside and worried about her Ed Shorecroft. She wanted to know more about this man, but Ed's story went unfinished, and he did not mind.

COMMENTARY



INTERVIEW

Gerald Stern

Gerald Stern has won many awards for his writing, including the 1996 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and a National Book Award for poetry in 1998 for his book, *This Time: New and Selected Poems*. Born in Pittsburgh on February 22, 1925, Stern earned his BA at the University of Pittsburgh (1947) and an MA at Columbia University (1949). Since 2006, Stern has been a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Here, he chats with *Three Rivers Review* about Pittsburgh and his new poems, and he shares a poem from his book *American Sonnets* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2002).

THREE RIVERS REVIEW--- You have new work in the March 2010 issues of *Poetry Magazine* and *The New Yorker* ["In Beauty Bright" and "Journey" in *Poetry* and "Dream IV" in *The New Yorker*.] The voice and length in the new poems is reminiscent of your early work. Is this intentional?

GERALD STERN--- It is interesting that you mention that, because I was looking, though not with this in mind, at some older poems from an early book called *Rejoicings*. It came out in 1972 or so, although, some of the poems in the book were written as early as 1964. I've noticed that a lot of the poems in that book seem to anticipate the more recent poems. It is kind of a surprising thing. I've noticed that connection myself. I can't explain it, though the poems I wrote in *Rejoicings* came when I was unknown to most people. I was finding my way [as a writer]— I was in a psychological and spiritual isolation, more than when I wrote the poems in *Red Coal, Lucky Life, Paradise Poems*, and so on. I became—and I hate this term— a public figure. When that happens, one becomes not *self-conscious*, but the use of communication, or even un-communication, as is often the case now, becomes much more important to you. I became a known figure writing for a known audience. When I wrote *Rejoicings*, I wasn't in that place, I was writing for an imagined audience and for myself, for Coleridge, for Melville... and now, here I am in my two-hundredth decade writing short poems that are elusive, political— say what I want to say, use punctuation as I want to; it is as if I am going into a place of retreat, to a certain degree. I can't entirely explain it.

As for writing long or short poems: I've always written both. I have poems that are 12 or 14 pages long, 14 or 18 lines long, some of them are 3 lines long. I have a number of long poems,

some of which haven't been published yet, that are 20 to 30 pages in length. I'm not certain what makes a poem long or short, but I write both of them.

TRR--- How do you suggest the known poet returns to an earlier voice of experience, as you do in your new poems?

GS--- Well, most [poets] don't, quite frankly. They develop a voice for themselves; we can call it a voice, though I'm not sure what voice might mean, exactly—a way or habit of writing, a tone and style that one sticks to, creates, or puts on himself. I suppose I've done that, too. I think, as I go on, I'm having less and less of a persona and more and more I am speaking from my own chair or rock or flower or whatever it is I'm sitting on. Simply, it becomes just me, talking.

How does that happen? Relentless exploration of what the Germans call the *sein*, and what in English is called *being*, which is the quintessential term used in existential philosophy: What am I? Where am I going? How did I get here? They're big questions. I treat them ironically; I kick 'em in the ass as I go by. I couldn't care less, but, in passing, I talk about whatever I want to talk about. If I want to curse injustice, want to challenge God or attack a Pope or two, I do it! I allow myself to become freer and freer.

TRR--- As Carl Sandburg stood for Midwestern Ethics, you have found a comfortable place within the niche of the working-class, Jewish-American found from Pittsburgh to New York City and in-between. It is not hard to see how these characteristics enter your work, but what was it about Pittsburgh that made an impact on what you write?

GS--- When you talk about a city, or where one comes from—in my case it's Pittsburgh—you're really talking about a person's youth and childhood. Now, one might come from a boring place like Cincinnati, but if you're from Cincinnati, I suppose it isn't boring to you, because there are connections to be made. I think there have been certain things in my life that have served as archetypes; there have been images I've been obsessed with. One is my life in Pittsburgh, and my life in a place *like* Pittsburgh.

Another is the image of a river, although in Pittsburgh there are three rivers; this magazine is the *Three Rivers Review*. I've lived much of my adult life by the Delaware River in Eastern Pennsylvania or Western New Jersey, as I am now. New York City is another of my archetypes, and there you have the Hudson River. The archetype of Pittsburgh concerns itself with issues like justice & injustice; race hatred; ethnic fighting – a part of which is Antisemitism; as well as bad, filthy air; hills; the beauty and the ugliness, compounded.

I get tired of people who, now that the industry is gone from Pittsburgh— J&L, US Steel, Carnegie, and all that, say 'Pittsburgh is a wonderful city; what a great city! No one had ever told me about it. It is so beautiful.' You've heard the story, I'm sure. I'm not sympathetic to those people, though. I say 'the soul of Pittsburgh is gone.' The soul of Pittsburgh was filthy and disgusting, exploitative, full of hate and rage and violence, darkness and soot— but it had a soul. I don't know what it has now. The physical beauty is there, but when I went to the river, where I worked the furnace for Jones and Laughlin Steel, I saw people drinking beers, homemade Pittsburgh brews— not Iron City or Duquesne, but really small local breweries, or Dutch or German Beers; I saw people sitting to talk politely over beers and sandwiches. On one level, it was very nice. It is nice for young people to gather somewhere and drink beers, pick up people of the opposite sex, and all that bullshit. On another level, I don't feel happy about that, because I was nourished by that terrible monster, if that makes sense to you. Now, I don't want to make a cliché of it, but I'm glad that the air is better so people don't have to deal with allergies and cancer and whatever else came from it. I hope that much of the hatred is gone, too, but I don't know if it is altogether gone. The hatred was really everywhere in the thirties, forties, and fifties. I experienced it in Pittsburgh, not in Buffalo; so, I know Pittsburgh.

TRR--- You mention the loss of the soul of Pittsburgh; it is evident in the changes that have taken place at the University of Pittsburgh since your time as a student here.

GS--- That's certainly true.

TRR--- What are your feelings about the changes that have happened at Pitt?

GS--- I like what has happened at Pitt. It's gone through a lot of different changes, under Litchfield, who was there twenty-some years ago. It has become a Graduate school; the administration at Pitt was as large as the entire collective administration in California at one time. It began pushing its way out of its undergraduate mission. I think it has a different mission now. It honors both the graduate and the undergraduate curriculum. I think it is still a great place to get your BA or BS, or any specialized degree, PhD, and so on. My stepson is a senior at Pitt now, studying Biology. He loves Pittsburgh. I still have a lot of friends there.

When I went there, and I don't want to make a big federal case of this, it was really antediluvian. There was no place to study writing; there was no place to congregate. If you were found walking in Squirrel Hill or East Liberty at one in the morning, you would be arrested for vagrancy. I was arrested several times for vagrancy, just because I was out walking with some friends at two o'clock in the morning! Is there a law that you can't be out walking at two in the morning if you're nineteen years old and given to that sort of thing? In fact, one time in particular, I was out walking with my friend, [the poet] Jack Gilbert, and I was giving some ridiculous lecture on the architecture of some houses on Shady Avenue and suddenly a black van full of police officers pulls up. Someone had called saying there were robbers outside. So, the cops nabbed us, took us to station 11 on Northumberland Street in Squirrel Hill, and we were kept overnight. It was hysterical. Of course, our parents were angry with us for walking around at two in the morning; we should have been safely in bed.

Now, things have changed. There are a lot of poets and writers in Pittsburgh; there are a lot of activities. I think it is for the better. Even though the city has shrunk in size, it is enlarged in spirit. When I was a boy, it was the tenth largest city in the nation. Now, it is down below thirtieth, probably. I still have a lot of relatives in Pittsburgh. I have no idea where they are. I had 73 first cousins, excluding those who stayed in Europe, and I was the youngest. I'm in my eighties now, so some of them would be in their hundreds. They're all gone, I guess, unless they're hiding in caves...

Gerald Stern

ROSES

There was a rose called Guy de Maupassant,
a carmine pink that smelled like a Granny Smith
and there was another from the seventeenth century
that wept too much and wilted when you looked;
and one that caused tuberculosis, doctors
dug them up, they wore white masks and posted
warnings in the windows. One wet day
it started to hail and pellets the size of snowballs
fell on the roses. It's hard for me to look at
a Duchess of Windsor, it was worn by Franco
and Mussolini, it stabbed Jews; yesterday I bought
six roses from a Haitian on Lower Broadway;
he wrapped them in blue tissue paper, it was
starting to snow and both of us had on the wrong shoes,
though it was wind, he said, not snow that ruined
roses and all you had to do was hold them
against your chest. He had a ring on his pinky
the size of a grape and half his teeth were gone.
So I loved him and spoke to him in false Creole
for which he hugged me and enveloped me
in his camel hair coat with most of the buttons missing,
and we were brothers for life, we swore it in French.

INTERVIEW

Anne Sanow

"As a writer," author Anne Sanow says when introducing Junot Diaz at the 2009 Drue Heinz Lecture Series, "reading a book is not the same as it is for readers who do not write. Your brain is performing two functions simultaneously. On one level, the wave is steady, horizontal and calm, taking in the story the same way any reader would. On another level, the level that has to do with the writer side of you, the wave is going crazy: constantly peaking and dropping as you are thinking to yourself: 'Oh my God, how can I do that in my own work?'"

Anne Sanow is the author of the story collection *Triple Time*, which won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize and the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award for Fiction. A five-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and the winner of the 2009 Nelson Algren Award for the short story from the Chicago Tribune, she has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the MacDowell Colony, and the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a freelance writer and editor and has taught most recently in the low-residency MFA program at Carlow University, in Pittsburgh.

Two weeks after receiving the Drue Heinz Literature Prize for *Triple Time*, a book about life in Saudi Arabia across several decades, Anne Sanow sat down with the staff of *Three Rivers Review*. Sanow tells us about place, culture, and the role of the author in exploring a foreign setting, as well as the writer's struggle in the world of publishing.

THREE RIVERS REVIEW--- So first of all, and I'm sure you get this question in a lot in interviews, tell us why you chose Saudi Arabia?

ANNE SANOW--- I went over to Saudi Arabia right out of high school, from sunny California to Riyadh. All my American friends go to college and I go and live on a compound outside of the city where you're with other westerners and—you can't drive as a woman—and you must cover up when you go outside, you can't drink—all of these things. My response at that age was, "I'm going to get out and explore". And I did and I got in all kinds of trouble—because that's easy. I learned a lot in two years about what goes on underneath—you know, what people see and what is obvious. I guess I became politicized in a way because I came from California where our biggest concern in the eighties was Ronald Reagan, then I'm in the Middle East at the time when Lebanon was a hotbed of war. I was from this country and culture where what the rest of the world sees is something that seems so

black and white, but when I was there I realized that this was not the case at all.

TRR--- So did you go with the intention of writing a book? Was it sort of a research trip for you?

AS--- I had always been a writer. I didn't know exactly how serious I was going to be, but I just started writing down notes and anecdotes, things like that, not knowing what I was going to do with them. I just knew that I knew more and could show more than most people in the US were ever going to see. I came back to the states at the age of nineteen. I had to start college at that point and I thought, "I'm going to write a novel about Saudi Arabia, I'm going to do this in six months and I'll be like a young publishing sensation". It was dreadful, trust me.

TRR--- [Laughing] How was it dreadful?

AS--- I went to creative writing classes as an undergraduate and I think that looking back on it I would say I wrote well for an undergraduate. It was like I had a character stand-in who was trying too hard to be good and observant and careful—and that doesn't make for interesting fiction. I think we've all done that, where you have this 'you' stand-in. The type of character that if you actually knew, you would want to slap, because they're observing too much but they're not getting involved and don't seem to have faults. I ended up putting this material away for a lot of years. We have a problem almost with material that seems obvious to us, we who have this expatriate or immigrant material. It feels like a burden because you feel like you're taking on more than somebody writing stories about people growing up in the suburbs somewhere. I do feel like there's a responsibility to deal with another culture.

TRR--- How did you develop it then into this wonderful collection of stories?

AS--- The best thing I did was put this draft away for years. When I started writing again, when I was a little older, I had been writing other stories where I learned how to develop characters and scenes and situations, so I could detach and that was what

I needed to do. I needed to get away from the character who was me. The first story that I finished was the closest to anything autobiographical and that was "The Date Farm", where a young woman goes over there and she's really frustrated and worried. I finally got that story out and realized, "OK, that's that story, gotta do it." And then I thought, "What am I going to do, write that story again? No." By that point I had done a little research too and learned that I was a research geek. I love it. And I decided to really try to go underneath things and somehow these other characters started coming out and I was very drawn by the explorer aspect-- almost like the old romance of the desert--and from that I got the characters for the big gay desert love story sequence in there. When that came to me I thought, "This is a little outrageous, can I do it?" And then I just decided to try to do it. Then from there the linking aspect started to happen because Thurayya, the twelve year old Bedouin girl in one story, was so mouthy and interesting that I decided to write about her again. These stories with Thurayya and Kimberly, the other expatriate character, and Gus, were so strong for me that I decided to write about them in a few contexts.

TRR--- Is the why you chose the collection of stories as opposed to the novel?

AS--- At that point, having a couple of stories and having them linked just started to really make sense. The book was very much in my head the whole time. I never really wanted to do a novel. At the time, I was a writer getting my first stories published and I liked trying different things, first person, third person, there's a story "Safety" in there that's in sections with titles and then I had a story narrated by a young man—I wanted to try these things, you want to try things as a writer. I wanted to satisfy myself that way and I hoped that by doing that, I was somehow writing a history, because it's about people. That was my idea.

TRR--- Not only is the setting of this book in a foreign culture, but it also happens to be a very controversial foreign culture for the Western reader. There are all these preconceived notions about what to expect from a Middle Eastern setting. How do you go about changing that?

AS--- Well I kept a lot of what would be the obvious controversy offstage. You don't go to a beheading in any of these stories, but somebody does talk about it. We do see some violence: the scene where the young woman glimpsed across a field and her male relatives shove her back inside the house and start hitting her. Yes you could say the women are oppressed in some way, but it's like when you scream too loud or use too many caps, people start ignoring you. I just decided that the more the characters were nuanced, the more you saw them going about real things they would do and reacting on a very emotional level, the reader would see that on some level, they're like people anywhere.

Life is normal; you don't think about having a split identity of an immigrant or an expatriate, in this case, your identity contains those things together and what you experience everyday somehow is normalized. By normalized I didn't want to smooth off the edges of controversy, but I wanted people to come at them maybe from underneath instead of having it thrown in their face. For me, nuance is truth, that is truth, and I think a writer no matter what you're writing about, owes the truth to the reader. All of your characters have to be true to themselves and have to be in situations that seem like you're creating some kind of life. I think particularly when you are dealing with a controversial culture, the reader has to learn in a way that is subtle, and that will hopefully accumulate into something meaningful. I didn't want to pander to any set of expectations in that way.

TRR--- On a sentence or paragraph level, how is this "normalization" accomplished?

AS--- First, what I try to avoid is what I call this exotic cataloguing effect, where the opening paragraph is, "The smell of cumin wafted through the air and swords clashed and camels trotted by." It's like a big list of every spice, every sound, all of those things at once. I feel that that's bombarding the reader with description and it's the cheap and easy way of bringing the reader to something "foreign". You do have to provide that kind of thing for the reader, but if you're following people through a situation, isn't it more regular, more correct, to describe these things as they're experiencing them and when it is relevant, as opposed to uploading?

I realize that the way I'm doing it isn't necessarily easy,

in my graduate level workshops we would talk about this. What I came up with for the final versions are more filled out than my initial drafts, which were often half the length that you see them in, and I did have to go back and flesh things out because I was working for more emotional impulses with the characters.

I like to work as a reader, I don't like things handed to me. If I wanted to read something with sign posts then I would find an atlas or a travel log, but this isn't what I want from fiction. I want to think about things. I want situations to resonate. And I do want to learn something. It's just like when you are in a class, you don't sit down and write everything an instructor says, but unless you go back and think about what an instructor says it doesn't permeate. I suppose that is a bit of a pedantic streak in me, I'm that teacher that's never giving an easy A, so I'm that writer that's never going to give you an easy A.

TRR--- You started more or less working on this project as an undergrad, how was that perceived in the undergraduate realm?

AS--- I did start writing about Saudi Arabia, but none of that is remotely related to this. At least in my program at the time the reactions that I would get would tend to be from people who had some expatriate experience themselves and they would say, "Oh, that sounds like something I remember," or "That sounds right." I could write fluidly, I could write decently, it just wasn't really a story yet. I was writing my impressions through a fictionalized character. Some people were just bored by the subject matter because they thought it was too serious, but that didn't bother me. I didn't want to write cute stories with epiphanies, but I also knew that it wasn't ready to work with.

TRR--- Some of the stories from the collection were published in several literary magazines, how did you go about sending these stories out?

AS--- The initial place that I was published in was a now defunct journal called *Other Voices* and they now are a book imprint of DZANC which is a really cool alternative publisher based in Chicago. I waited a while before sending out a story, which I think is good advice for anyone. Honestly, most undergraduates are not ready to send things out to say, *The Kenyon Review*. You

will look back and say, "Oh my God, I'm so glad I didn't do that."

I think it's wonderful to have undergraduate journals, because that is where you can have people that are at a similar stage and have things in there together, and I think that's really great. There should be more journals connected with undergraduate writing programs. I had several things that were little stories, they were OK. I had many with expatriates walking around saying pithy, wise-ass things to each other and they weren't that great. I didn't send them out, thankfully. "The Date Farm" was the first story I finished where I had an instinct and I said to myself: "This is ready to go".

TRR--- What would you say is the best way of choosing where to submit?

AS--- I'm very methodical. I think that it's obviously very difficult to read every literary magazine, but you should look at them and see what people are doing. These days because things are online there are at least always samples for you to read. When I started sending things out, you had to go to the library or the bookstore, you know, get the physical thing itself. You develop a sense of-- yes let's be honest there's a tier system. There are more established journals; well known writers are published in them; they pay, and some of them have different aesthetics: *The Kenyon Review* from say, *The Mississippi Review*. Some things are more experimental and would never publish a long narrative piece like mine, so I would never send to them.

You get smart about what's out there and I think once you pay a bit of attention, you sort of turn into your own secretary. I have a word file that is several years old and so I just made a chart of where something goes, when I send it, how long it takes to get a response and if I have anything noted from the editor on there. You should send to a group of magazines that are about the same level that you've decided on, and you see what kind of response you get back and resend as you get rejections and so on. You start with your first tier choice and work down a bit assuming that initially you're not going to get your first story published in *The Kenyon Review*. I didn't. But I was fortunate in that I didn't have to wait too long to get that first story published. But I really polished things up before I sent them out and fortunately, everything in *Triple Time*, with the exception of one

story, was previously published. The story, "Grand Tour", ended up winning the Nelson Algrin Award this year, so that was great. It was the only unpublished story and the one I happened to send there.

TRR--- Are you currently sending new stories out?

AS--- These days I'm working on a novel, so I haven't had much to send out, so I'm a little rusty, but there's perseverance and just basic administrative smarts about doing this. There's not a mystic set of druids trying to not put your work in print. Think about the amount of work that gets submitted to this magazine. I've read for journals before and they'll give you a huge box of submissions and that's just for one reader and you might pass on one or two recommendations out of a hundred. That's really how much writing out there will electrify someone out of the slush pile. That doesn't mean a lot of it is not good. It just means that a lot of it is competent, but it's not turning you on in some way.

I think knowing a bit about the process is great for you guys because it demystifies it somewhat and there's nothing really mysterious about it. Any reader or editor wants to find a great story, so always keep that in mind, that's the best thing. I remember being a grad student and over the Christmas holidays I had a huge box full of submissions and there was rain and sleet and I'm reading all of this stuff and most of it's not great and then I found something great. It just made my entire vacation. I was so excited that I had discovered this person that had sent this into the slush pile. All editors want that.

I do think people should wait until you feel really confident in your work and that it's very polished and you have people other than your closest friends or advisors look at it. There's no hurry to do it. You'll be happier to not be embarrassed by something you have in print later, than to rush it. Some people think, "Oh God I have to get published now." You really don't. There are a lot of journals, the editors revolve, there are different styles, and I think there's a lot out there. One of the best things about doing all of that research in terms of what journal to send to is that you get to read a lot of great work. Aren't we supposed to want to do that if we're writers? Because every now and then I hear someone whining about it and I think that if you don't want to, I don't think you should be sending your work around if you're

not interested in what other people are writing. Sometimes that amazes me.

TRR--- What did it feel like to finish the book you had been working on for so long?

AS--- There were a couple steps to that. One is that I finished and one day I thought, "Oh, I just finished my last story and I finished editing and now it's a book." It feels good, but it takes so long that it's a little bit of an anticlimax. You sort of walk outside and you're like, "Ok I just finished my book."

TRR--- How did you go about getting it published?

AS--- For me, my road to getting published was a little bit long. I wasn't able to get this published commercially. There were all these reasons; "Almost this," "Almost that," "We want you to have a novel at the same time."--which is common for short story writers. Fortunately, when I decided to enter it into book contests, getting that acceptance was wonderful; you get blown away by that. I had watched for years: Who was winning the Drue Heinz? What kind of stories were they? And to get to be in that line up was obviously a thrill.

Then you start the publication process and it's like you have a bunch of mini celebrations along the way. You find out your book's going to be published, and that's great. Then you go through an editing process and it's very exciting when you get your page proofs because then it's set into types that are different from the type you've been doing. I had a fortunate experience with the press and they were very personally attentive. I felt like I got to know the people working on the book and it was a thrill when they came up with that beautiful cover. I was so delighted.

Afterwards, when it actually comes out, you have to put some things into perspective, because you'll hear that with the Drue Heinz you get a wonderful launch, but other than that you're a little bit on your own. You are a short story writer. Most short story writers are not going to be on the *New York Times* Best-Seller List, or get reviewed by *The New York Times*. You just have to realize that it's the start of something longer.

TRR--- A lot of people think that there is a big difference before you get published and after, what would you say to that?

AS--- Well first of all, the validation is helpful for you as a writer, because you do feel that you've worked something to completion and reached somewhat of an audience and it is satisfying. All writers need that fortitude. We need to be buttressed. We need to know that we're not totally crazy for getting at our desks everyday and making up people who talk to us in our heads, because that's what we do. It gives you some hope that what you're working on next might also come to fruition. But honestly, when you sit down and write everyday you aren't thinking: "I'm a published writer." You're thinking: "God, how do I make this work?" It doesn't solve your problems as a writer, but you do feel like you're a professional of some kind.

Also, there are practical things like, before you have a book out, you are not going to be asked to introduce well known writers, or to teach in an MFA program. There are just certain professional barriers pre-book and post book, so there's that and that's practical. You're still the same person and because we generally take so long with what we do, it's part of a continuum. For me at least, I feel that maybe I had some underlying confidence that there would be this career that I would try to develop. There are points where you're not sure it's going to happen, but if you have some sort of determination about it, that enables you to put it on a longer career thread.

In terms of what you're thinking of and what you want to write about next, that doesn't really change. I was working on a novel at the same time, and that hasn't changed because I have a book out. I still have to write that one and tackle it and edit it and throw away terrible prose. I think it's much more likely that somebody will be happy to look at the finished novel and possibly publish it, but there are still no guarantees with that.

Being a literary writer has a lot of risks, you need some other paying work, and hopefully you'll enjoy that paying work, and realize that being a writer is who you are but, for me, I like to go for a healthy balance. It's definitely who I am, and a central way that I define myself, but I'm a writer who likes to experience the world as well. I don't just shut myself away. That for me helps keep that balance going, that's the healthy thing to do. I try, anyway.

TRR--- At your reading and even in your writing there seemed to be a sing-song sound to your sentences. Is that what you strive towards, or are you more plot or character driven?

AS--- I wish I could be more plot driven, I think I envy writers who are. I mean, don't we have this thing in literary fiction where plot is evil? It's not true. But we tend to not use it as the first tool in our writers kit. I think I'm getting better at it, but I'm very, very language oriented. I have no skills whatsoever as a poet, but when I read the work of other people or students, one rhythm, one phrase, will catch my ear and I will say, "Wow." I'm sure you guys have had that experience. With a piece of work where all of a sudden, you wake up a little bit and you start paying attention. And to find that different rhythm, to find the voice, is something that is hugely important. I cannot write a full draft of anything until I've settled into that and that takes a lot of experimentation. That's why I throw away so much. I carry a notebook around that I write down anything in. That's the random notebook that has phrases, descriptions; anything and often it has rhythms.

The first story in the book, "Pioneer", the story with the young boy, I actually wrote that story from the three last lines, which, originally were just a rhythm. One day, I had my notebook out and I heard a rhythm in my head and it was just a very simple beat of dadada-da, dadada-da, dadada-da and that somehow stuck in my head. I wrote it down as a Morse code series of dashes in my notebook. A couple days later, I put a few words in there, not deliberately, and I realized it was: "There is her-blank, there is her-blank, there is her-blank." Again, I don't know where that's coming from. Then the three lines finally came to me. I knew it was obviously repetition, so those three lines, the last three ended up being: "There is her breath, there is her breath, there is her heart." That's what I had; and then, I somehow had been trying to write a story that was centered around a child. That was it. It was very vague. I knew that was an ending. I'm sensitive to how rhythm starts at the beginning of a paragraph, to the end. When I teach I like to diagram things, like having them in big arcs and swirls and things, because in my head, I have that in my story. You asked about plot, I think about arcs rather than plot and I think that an arc has to have momentum. And within that there are various notes; I'm not a musician at all, but I feel like I when I

speaking to composers at artist residencies, we get each other. They tell me how they compose a piece and it makes a lot of sense. I have to hear it.

To type things is also part of the process for me and to retype them. The shapes of letters and the shapes of sentences, where a comma is; I love the Em dash, I love the semicolon, and I want them to live in literature. Those things sound different to me, a semicolon sounds different than a dash, sounds different than a comma—sometimes prose needs to be technically ungrammatical. You have comma splices, sometimes phrases can fall off each other, but that's what the rhythm should be. I reject a lot when I just know it's not right, when it doesn't sound right.

TRR--- Out of curiosity, what was one of the worst moments for you while writing this book?

AS--- Actually it was when I first finished it, and—I'll be honest because it's the stuff we don't like to talk about most—I finished the book, I was in my second year of the fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center, and I was so excited. I thought, "Ok, I have this whole collection finished, I'm going to do all these query letters to agents," and when I did, I got a huge slew of responses, saying: "Yeah, send the manuscript." I thought: "Great, I'm on my way," and then it just did not work out like that. So I spent the next six months getting rejections and that was very difficult. I know other writers who have been through that as well and having your first book—it's like your baby. It's like someone telling you your kid is really ugly and stupid too. That is not easy. I had not experienced that, because all of my stories had been published, not all of them easily, but they all were. So here I was thinking, "Wow, all of my stories have been published." They'd all either won awards or had been nominated for Pushcarts and I thought: "All right, this is probably going to work." And that was frustrating because I thought I spent so long on something that I cared so deeply about and that it wasn't going to get this other life.

TRR--- How did you react to that?

AS--- I know writers who never published their first books and they still kept going, or writers who had to wait. Often what happens is that writers have a short story collection, finish it,

can't get it published, spend many years writing the novel, get the novel published and then a publisher releases the short story collection. So that was vaguely out there as a possibility, I just didn't want it to be that way. That was tough because I had to learn at that point—well, first of all, you sort of learn in a brutal way how important writing is to you. While none of that feeling is fun, I think if you learn to stick it, and you go back to work, that you've definitely come through some hurdle. So you're a bit tougher, and I think for me it actually was.

In terms of how I was working, it was hard to feel confident about what I was working on for a while, but then eventually I got really stubborn and you work with that underdog feeling. You start to feel like Rocky and you're like: "I'm gonna do this," and I got very determined to keep going, because I had to tell myself, "Look, I know having this first book out is not the end all, be all of my worth as a writer." It sounds easy to say now, but I had to tell myself that then, and knowing that I got back to work after that on a new project that I didn't know would go anywhere, was an important point in moving forward, not just in my career, but as a writer. Knowing I could do it, knowing that it hadn't been all easy, but I was going to do this anyway.

When you find out you're utterly compelled to be a writer is when you really find something out about your identity. That's the honest truth about my hardest moment. It's not the writing itself, that can sometimes have its frustrations. I generally don't believe in writer's block. Sometimes I sit down and I'm not sure what I'm doing or I don't like what I'm doing, but I can always do something. I may throw it away later, but that's fine. And it's not fun when you spend several weeks or even months at a time writing at your desk and you have to throw it away, but it happens and if you're willing to put yourself through that and keep going, you will get better and you will come up with something. So the writing itself is a little easier in that sense, I allow myself to be frustrated with it.

Write a lot of crap; it's fine. It really is.

More with Anne Sanow is available in the digital edition of *Three Rivers Review* Volume XV. For the complete version of this interview, please visit threeriversreview.blogspot.com and read what Sanow had to say about her new work.

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he grew up rooting for the Eagles. He honestly believes that Uncle Sam's cheese steaks are better than "Real Philly Cheese Steaks" (as in, cheese steaks from Philadelphia with cheese whiz and everything). His favorite thing to do on a Friday is pick up pierogies from the Oakland Farmers Market on Sennot Square. His favorite thing to do after voting is to get Dave and Andy's Ice Cream. He's currently studying abroad in Spain, and misses Pittsburgh food more than he had previously realized.

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OLYMPIA VERNON is the author of three novels. *Eden*, her debut novel, won the 2004 American Academy of Arts and Letters Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award and was described, in an introduction by Reynolds Price, as having "the startling freshness of a sudden razor cut on the throat." Vernon won the 2005 Governor's Award in the Professional Artist category for the state of Louisiana. She currently lives in Louisiana and Texas with her husband and two stepchildren.

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Submissions are opened & reviewed between September 15 and January 15. Responses to submitted work can be expected by March 15, following the reading period.

Submit up to 15 pages fiction or 5 poems to:

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Annual *Three Rivers Review* Poetry & Fiction Prize contest details are made available during the Fall semester.

Thank you.

