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PoemMemoirStory Staff

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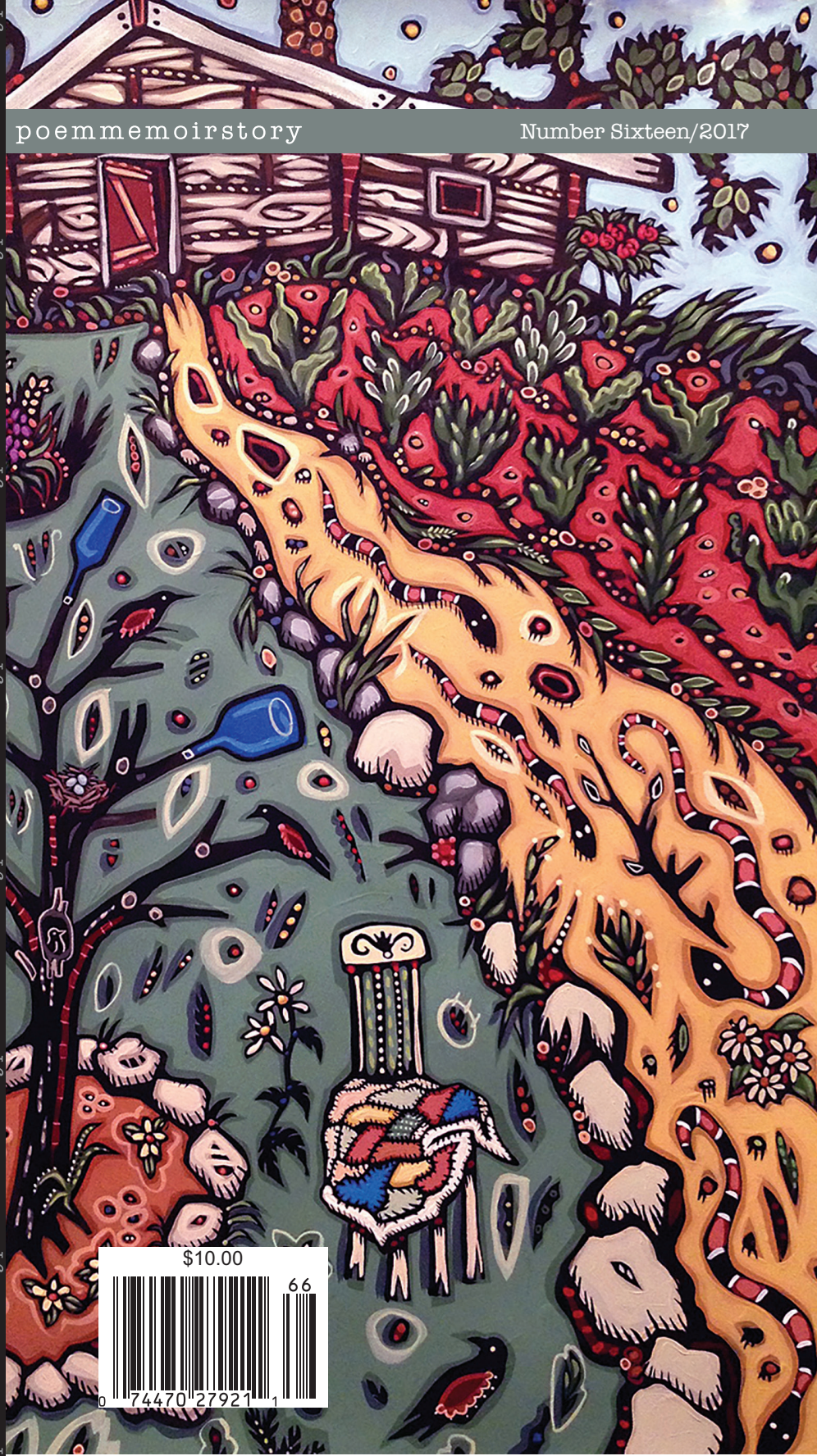
Number Sixteen/2017



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POEMMEMOIRSTORY

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PMS poemmemoirstory appears once a year. We accept unpublished, original submissions of poetry, memoir, and short fiction during our January 1 through March 31 reading period. We accept simultaneous submissions; however, we ask that you please contact us immediately if your piece is published elsewhere so we may free up space for other authors. While *PMS* is a journal of exclusively women's writing, the subject field is wide open. We strongly encourage you to familiarize yourself with *PMS* before submitting. You can find links on our Web site to some examples of what we publish in the pages of *PMS 8*, *PMS 9,* and *PMS 14.* We ask that you limit your submission to either five poems or 15 pages of prose (4,300 words or less). We look forward to reading your work. Please send all submissions to https://poemmemoirstory.submittable.com/submit. There is a $3 fee, which covers costs associated with our online submissions system.

For any other correspondence, contact us at poemmemoirstory@gmail.com.

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FROM THE editor-in-chief

Dear Reader,

This is my last issue as editor of *PoemMemoirStory* for my amazing colleague, Lauren Slaughter, is taking over as editor. You are in for a treat with Lauren at the helm 'steering the craft' in the words of Ursula Le Guin. An extraordinary poet, Lauren is the author of *a lesson in smallness* (National Poetry Review Press, 2016). She's going to bring much new life and energy to *PMS.* On that note, we were having a discussion about the name of the journal, *PMS*, and we both agreed it was time for a change. The name *PMS* has had its day even as it has evolved into *PoemMemoirStory*.

So this is the last issue with the name *PoemMemoirStory/PMS*, and next year, under Lauren's editorship, the journal's new name will simply be *Nelle*. Why Nelle? The first editor and creator of PMS, Linda Frost, first established this journal in Alabama in 2000 through her own passionate vision for women writing poems, memoirs, and stories. The interim editor, Tina Mozelle Brazil, a radiant poet, grew up in Alabama and has crafted many poems from the red dirt of this State. I moved to Alabama in 2009 because of the biography I'd written about Harper Lee for teens. Alabama's Nelle Harper Lee passed away in 2016, and so naming this journal in her honor, a writer who lived life on her own terms and whose characters have become part of the bedrock of literature, just feels right. Besides, Nelle loved stories better than anybody and found home in both New York City and Monroeville, Alabama.

Harper Lee said this about writing: "Writing is a process of self-discipline you must learn before you can call yourself a writer. There are people who write, but I think they're quite different from people who must write."

Our contributors in these pages are women who *must* write. Halley Cotton, the poetry editor, notes how themes of displacement and otherness emerged in these poems of *PoemMemoirStory* 16. From the seasons passing in Lisa Higgs poem "Dimensions" to the grandfathers and gorillas in Danielle de Ojeda's poetry to the wild frenetic color of birds and bones in verses of Liz Abrams-Morley, we are aware of the passage

of time and loss as well as the struggle to fit into new surroundings. Abriana Jette asks, "How Jewish do I have to be?" in her poem "How Jewish" to those who feel her otherness and offer pity. Ilene Millman's "Basket Lady" gives us a long ago snapshot of Ida Jefferson Wilson's ability to "splice coils of bundled sweet grass" on Highway 17 in Charleston in the 1930's.

In our memoir section, Bernadette Murphy takes us with her on a climb up Mount Whitney in her essay "Whitney." Murphy, the author of the memoir, *Harley and Me: Embracing Risk on the Road to a More Authentic Life*, opens her essay about Mount Whitney with a quote by T.S. Eliot: *Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.* All our memoirists go as far as they can go and beyond. The late Dana Hubler (with an introduction by Judith Dancoff) shares her journey to Cape Cod, motherhood, and writing, and Dana's own daughter wrote her mother's bio in this journal, which I am dedicating to Dana, whose stories ended way too soon. Jenine Holmes' serenade to Nina Simone jumps off of the page in the same way Simone's music has remained a continuous powerhouse serenade over the years.

Our managing editor, Cheyenne Taylor, writes about the fiction in this issue. She writes: "I think the thing these stories have in common is a kind of restlessness and finding something that shakes the main characters out of their status quo. A woman knits her way into a new life (Claire Guyton's "Casting Off"); a girl who participates in a kind of anarchy/chaos to shake her depression (K.C. Mead's "Key-Holders); a woman who tries everything to find a real job (Suzanne Kamata's "A Real Job"), and a girl whose job in a Danish hair salon surprises her at a transitional time in her life (Jane St. Clair's "Touched by Copenhagen.") So transitions and events that change things, and the desire for more, or better, or different."

I was lucky enough to get to talk to Ann Pancake, author of the short story collection, *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley,* and the novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been*. Our conversation began with place as we both taught English in Japan and China close to thirty years ago, and then moved on to plot, discipline, and the preciousness of time, but the heart of our conversation became about addiction in our families. This was not planned. I didn't know Ann had a brother who is an addict, and she didn't know I have a son who is also an addict. It's torn our families apart in different ways, and I am grateful for her honesty and willing-

ness to talk about a subject that stalks me everyday when I think of my son sleeping under a tree in Los Angeles. I would like to especially thank Laura Simpson who transcribed the conversation, no easy feat, and for Lauren Slaughter, Emily Krawczyk, and Cheyenne Taylor for helping me find the cuts to shape the piece. And thank you, Anamaria Santiago, for coming aboard as managing editor.

And so thank you again, dear Reader, for your support over the years, and if you are just discovering this journal, welcome! We recently gave three big bags of children's books to the directors of the "Aid to Inmate Mothers Story Book Project" at the Tutwiler Women's Prison in Wetumpka, Alabama. Over the years at each PMS publication party at Desert Island Supply Company in Birmingham (DISCO), we collect children's books for incarcerated mothers to record to their children as bedtime stories. It's part of our vision to encourage stories and reading for the future young readers and writers of Alabama and beyond, finding a world of hope in stories even behind prison walls.

Finally, I have loved being the editor of this journal and working with so many students and contributors over the years. I never expected to leave my life in Los Angeles for almost eight years now to find a home in Alabama. Even though I go back to Los Angeles regularly to be with my husband who is tenured there, part of me has found home here too. I am very grateful to Alison Chapman, the Chair of the English Department for her support of *PoemMemoirStory* along with the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Robert Palazzo, and my colleagues: Lauren Slaughter, Melba Major, the former and most wondrous managing editor, Jim Braziel, Adam Vines, Nichole Lariscy, and so many others continually show up to support the Creative Writing Department at UAB. I am so appreciative of Liz and Chip Hughey who run the Desert Island Supply Company (DISCO) where we have our publication parties each year with Birmingham Poetry Review in the spring. I would also like to thank former students who worked so hard on *PoemMemoirStory:* Callie Mauldin, Bethany Mitchell, Sarah Jennings, and Christia Givens to name a few.

I would like to end by singing the praises of Bethanne Hill, a beautiful Birmingham artist, whose painting "Traveler's Rest" is our cover this year. I've been a huge fan of Bethanne's since I moved here and she describes her painting this way: "Years ago when I traveled as an admissions counselor for the Atlanta College of Art, I was always taken with

the place name 'Travelers Rest' in South Carolina. When I did this painting that included elements of home and rest and comfort (and some discomfort, as there always is) the name came to mind."

So between the West Coast and the Deep South, I am grateful for the "Travelers Rest" of both places. I'm sending a big shout-out to all our contributors and editors, and our designer, Russell Helms, who works the magic of putting it all together. I'm excited to see it grow in future years under Lauren Slaughter, who is going to be a fabulous editor. But most of all, to you, dear Reader, thank you. You mean the world to us, and it's wonderful to be able to put this journal in your hands.

Yours truly,
Kerry Madden
Editor-in-Chief

POEM MEMOIR STORY

Sarah Brown Weitzman

Vigil

The moon's half-eaten tonight
like the yellow apple
you wanted but could not finish
in your last sickness.
I have come again
to clean off the moss
from the rocks that protect you
from wolves, my son,
though I know your spirit
is not here but climbs
among the silver web of stars
where you have the Dancing Bear
for a playmate and drink
from the Great Gourd
and perhaps forget us.

While your father sleeps
I come to do my work.
It is better
he does not know of this.
He is resigned
that moss thrives
while the corn withers
and that parents survive
their children.
I must be back
before he wakes.
The moon will make false
day of my return
but I am afraid
the way will be dark, dark.

Lisa Higgs

Dimensions

> *We are snow, rain, cold, darkness, we are each product and influence*
> *Of the globe.*
>
> —Walt Whitman

We are thunderstorm,
January night cracking

children from beds, the clocks
blinking no time,
wrong time

we are in time a sister, a brother,
on a hill in shadow
of winter tree, waiting

the train to its tracks, snow light
on ground, dog's breath

permeable

a fox caught crossing
upwind
its red plume bounding
through summer grass

in time
of corn, the heat
high at daybreak, air stuck
in the throat.

We are the heat,
wrenching heat. Corn shadow
a shade soon lost

in flatness.

We are in time

in flatness,
field and field and field

only ending

in crossing, windbreak,
old house small
in the yard of outbuildings,
barns, silos, lean-tos

the bulge of green
tractors, plastic tubs
of pesticide, fertilizer lifted

on wheels, the sweet
chemical smells. Hazy spray,

the mist

of human obsession
for multiplying all yields.

In time, lost
in corn, brother, sister

flitting the rows

following high sun, fields
undulating to tree edges,

a pond, a lake, fences,
cows cudding pasture.
Forgetting the time

until Honey and her rider
call out over the yellowing expanse:

follow me,
follow me,

time to head home,

dog lopping the breaks
of furrow, unclaimed
field of tall grasses gone to seed.

Danielle de Ojeda

REM

This gorilla in a human
suit stomps through Gilroy
Gardens, matted hair
jutting from its griping
garb; puffs on a
cigarette; debates about
Obamacare with a primal
guffaw.

I surf through
milk and pearls; thick,
creamy, compressed,
wading waist deep in
vitamin D; my whole body—
a hand in a bag
of beads, riding the swell;
listen to broken strings
of necklaces fall and hit
the hardwood floor.

Bird encyclopedias cover
the living room; I hug my grandfather
one last time more; the smell
of dusty garages; all my words
are in my throat; he asks
how my gorilla is doing
as I weep.

Danielle de Ojeda

Freud's Kitchen

I let drop
my ego.
It skated
across the
kitchen floor;
Painted the
Brownstone green.
Porcelain
tiles cooled its
undertow,
boiling back-
wards. I scraped
the burnt-on
edges off
to salvage
dignity.
I kneaded
bits into
chicken bone
and fed it
to the cat.

Danielle de Ojeda

The Man on the Moon

I suffocated
on the moon last week,
staring wide eyed at
the blazing blue Earth,
teasing me to turn
like shades of brilliance.
My eyes, reflective
burning suns, never
looked upon the man
whose face, up close, shined
as dark as asphalt.

I suffocated on
the moon, my cracked helmet
tearing the universe
into two askew wholes.
The cracking sound tap tap
tapping on my brain like
some barbaric foreign
bitch begging for refuge.

I choked on a
Thursday, the day
after hump day.
I could almost
see my bouncing
brother bursting

into me, his
smile screaming
ALMOST FRIDAY
ASTRO-NOT, TO
INFINITY
and then he stopped.

I choked on
the moon
shoved and shoved
it halfway
down my throat
before I
realized
it's too big
to swallow
I pressed on
nonetheless
all because
inertia
lives only
in places
gravity
is absent.

Liz Abrams-Morley

October's End: Eve Returns to the Garden

Feed me red and purple before
my bones dry white.
Feed me the last chirps of birds
before frost, before journeys south.
Feed me the rustle of leaves,

scurry of squirrel feet, acorns
gathered and secreted in oak leaf piles
under trees become skeletal, before snow
blankets the cold earth, before seeds
lie dormant underneath, before growth

seems a forgotten dream. Long ago,
mint tinted languid afternoons.
Now, before dusk, russet daisies rustle,
dun-gold flowers dot the path beside
a muddied pond where

brown-orange carp have grown large
and slow, prepare to lower themselves
further into watery depths and sleep
under a scrim of ice. Brittle lily stems rise
without flower. Where petals have dropped

what remains resembles celestial microphones.
How long since these picked up Your signal?
Feed me a signal, any small sign:
A vee of geese India inked across flannel sky,
the scent of green rot's return to earth,

goldenrod's tickle. See how a ladder leans
against gray shingles of the weathered shed's
wall. If I were to climb it,
would I find a woman's dream, find myself naked,
gleaming, my garden fertile?

Everything ends, You lectured as we left,
but you never mentioned the consolation
of endings: how brightly
maple leaves flame before they dry,
before their fall.

J. I. Kleinberg

Blessing

To open a blessing,
begin with *less*.

Notice the absence.
Observe the grief.

Embrace fog hovering
over a pasture,

your fingers dampened
with something lost—

perhaps the taste of salt,
the heat of chili peppers

washed away.
Watch for the water's mouth

as it draws closed around
the rising heron's foot.

To close a blessing,
sing.

J. I. Kleinberg

Lesson

Sweaters like that—the kind that button up the front,
the neck meeting in a V on your chest like a lost set of ribs—
my uncle had two of those, one pale blue, one beige.

Don't put your sweaters on a hanger, my mother would tell me,
dabbing water on the poked-out shoulders of my sweater,
her fingertips pushing the wool against *my* poked-out shoulders.

Fold your sweaters and put them in the drawer, she would say,
pulling open her drawer where cashmere and cotton
whispered in soft colors, a piece of tissue paper folded into each one,
the necks round and perfect, ready for pearls.

My uncle's sweaters were cashmere, too, thin to near transparency,
like his wrists. He never buttoned them, never left the house
without one hanging capelike on the sharp bones of his shoulders,
the hanger's imprint a tiny set of wings.

J. I. Kleinberg

ONE DAY

1
before sunrise I wake to the sawing honk of geese over the house

I repeat the donkey-bray
of their call—watch for magenta
flooding into dawn-lit
crabapple blossoms—admire
the punctuated chatter of chickadees
ellipses of lemony tulips

2
from the middle of your poem I borrow the taste of the ocean

I dip a spoon of brine
raise it to my mouth
to tongue its brackish broth
repeat each mollusk madrigal
rinse my body's restless shore
with salted words

3
I cannot name the afternoon's blue mystery or speak her language

I return to stone because it is what I am
to dust because it made the stone
to water that urged the dust
light that guided water
and darkness because it understands
the worn petroglyphs of memory

4
each evening I fill an old bucket with shadows and carry it home

shoulder bent forward with its weight
I pour darkness into corners
under chairs and table
in cupboards and bookshelves
beneath my narrow bed
penumbra of the day's lost beginnings

5
though I know little of faith I can make a prayer by calling its name

where birds nest in downy dark
I kneel in a tangle of words
fold into languid quiet
listen for rain that whispers
the name of the holy night
—wafer on the tongue of dreams

J.I. Kleinberg

Door

after Patrick Lane, Sabi

A sound floats unmoored in my thoughts.
A reflection pauses in the mirror's crack.
Diverted by radiance, I brush my hair, all shadows.
Memory braids into memory. My skin's a dreaming cloth.
Each time I hear the echo, I clutch its livid syllable.
The eye listens.
A rectangle of light endures, mute on the easel.
When I was a child, my mother painted a door and walked through.
I stood at the threshold, my face smudged viridian, cadmium, cerulean.
Dangerous ingress, my fingers shaded in blue eclipse.
Beside the path, moss pillows in my mother's abandoned shoes.
The door between worlds has no hinges.
Withered and empty, my blind bones listen at the sill.

Deborah Thompson

Looney Tunes

The floor dropped out
so I became the floor
face down gripped crumbling corners
with nails of finger and toe
adjusting and readjusting
for a more reliable purchase
though funds were short
and my allowance small

the others
brother sister mother
moved on back
settled in on my young shoulders
reclaimed space
rearranged furniture
each to his or her own

never once looked down to ask
  whatever became of
as if they knew
in looking they might realize
how much nothing gaped beneath
feel their own weight
and be obliged to fall
in an endless downward spiral

lost as the cartoon characters
and cozy Saturday mornings
shared with my father
before he dropped out

Morgan Finn

Guernica

Picasso furiously painted his huge black, white and gray mural in six weeks for the 1937 World's Fair after Hitler's Luftwaffe destroyed the tiny defenseless Basque hamlet on a packed market day as a bombing experiment. Mostly women, children, the elderly, even animals in the field were shot down as they fled.

I. WOMAN WITH THE LANTERN

Never again will I lean from my window
and believe an orderly mind
can hold back sorrow. Instead,
I will live out my days wearing weeds.
Assemblymen who swore beneath our ancient oak tree
to protect us, lay scattered in pieces
…clergy blood colors the soil;
Ah, Miguel, our Archangel, avenge us!
If Napoleon, if even the Moors
could not break us, neither will Franco.

What's done is done, *mis caros.*
For now, weep and curse fate.
Then pull the edges together.
To endure, pretend a little, nod vaguely.
If I could, I would gather you to me,
reminding you as my own children
that we must go on. Always there are angels
and other lanterns. Haven't you heard
how, mid-dirge, the *Gernikako Arbola,*
our sacred oak, has not fallen?

II. THE DESPAIRING WOMAN

Has anyone seen my little Cecelia—
her footsteps full of
hesitation—not tripping over rubble,
but grabbing the air as if
she might? Because of her illness,
whose name moves over my tongue like bad milk,
we honored her Saint's Day early.

Even on this street of corpses,
I could spot her pale hands—
tapered as fish at market—
fingers coming to life
as she makes bread,
their clumsiness hidden in dough—
her short vision making our courtyard
seem to her more than gray buildings
held together by clothesline and rumor.
For Cecelia, the giving dough is enough,
and the embrace of clean sheets—
though who knows for certain
what she kneads and gathers in.

Blessed Mother, since her birth
my brow has crinkled from praying
to Santa Lucia, the virgin, to Santa Bernardina.
Please do not let this be their reply: Cecelia
snatched from me, no bread
for our table, laundry fluttering
until morning…

III. THE SPEARED HORSE

Our hooves clattered a warning on cobblestones,
but your crass music blocked us out.
Listen.
Must martyred saints scratch

at your doors? Or do you think
my bowed back could carry you
to safety?

From the stable I felt
death straining and refused
to come out. Beatings from drunk masters
are better than bowels rotting in the arena,
or being herded to market. It is never
prudent to sleep lying down.

The earth waits, the earth wishes
to swallow our shrieks,
but this is not the first time
we've been brought to our knees,
tongues protesting…

IV. THE VICTIM OF FLAMES

Even now, Mama, you draw
your shawl around many sorrows,
yet turn away from me.
Years I tried to make up for what my presence
does to you. I've knelt
for *your* absolution
before Holy Communion,
but the slash of your mouth only tightened,
causing me to run by your clock after marriage,
my words out of sequence when my husband
tried to unbraid my hair, mine the last lamp
burning in the courtyard hours after
Javier stopped calling me to bed—
so that mornings he would wander outside to test
oak trees for warp as I spewed from the window:
"Can your fine ships keep our skies from exploding?"
as he stomped off to butt planks, and I
kept scrubbing even that high window

nobody can see—while sputtering
to clotheslines and chickens, pausing only to
pay my respects to the dead,
screeching afterward at Javier
about who would be next—until I
finally slept…oh, but Mama,
when I glanced away from the clock
I felt your hands striking…if
you had embraced me just *once,*
I would have burst into five constant stars
of white, pink, blue, green and yellow,
this wound of a mouth healed.

V. THE DISMEMBERED WARRIOR

Filled with its own thoughts, my head
never belonged to this body—any more
than the moon is part of the Pyrenees.
Head often floating outdoors,
teeth clamped on a cigar,
my face would peer through a window
at my poor Jacinta having one of her fits
while she screamed at me to do this
and do that until wine
made her pass out mid-scream.

Only then could I focus
on matador dreams
of how to stop German bombs.
Long before I raised
the Basque sword against fascists,
these shoulders bore my parents,
Jacinta,
her family;
perhaps I would have made a good priest
if my first vision of Jacinta
had not cut with such a hot edge

through my prayers. Yes, even at our wedding,
I saw her petals start falling.

El Toro, with the vigilant eyes—
when my Jacinta beats out her grief
on your vast shoulders, please tell her about
the flower blooming from my broken sword.

VI. THE LAMENTING MOTHER

When my daughter greeted me crying,
I refused food—until my milk ebbed.
Nothing tempted, not even those big purple grapes
I craved while pregnant—back when I still
slept and sang, Manuel's hand on my belly.

Mother of God, what is wrong with me?
None of my sisters swore at their infants
when they whined away nights, but I fermented,
shaking my baby the way a dog shakes rabbits,
spewing taunts like in the gypsy *soledades:*
Your father bounces you on his knee.
Tell me the last time he held me.
Hungry again, my bawling daughter?
Here, let my fists feed you,
let them turn you the purple of grapes.
When the bells of Santa Maria chimed,
followed by guttural sounds,
I thought anything louder than
what shrieks inside me must be a sign.
Bravo, the pigeons are migrating early! I cried,
praying that our men would return
from the Bilbao front to snare them
with a net. Except rubble and flame rained
down. Releasing a tiny sigh, my child went limp
as a pigeon at market. I implored El Toro for mercy,
but He turned away from me

as a sky full of roaring falcons swooped
down—until it was all the same to me:
pigeons and falcons, dogs and torn rabbits,
bombers and the sad-eyed Mother of God;
who can escape the net, the net?

VII. THE SURVIVING BULL

Stiff your Oles! and roses,
your pious candles. Look around you,
instead! Basque shrieks have split
the air, leaving behind only corpses, which I
have presented to you as children. Yet
you continue to gawk as if expecting
a curtain to fall, their remains
to jump up for one last curtsy or bow.
Do you imagine I lost sleep
to turn their despair into art just for your
entertainment?

Stop smacking your lips
in mock sorrow, secretly glad it's not you.
Shame for slinking around like mongrels,
poking here and there with insatiable fingers,
coaxing my hide to expose old wounds,
any patch of thin skin where the sword
can enter. God knows how long
I have glared across these tablelands,
backed against the Bay of Biscay,
without glancing behind me—except for
an occasional bellow over my shoulder
where some damn fool bird
keeps singing its heart out.

Abriana Jetté

How Jewish

Friday morning I got to hear the word
holocaust mean a day too hot to bear
from two teen-age girls in pink lip-
gloss as they walked off the bus.
As in My God
it's a holocaust out here.
That's what they said.
Every time I tell somebody I am Jewish
they say sorry
as if there is something to be sorry about.
But you don't look Jewish
they chime, as if it is
a compliment.
Mom saves sugar packets, keeps
rings and pearls in her purse, waits weeks
to toss out scrap paper or tissues
half-used. She learned this
from Abraham and Anna
who left Auschwitz and Dachau behind
to start a new life in New York City.
Is that not Jewish enough for you?
Tell me what you need me to do—
Repeat the *mi shebeirach* over
Shabbat candles? Bless my meat
before I consume its nutrients
for my own good? What, should
my nose stick out just an inch
more? How Jewish do I have to be
for you to no longer feel
the need to be sorry?

Ilene Millman

Blindspot

Let me put it this way, I grew up
integrated
                it was nothing progressive
just a condition
where wealthier Jews
   moved on
and poorer ones like us
stayed noticing.

      I played with kids on the street
                rangy unhomogenized kids
my parents called *schvartzes,* code word
for black: the old lady next door, the black "help"
something we had none of
     until I was grown
when one day each week my mother had Alice
who washed, ironed, cleaned and pilfered
liquor from our basement bar.

 I remember two black men battling on the stoop
          of my childhood Brooklyn house
grunting and lunging with sharp-bladed somethings
trailing blood and blue-uniformed cops who
dragged them away leaving
          stains my mother scrubbed out
with buckets of boiling water.
                *
I already know you now.
You have nothing to do with headlines.
You have nothing to do with stoops
          or stains

or watered-down bottles of booze.
I already know you.

We sit face to face at YaYa Noodles.
You in youthful black male student identifiers
me in my un-hip jeans and good-intentioned enlightenment.
Between mouthfuls of fried rice and dumplings
we weave air into meaning the way humans would
mindbugs spinning
beyond our knowing
like colored dots of a pointillist painting
blended by the mind's eye
white canvas unseeable
between.

Ilene Millman

Genesis:22 The Binding of Ann

Gather me all the elders of your tribe.
We gathered—
the son and the daughters,
there were no elders.

TV droning above, white light from all points—
they said no circulation necrosis
we heard a knife for every pain—
we heard choose—sharp, serrated

You must choose.

Had we ears to hear if the angel calls out
Halt

Our heads pressed together at the foot of her bed
this picture of her turned wrong way up—
the umbrellas already opened
inside our house, lizards counting our teeth.

Ilene Millman

Genesis:23 In the Mouth of the Cave

The offering offered, sacrifice made
it came to pass, a second time we were called
and we rose up and went

called not by angel's voice
but a nurse's, not unkind,
not omnipotent either.

Heads bowed beneath our cargo
of yearning, we held her hands,
untangling coils of words.

They said not now. They said days.
What did we know of signs
rattles naked or bent conclusions?

Our Thanksgiving dinner lay interrupted
and the last laugh this: the way we sat eating
cherry pie the recipe hers.

Ilene Millman

Basket Lady

Ida Jefferson Wilson is credited with erecting the first sweet grass basket stand on Charleston's Highway 17 in the early 1930's. She was living in one of the former slave quarters at Boone Hall, working as a sharecropper picking strawberries.

Your fingers dance—
Nimble as a low-country fiddler
you splice coils of bundled sweet grass,
weaving silence, songs
metaphor,
        all your fingers
        both hands
your knees.
        Circle go out
                and out
          and out again
    pull, gather, bind,
        stitch words into water
    close to the bone.
Water held in a basket—
        an old story
    you sew and pass to other hands
so it goes on telling itself: purple sweet grass
bulrush, palmetto frond
ties that bind
you to do something
        a shade more
        than what you've been led to believe,
that which you most immediately are not.
        Never saying much before,
    you circle around the husk

of the old from which you've come,
hang your baskets on a ladder-back chair
out there, beside the highway.

Charlotte Muzzi

Princess Kay Karen Bracken in a Butter Carton Dress, 1963

Dead center in the photograph
she balances on kitten heels,
the regent of her antique frame.

The scruff grass tickles her white heels
and reaches for the cardboard hem
where overlapping text proclaims

Milt's Dairy proudly on her skirt—
the chorus nips in where it meets
the bodice of her cardboard dress.

This dairy princess, '63—
so regal in her empty field,
she hardly seems preposterous.

Although a storm is coming in
she simpers for the camera lens
with every shade of artlessness,

composed, and poised as if to say
she'll bear with utter confidence
the burden her perfection is.

Dark regiments of careful waves
march solemnly across her scalp,
a cushion for her velvet crown:

its tiny tridents proud the clouds,
and to her proffered china plate,
the absurd rain comes beading down.

Diane Hueter

When Annie Oakley Came to Town

Pa pulled the bone from the steaming roast,
jabbed and poked at the round grey eye
until a gelatinous ball shivered on his plate,
slippery with broth. He swallowed the marrow
without a word, just as soundlessly
as he beat me every day.
I never found new eggs in the yard,
my churning never turned to butter,
my stockings wouldn't stay up, my braids flew like birds.

Our town's band—trumpet, tuba, violin,
boomping and blooping and whining,
inept as a pig-tailed girl, led her parade. But oh!
Her golden pony cantered in the center of the street.
Her tiny, black-faced dog, his tongue
peeking from his lips, like a sly, silly clown,
trotted proudly behind.

Ma loved sweets, corn fritters shiny with grease,
drenched in syrup, kernels popping from the batter
like surprised babies. And she loved blueberry pies,
browned crusts shimmering through butter and sugar.
The juice stained her teeth and spotted
the white lace ruffle on her breast.
Every morning she braided my hair, wrenching it tight as rope,
muttering over her frills, *Be quiet hold still no whimpering from you missy*

I saw her ride through our town
on her dancing pony, its tail ribbon-braided.
Silver bells on the bridle, music so sweet,

surely it reached the angels on high.
Her dog leapt to her lap. How she laughed
as it licked her lips, nose, and cheeks!

My plate—always muddied by beans
and chicken hearts and gizzards.
I'd cut them in half, then in half again, peer into the chambers.
I was so hungry I ate rooms and rooms—
stairs and windows and doors,
candles and rocking chairs,
quilts and guitars, ribbons and radios,
pianos and chamber pots and dolls.
I hid inside with my eyes behind my fingers.

When Annie Oakley came to town,
to my town, she waved
to my family, to my neighbors,
to the store, the jail, and the school,
to the dogs and cats, the horses and cows,
to everyone and everything,
finding somehow even the empty shadow
that stood beside them.

Between my fingers I see
the fringe from her glove flows,
wheat in the wind, the beads on her vest
shine like cherries.

Before the sun sets, for her last act,
to the amazement of almost all,
she aims her rifle, shoots a sweet red apple
right off her wee dog's head.
Anyone can see he loves her
and he is not afraid.

Sarah W. Bartlett

Cronehood

I'm so tired of hearing the phrase
'juicy crone,' as if all the drippings
and dribblings of adulthood weren't enough.

Who wants to be a mango at 75? By then
haven't you had enough of being eaten
and striving to be your tastiest strain?

Age preserve us from all that ooze!
As I massage her scaly flesh, sleek the skin
stretched over deep blue veins of hand, foot

I cannot imagine plump or juicy applied here.
Dry has settled in, and even this oil
though instantly sucked in, is no match

for the sucker I would be to imagine
juicy cronehood leaking from these pores
of desperation and pain.

Mary B. Moore

Amanda and the Man-Soul

Amanda likes the mandolin's twang
she also likes a good man and has one
inside her, says Jung. Her mantra
is *Amanda Man Amanda*. She suns
today, listens to bluegrass, tans
and forgets about the little man.
She is reading Jung.
She is not who you think she is.
She's just blackened her spiked hair
like a Goth and bathes herself in Aloe
to soothe her fresh tats, her arm cuts.
Not to imply she's unhealthy. Amanda
thinks the man lives in her chest. She'd like
to evict him, cut him out, but where would he go?
Tragic face, happy face, sly face, and so forth.
Jung says the man inside is her soul,
the sexes crossed. She's his hidey hole.
Amanda never hides.
She looks up. The sun's
on the book, on her lap, it's hot
in her jet black hair. She'd like
a sturdy girl soul, thick-knuckled,
chin squared, feet splayed from working
the soil. She'd play mandolin
for its moods, both lyric and bold.
But Amanda's stuck with the middle man.
He thumps in her chest like iambs,
part of Amanda's *I am*.

Mary B. Moore

The Gone Twin

Though their mother played violin
sonatas which might have soothed the twins,
Amanda played second
violin to no one:
she absorbed her twin
as they floated chin to chin,
translucent eye buds, spine
and wing: Gloria turned
into subtext, a gloss on a sin.
Her DNA is under Amanda's skin.
Amanda doesn't believe in
sin Church God but imagines
Gloria sings

Glooow oh oh oh oh oh
oooh oh oh oh oh
oooh oh oh oh oh ohria
in Excelsius De e o
in church. Amanda sings the alto.
They make a duet, on low,
one high, a contralto
of sorts. But Gloria
likes to jangle fast then slow
like change in Amanda's head as she goes
home from Bellisimo,
her salon, the cloth bag of furbelows

on her arm, earrings
hairclips, bracelets, bling bling.
Everything in the bag sings,
a tangle, belling.
Amanda wants to sing along

a high quick flickering
of notes but Gloria pings
like starlings
and talks like monkey mind:
Amanda this, Amanda
that, tit for tat: *how'd you get skin,*
bone, tongue, the body's bling?

Somedays, Amanda skips to taunt
the gone twin, or reads about saints
and haints. She's Gloria's haunt.

Mary B. Moore

Amanda Muse

Amanda got a new suit
black as the tires on Grandpa's '64 Olds
and tagged: all wool, gabardine.
It smelled like an oil field and shined
like the seat of Mr. Dude's pants.
Amanda's suit's an imposter
and knew it: otherwise why slump
in the closet, sleeves
like flaccid hopes?
But oil still smells like money,
so Amanda wore it to interview
a man who wanted to sign on as
second persona.
He wanted to mask blond Greeks
and hoped for some ruins to loll
about in, stellae, pillars:
Ionic, Doric would do.
He thought he'd look imposing
in toga. He spoke with a slight lisp
and looked in a dim light like Keats.
Bemused, she signed him
above the elbow, but that was not
what he had in mind:
she was too apt to take liberties
too prone to puns.
He huffed off to find
a more compliant muse.

Mary B. Moore

Ballad of Red and Blue

The man in the park thinks my blue hair
can't be true. He looks twice to ensure
he saw what he saw. His dalmatian
is black and white, and wags. He's heard
that Nepal celebrates Dog's Day today:
he would like a red garland, thank you.
The man's mouth makes an "O."

The man says "cool," then quicksteps away
lest blue pool up in his eyes, his mouth,
seep into the dime-sized holes in his boots.
The cardinal perches on a beech.
He's red: his song is red.
Red will be seen, will be heard.
So will the startle-blue of my hair.

Mary B. Moore

Gratitude

for Marie and Lorie

The stump-tailed cat lives with a blue-haired woman
and a red-haired man in a house whose bricks
are books. Today the woman carries
a pocketful of apricots to a bowl,
and puts a red rose wide as her hand
in a blue and white vase.
Red-gold threads curl loosely
in the rose's center, filaments
of the sun. The apricots are suns too, furred
like the blond hair on a girl's bare arms.
Marigolds, named for Mary's gold
which is mercy, flower in small
blue pots at the windows.
(The blue-haired woman is not religious
but remembers where she comes from.)

A sickness got into the black cat's tail,
his balancer and dancer:
somebody took it away while he slept,
but now he leaps from the wingback chair
to the top of the bookshelves.
Pleased with himself, he primps
beside Aristotle. In the house made of books
the red-haired man reads, the blue-haired
woman writes poems.
The inky cat lies on a book.

Kathleen Balma

Dramatic Dichotologue

It's good to be bilingual. Almost makes up
for the other bi thing about me. Not quite family, but step-

whatsit, or great doohickey twice removed
on your ex-fairy-godmother's side. Still, I'm *something*

like your Aunt David, and if the Queen ever dies
I'm in the line of succession. Truthfully, I prefer

circles to lines. "Circle of succession"
has a nice ring. Like Knights of the Round Table

only sexier. You may think it's hard to be sexier
than a circumference of metal-clad men, but I swear by

all the bivalves in an errant chef's paella
that my circuit is more heartthrob than King Arthur's.

So would Casanova. He'd swear on a stack of pizzas,
florins, and halos, 'cause that's how Giacomo rolls.

I can't help but epicene. Head doctors named me.
They were torn between bi- and pan-, but Pan complained.

Turns out he's not a fan, either. He'll shag
any cloven beast but me. His loss.

I've never loved by halves. The army was
pleased in Top Secret—something about my

expertise at double time and scientists always inviting me
to experiments. Yes, the bars are full of lab jockeys,

but why complain? I haven't had this much
airtime since David Bowie died and brought me

four chambers closer to the throne.

POEMMEMOIRSTORY

Gail Seneca

A Child of the World

I was not born for one quarter; the whole world is my native land.
—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

By day's end, the ward stank of sweat and disinfectant. Mrs. Fernandez tossed and moaned in her bed just inches from mine; Crazy Mary wandered the floor, spewing threats and accusations. Snores, raspy breaths and cries of pain pierced the rank air. Nine patients in the ward, all of us critically ill. Awake in the gathering dusk at Coney Island Hospital, I longed to be somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Closing my eyes, I heard the crunch of metal against metal in the car crash. I felt warm blood dripping down my face. I saw Dad storming the emergency room, the broken capillaries on his nose purple with rage. Morphine dreams. Words, images and sensations jumbled together in a kaleidoscope that wouldn't stop spinning. What was real? Not this ward, I hoped, with its drab green walls and creaking doors. Not this bed, where I lay on my back, unable to move. Not now, when I was just fifteen years old.

In the morning, an aide hoisted me onto a bed pan. Dutifully, I shat. Then I waited. Two hours with my hips on the metal rim before someone took the bed pan away. I sipped sugary sweet juice from the straw the Candy Striper poked between my lips and felt my tongue go fuzzy. I watched the lunch tray come and go, untouched, because I had no use of my hands. Paralyzed from the neck down, maybe forever, they said, definitely for now. I waited minute by minute, hour by hour, to be rescued.

Dozing again, dreaming of riding the waves at Jones Beach, I heard a motorboat so loud and close I went cold with fear. My eyes snapped open. Not a motorboat, not the beach. I was in bed, on the ward. A hydraulic drill? Why? Where? I floated my eyes up to the space behind my head and saw a dark face peering down at me through the din. "Bonjour," it said, white teeth flashing. "I am Dr. Basin. De Haiti." His eyes were bloodshot and a jagged scar descended from his forehead to his jaw.

The drill banged like a jackhammer, metal against bone, unceasing, penetrating my brain. "Stop!" I screamed. "What are you doing?"

"We must drill holes in the skull," he said, in heavily accented English. "For the tongs."

My lips went cold. "Morphine," I pleaded.

Dr. Basin raised his hairy eyebrow and exchanged the drill for a shiny steel instrument with two dagger sharp points. "Attende," he said. Wait, I understood. My high school French had taught me that much. But my French teacher was a pale Parisian woman, not a dark man wielding instruments of torture. French sounded wrong in his mouth.

"Please!" I whimpered. But Dr. Basin worked steadily until my neck stretched backward and a crushing weight pinned the back of my head to the pillow. I faced the grime streaked ceiling.

Dr. Basin snapped off his rubber gloves and tossed them into the trash. It might as well have been me that landed in that trash can. I couldn't see the device he implanted in my skull but I felt it pinch the skin on my shaved head. Somehow, it exerted such a powerful pull on my neck that even the slightest movement was impossible. I didn't know how the device worked, but I understood that it trapped me completely. "C'est bon?" Dr. Basin looked into my eyes, ignoring the tears. "Pour ta sante. Have faith."

I strained to understand. This black man with the scary scar and the shadow of a beard wanted me to trust him. This was 1968, when white society was on high alert against Black Power. In my Brooklyn neighborhood, black men couldn't walk on the streets without being harassed.

Yet here I was, in a thin hospital gown, at the mercy of a very black man. Drill in hand, he stood at my bedside. My blood had splattered onto his white coat. "C'est bon?" he repeated.

"Oui," I said. There was no other choice.

Mrs. Fernandez hadn't spoken or moaned or cried out for days. So when jangly, guttural noises sputtered from her throat, I called for help. The surly Irish nurse appeared, armed with a loaded syringe. Not for Mrs. Fernandez, but for me. She steadied the needle at my hip. "Listen," I begged. "It sounds like Mrs. Fernandez is dying."

The nurse's eyes narrowed and her lips turned down in a mean, stubborn line. "Everyone dies," she said.

I gulped some air in anticipation of the needle's stab but as it slid in, I felt nothing. Like last time and the time before that. I had to start believ-

ing it; it was undeniable. I *was* paralyzed. I was no longer the vivacious girl who danced and hitchhiked and demonstrated at the Pentagon with my best girlfriend, who'd walked away from the accident unharmed. I felt closer now to Mrs. Fernandez. Like Mrs. Fernandez, I would die. Possibly right here in this hospital ward, beside her.

Crazy Mary loped toward me. Positioning her bulky body against my bed rail, she leaned in so close that I smelled her foul breath. "What you got in your head, girlie? Does it kill the bugs?" There was no getting rid of her when she got started, her words tumbling out like popcorn. "You stole my cat!" She grabbed my nightgown and twisted the fabric in her fist. "You're bad!" Releasing the gown, she spat on my sheets.

"Ay, Mi amor, que lio!" Aurora, the pretty Puerto Rican aide, came up behind Mary and cajoled her into her bed. "Callate, mi amor. La muchacha esta durmiendo."

I exhaled. Aurora never failed to restore order to the ward. Her melodious voice calmed us. As she changed my sheet, she hummed. After she'd settled me in fresh linens, she sat at the edge of my bed and stroked my cheek. "Y tu, mi hija? Estas mejorando?"

"Si." I lied. I wasn't getting better, but I wanted to please the lovely and motherly Aurora.

The next day, Dr. Basin came onto the ward, accompanied by a dumpling shaped woman. "*Comment ca va*?" he asked. He skimmed his hand on my head, lingering at the places where he'd inserted the tongs. In halting English, he explained that the skin around the tongs in my skull might blister and a sore could develop on the back of my head from the lack of movement. "But you will heal," he said gravely. "A bientot!" He waved good bye and left the dumpy lady with me.

Her eyes darted around the ward and finally landed on the device in my skull. She cleared her throat and rushed through an explanation. The "Crutchfield tongs" in my head were attached to a pulley from which heavy weights were suspended. They hung behind me on a rope that reached nearly to the floor. She looked at the contraption, rather than at me, as she spoke.

Nausea rose into my throat. I spit out the taste. The woman ignored my reaction and went on with her speech. She told me the traction would knit my broken neck bones back together.

"The tongs shouldn't hurt," she said. "The nerve endings in your skull were damaged. You flew through the car window, you know."

Flew? More like smashed into and sliced by the window. "When will I get out this thing?"

Frowning, she said, "Patience, dear. We've just begun. Healing is a matter of months and years."

"A month's a long time for me."

She dismissed me with a thin, strained laugh and patted my knee beneath the blanket, forgetting, I supposed, that I wouldn't feel the comfort she intended. "We're arranging a tutor for you." Her forehead furrowed. "We're trying, anyway. And I'm sending you some special visitors."

"I have visitors." Most days, some of my pals showed up with candy and chips and sandwiches. They played the latest Beatles and Rolling Stones tunes on their transistor radios. They told me which of their brothers or our friends had been shipped off to Vietnam. And who had fled the country to avoid it; my boyfriend was one of those. My favorite visitor came a few times a week, with his banjo and a concert of upbeat tunes. He'd been hospitalized with polio as a child in a city hospital just as bleak as this one. The polio had left him lame. It saddened me to watch him graze the bed rails for support as he walked in and out of the ward. I wondered if I would eventually walk like that, or if I would walk at all.

"These visitors understand your situation," she said. "Young people like you, with spinal injuries. They're in our rehab unit, learning to live with disability." Her double chin wobbled as she said "disability," each syllable spaced out as if she didn't want to get to the next one. She reminded me of my mother, with that phony laugh and that hesitancy in her voice. Whenever Mom visited, she encouraged me to get better so I could make it to the Junior Prom. She'd giggle as she said it, like it was a ridiculous aspiration. And it was.

"Will I be disabled?" I asked. I tried to find the woman's eyes, but she looked away, just like Mom did, whenever I asked about my prognosis. Mom's evasions were annoying, but typical. She was usually polite and never direct. Dad would make all the decisions about my treatment, not Mom. In this situation, like in the rest of her life, Mom had no authority.

No tutor ever arrived. My friend with the banjo sang. Crazy Mary howled and cursed. Mrs. Fernandez died. Dr. Basin arranged for a piece of soft cloth to fit beneath the back of my head; a sore had formed there,

just as he had warned. Aurora checked the sore daily and adjusted the cloth.

"Attende," Dr. Basin said, whenever he dropped by. "Time heals."

On a steady diet of morphine, my mind felt like cotton candy. I floated from memories of dancing at a rock concert in Central Park to fears of a future in a wheelchair or worse. On a wintry afternoon, a month after Dr. Basin had drilled the holes in my head, one of the "special visitors" showed up. An orderly wheeled him to my bedside on a gurney.

The visitor, a black teenager with rage in his eyes, glared at me and asked if I'd been shot. "Car accident," I said. "You?"

"What you think?" He snorted. "How's your drugs? You got extra? Me and my boys looking to end this shit."

The orderly guffawed. "Not in the script, bro," he said, and wheeled the boy out of the ward.

On the night shift, Aurora gave me a sponge bath. She stretched my arms and legs as she murmured, "Que linda! Que joven!" I longed to feel her touch. "Estas mejorando!"

In the ward, the Stryker bed in the corner creaked in a slow turn to the right, then the left, massaging Mrs. Orozco's broken back. She'd been in that bed since before I came. Like Crazy Mary, she was a long term inhabitant of that room, like a ghost in a haunted house. She should have died already, but like me, she was stuck here, midway between life and death. IV tubes dripped and hissed. Bells rang. Nurses squeaked in and out on their rubber soled shoes. Sometimes, they poked thermometers in my mouth and needles in my arm. My forearm turned black and blue.

Dr. Basin stopped by every few days, often with no agenda other than to comfort me. He checked the sore on the back of my head and sponged the crusty scabs around the tongs. His touch was gentle. I noticed the flecks of gold in his dark eyes and the faint smell of cloves that emanated from his mouth. When he spoke, I struggled to understand every word. I wanted to believe him. I needed to trust him.

Mom visited on Sundays. At first, Dad had accompanied her, but he quickly tired of the smell and the boredom of the ward. Sunday was his only day off, he complained. "And I'd rather not spend it in a shithole."

So Mom came on her own, braving the long drive through Brooklyn and Dad's demands that she be back in time to make him dinner. "This place depresses him," she said. Lowering her voice, she added, "He's not

used to black doctors. You know, he's like Archie Bunker."

In those days, Archie Bunker's television persona spewed intolerance. Dad and probably thousands like him embraced Archie's attacks on blacks, communists and hippies.

"Archie Bunker's not a nice guy," I protested. "Dr. Basin is."

"But he's black," Mom said, as if that concluded the case. "And he hardly speaks English."

"I understand everything he says!"

Mom gave me a withering look. "Dad doesn't." She glanced at the tongs. "And he's paying for all this. He doesn't like it one bit."

What doesn't he like, I wondered. The bills? The tongs? Me?

Mom spooned applesauce into my mouth. "You need to be more cooperative. Dad's upset."

She didn't say it but I sensed that Dad's "upset" was explosive. He wasn't a patient man. He'd probably reached the point where he had to act, for better or worse. The applesauce soured in my throat.

Dad appeared midday the following Tuesday, striding into the ward as if he owned it. His white shirt strained against his broad chest. Setting his fedora on the night table, he said, "We've had enough. Don't you think?" I looked at him quizzically. "This place is bleeding me dry. And doing nothing for you. I'm gonna have it out with these monkeys today."

"Sir?" Dr. Basin addressed my father. "You want to meet here?"

"Speak English," Dad said derisively. Dr. Basin *was* speaking English.

Dr. Basin pushed a button on his belt. "The administrator will join," he said.

A man in a suit, with styled salt and pepper hair, appeared at the door of the ward and walked toward us. "Good to see you, Mr. Seneca." He stretched his hand toward Dad, but Dad didn't take it.

"We're done with this place," Dad said. "I've had it up to here"—he indicated his throat—"with your bills. And your blacks."

I gasped and wished I could disappear. Dad's rants were all too familiar. Back home, I slammed my bedroom door to shut them out and sometimes I fought back. Once I'd slapped him and he'd returned the blow. "Stop it, Dad," was all I could muster now.

"Why the hell should I stop? These clowns can do an operation that will end this crap once and for all. But they make more money keeping you in here like a prisoner." He glared at the administrator. "The jig's up."

"Surgery is far too risky, Sir." The administrator stepped toward Dad. "It can cause complete paralysis or even death. Our top neurosurgeons," he glanced at Dr. Basin, "advise a more cautious approach because of your daughter's age. They will not risk this surgery."

Dad's upper lip curled into a sneer. "If I were you, I wouldn't let the blacks tell me what to do."

"Dad!" I shouted. Didn't he care that I'd bear the brunt of his vitriol when he went home?

"I'm moving her on Thursday. I found a hospital that will operate and get her out of this mess. You cooperate or I sue your ass." With a wink at me, like we were conspirators, he left.

I felt too ashamed to look at Dr. Basin, but he cupped my head in his hand, as he often did when he checked the device, and let the warmth linger. It coursed through my skull and reached down to my neck. I longed for it to reach my chest and warm my heart.

Late that night, Aurora spoon fed me meatloaf and JELL-O, leftovers she'd smuggled out of the cafeteria. As always, I'd been unable to reach for my own dinner tray, and as always, Aurora intuited my hunger. "I'm leaving soon," I told her.

She clapped her hands with delight. "Que bueno! Estas mejorando!"

"Maybe," I mumbled. I couldn't admit that nothing had improved except Dad's mood. He had finally arranged for something to happen.

An ambulance crew bustled into the ward early Thursday morning, long before the doctors' rounds and after Aurora's shift. Without explanation, they shifted me from the hospital bed and onto a gurney, with the tongs still embedded in my skull. Crazy Mary watched, the only witness, the only person awake in the ward besides me. She cackled rather than saying goodbye. The crew wheeled the gurney through tiled hallways and into an industrial sized elevator. Nothing looked familiar; I'd been unconscious when I was admitted and since that night, I'd never left the ward.

It was exciting to be moving, to be going somewhere at last. Outside, the crisp winter air exhilarated me. It had been a year since I'd seen vapor billow from my mouth, since my face stung with cold, since I'd seen snow crowning the roofs of cars. Christmas lights twinkled. If the surgery went wrong, this might be my last Christmas. All right with me; I couldn't imagine living with paralysis, or with my father. The months in the hos-

pital had ruptured my allegiance to him and shifted it toward the black doctor he disdained. Dr. Basin had accepted me just as I was, broken and slow to heal. But Dad insisted I recover on his timetable, even if that required a risky operation.

At Maimonides Hospital, I was pushed through a bright entry bay and into a room with only two beds. A window overlooked the tree lined street. A sprinkling of snow covered the oak branch nearest the window. The room was blessedly quiet. It smelled fresh; the window was slightly open. It was a much better place to die.

In these new and more pleasant surroundings, I waited for the surgery. But nothing was scheduled. I lay in the bed, immobile, staring now at a pristinely white ceiling. Roommates came and went quietly, pacified by pain medications. No one died. The nurses fed me every meal, bathed me every day, and maintained the morphine regime without interruption. But none of them hummed and none of them assured me that I was *mejorando*. I missed Aurora.

My high school was in the same neighborhood as Maimonides, so more people visited. Schoolmates, my friend who sold marijuana, my French teacher. She gifted me a tape recorder loaded with French exercises so that I could keep up with my class. I thanked her, but I couldn't operate the tape recorder without the use of my hands. I traded it to my dealer friend for three nickel bags of marijuana to be delivered when I got out. The trade seemed like a deposit on the future; no one was talking about my ever getting out. The banjo player continued his visits, but the nurses didn't let him play or sing for fear of disturbing other patients. Maimonides had strict visiting hours, from six to eight at night only, and the nurses enforced them. So I was alone most of the time, with my thoughts and my fears. I wondered how it would all end.

None of the nurses seemed to know the plan. Dad eventually filled me in. The doctor who had agreed to do the surgery and admitted me to Maimonides had suffered a stroke. Someone else had to take over my case and he needed time to evaluate it. "Just sit tight," Dad said. What else could I do?

A week later, a man in a camel hair sports jacket and a silk scarf introduced himself as my new doctor. "I take over for Cerulli," he said. "Your father is not very happy." A strong Russian accent coated his

words. I guessed that was the cause of my father's unhappiness. To him, Russians were the enemy, as surely as the blacks. And despite all his efforts, these were the people in charge of my health. "Call me Alexi," the doctor said. "We will come to know each other well." He touched my neck, my head, my broken collarbones and shoulders with soft fingertips. His nails were manicured and lightly polished. He smelled of musky cologne. After he examined me, he readjusted his scarf and said, "Very good. Young people heal."

Alexi came back after Christmas. With a sad smile, he told me that the surgery was too dangerous. "Spine is delicate as a cello string," he said. "You like Rostropovich?" His eyes lit up. "I play." He mimicked holding a cello. Tilting it toward the tongs, he said, "Some progress here. We give it more time."

Exactly what Dr. Basin had said. "Attende." Had he been right? Could time really heal my broken neck? "My father won't wait," I said.

He shrugged. "I don't operate."

"He's fed up," I pleaded. "He'll kill me if you don't do the surgery."

Alexi laughed. "He kills you? Or the surgery kills you. Some choice!"

"It's true," I wailed. He set his hand on my shoulder as tears stung my eyes. "What should I do?"

"Pray," Alexi said.

Pray? Weren't the Russians Communists? And weren't Communists atheists?

Prayer took me deep into the nightmare of being warehoused in the hospital, abandoned by my exasperated parents, and dependent on Alexi. The hard brilliance of his diamond lapel pin captivated me. What kind of doctor dressed in silk and diamonds? What kind of hospital refused to do the procedures it had promised? Where was Aurora when I needed her? In the hushed sighs of the IV machine next to my roommate's bed, I heard Aurora's voice. *Estas mejorando*? She wanted that for me. She believed it was possible.

When Alexi returned, he had a book in his hand. "No surgery," he said. "Poetry." He drew a chair up to my bed and opened the book. "Yevtushenko. A man with hope. Where there is no hope." In a deep and sonorous voice, he read aloud in Russian. I understood none of the words, but the rhythm pulled me along. A sense of possibility brightened

the room. With Yevtushenko, I imagined release. Alexi imagined with me. Together, we knew the sufferings of the world as it was, and together, we dreamt something better.

Alexi read to me for more than an hour. He returned the next day and read more. He would visit, I realized, for as long as it took for me to heal. As if by magic, the healing began. My toes tingled as Alexi read. Warmth flooded my chest.

Dad railed against Maimonides Hospital and fought with the administrators over the surgery. He insisted I waste no more of his time. But Alexi waited patiently for my healing, like Dr. Basin and Aurora. They were strangers to me, not relatives, not native New Yorkers like Dad. They were Haitians, Russians and Puerto Ricans, yet they cared for me like a beloved member of their families. In that year of waiting, I left behind my identity as my father's property and became a child of the world.

The sun shone brightly on the day Alexi wheeled me to the parking lot, where my mother stood, waiting to take me home. She looked disappointed. Tying a scarf around my shaved head, she said, "You look like a boy with that haircut." Alexi settled me in the passenger seat, making sure that the bulky neck brace didn't bump against the doorframe of the car. He placed his copy of Yevtushenko in my lap and squeezed my hand. I felt the warmth and the pressure and knew I would be all right.

When I was back in high school, set free to live, I couldn't dance or ride a bike or go to gym class, but I had plenty of time to look up the poetry of Yevtushenko. I decided that Alexi must have read me these lines:

I sing and drink
giving no thought to death
with arms outspread
I fall on the grass
and if, in this wide world, I come to die
then it's certain to be
from sheer joy that I live.

Jenine Holmes

On Quodlibets

"Who is this?" I asked, breaking into the photographer's concentration, my voice filling the airy studio high above West 26th Street.

Bard poked his head out from behind the large format camera, the whiteness of his skin and hair, framed by the blackness of his equipment.

"You don't know? It's Nina Simone. You strike me as someone who'd love her."

"Love? Within one track, I needed Nina Simone the way I needed oxygen. Her voice and lyrics made sense out of the tragic. At twenty-seven, I had witnessed a beloved father figure transform from a tall, talented artist, a striking black man, into an urn of gray ash scattered over the emerald grounds of his upstate New York home. Seven months later, my boyfriend died from pulmonary edema, a complication of undiagnosed pneumonia. He was twenty-six. After six months under a black depression, I gave in and started seeing a psychiatrist. "The talking cure" had yet to take root. But the singing cure did that morning in a Chelsea loft, as the first notes of "Little Girl Blue" reached my ears. A classic fugue mixed with a traditional Christmas carol, "Good King Wenceslas" the odd, whimsical tension between the two, a quodlibet, created luminosity in the air and the undulating pitch in my stomach.

Sit there and count your fingers, what can you do?
Old girl you're through.
Sit there, unhappy little girl blue.

The texture of Simone's voice, rich and raw at once, cut like cognac. Nina Simone somehow knew that behind my coatings of mascara and layers of cocoa foundation, my precise made-up face, I felt "old' and "through" and frightened. Death had extracted something my youth could not replace. Now help had arrived. It had x-rayed and examined my feelings then raised them to my consciousness like so much aspirin.

Growing up, one thing was definitive in our household: music mattered. The sale of 45s and albums filled our bellies and provided a middle class

lifestyle: a two-story brick home, two cars, family vacations, from the profits of my father's eastside Detroit record shop.

Chords and crooning coated the atmosphere of our west side home, daily. My mother's taste ran from The Rolling Stones, Dionne Warwick, Helen Reddy and Aretha. My dad favored the R&B soundtrack of Forest City, Arkansas, although he'd abandoned my grandparents' farm upon his return from the Korean War.

I recall my mom dubbed them, "my baby's gone songs," shaped by the grit and rye whiskey-filled voices of Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolff and BB King. Their croaking broke through the peace of our home most Sunday afternoons.

"You have to live the Blues to play the Blues," the old quote goes. My dad, born in a rural farm community, black and male in the 1930s, undoubtedly tapped into the Blues on a level that I could never fathom. Early on, his rebuff taught me not to ask about the past. So, I took up searching his things for answers.

As my mom cooked, and my dad tended the yard, I'd sneak into his second floor office, in the rear of the house, my stocking feet sliding across the oak floor, prying open the closet door, and peering into the red leather box on the floor. My fingers would slide over the smooth, black, shiny rims of the 78s; as mysterious as my father. Forty-fives ruled my musical universe, 45s funded my dad's business bank account. Why did he hold on to these records?

Forty years later, the LPs of Jackson Brown, James Taylor and Joan Armatrading, the soundtrack of my teens and twenties idle under a wooden cabinet in my Manhattan apartment in thickening dust. That music shepherded me into adulthood. Now I needed Nina Simone to get me to sanity.

After the team completed the photography shoot for an advertising campaign I'd created, now lost to memory, after the models were released and client had been called back to her office, Bard and I were alone. After some time, he strode across the loft over to the black leather sofa where I sat reading e-mails and extended his hand toward me.

"Here," he said, pushing Simone's CD forward. "I could tell it really resonated with you. Take it."

Bard, a middle-aged man who bore more than a passing resemblance to the late night host David Letterman, a white man who'd married a Japanese woman before it was chic, seemed to understand much that

escaped most. Simone's voice had cut through me, even with my professional face on, even though I was the kind of black woman who was raised to cover up such emotions. He witnessed the connection many black women hold with Simone. Her music embodies our experience in the world, the complexities that our existence creates. We view Simone as a representation of the utterly personal, translating the quodlibet factors of living as a black woman in America.

The first time I heard Simone sing, "I Love You Porgy," heard her murmur, "don't let him handle me with his hot hands," I burst into tears. I'd known those "hot hands." I knew what she was running from, and to, Nina's voice was the voice of the unsaid.

A quodlibet can yield a vast amount of results. And I felt each and every one of them when I first viewed the images of the actress Zoe Saldana, made up to play the lead in *Nina,* the biopic based on Simone's life. The sight of Saldana's café au lait skin darken through prodigious quantities of make up, her slim aquiline nose broadened by a Negroid prosthetic and the talents of a makeup artist. Eighty-nine years since the entertainer Al Jolson, a white Russian Jew, smeared his pale skin with shinny black paint and sang "Mammy," an old beloved plantation ditty in the movie *The Jazz Singer,* we have Saldana, a fair skinned black/Latina woman, taking on the same black-face makeup, becoming a counter-intuitive lightning rod to the very legacy of Nina Simone. Since 2014 Saldana has created a firestorm across social media, two full years before the theatrical release of the film. Marches have been planned for the spring of 2016 premiere. Protests. There's even a Facebook page boycott. Log on. Fume. And push post. I am certain Simone would have written a protest song about it.

A prodigy who played her first tune by ear, at the piano, before the age of three, Nina Simone, christened Eunice Waymon, was a child so talented that black and white citizens of Tryon, North Carolina agreed to fund a scholarship for her studies of classical piano. In the midst of the darkness of Great Depression, Eunice was a singular sun. And everyone wanted the same thing for her: for Eunice to attend the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Eunice desperately loved classic music, especially Bach and Beethoven. But with her dark skin, broad nose and thick lips—her less than western classical looks—everything that America denounced in the

1940s and 50s, further complicated the incredible classical music flowing from her singular efforts.

Even among the blacks, Simone suffered. Her dark skin would have prevented her from brokering the divide of light and dark. At the time the "paper bag test," a cruelty that blacks used against one another to further segregate themselves in an already divided society, ruled. If your skin tone was darker than a common paper bag certain societies and organizations were closed to you, even if you were as massively talented as Eunice Waymon, a fact that makes the irony of the fair-skinned Saldana playing Simone all the more disturbing.

The sad state of Hollywood casting and practices has been widely covered passed over for the nominations since 2013. In 2015 Sylvester Stallone, received a Best Supporting Actor nod for, *Creed.* A box office knockout, the only white nominee from the largely black cast. I'm not suggesting that Stallone didn't deserve the nod but clearly he had to act with *someone* in the film. He didn't direct himself. As Ta-Neshi Coates of *The Atlantic* put it, "There is something deeply shameful in the fact that a young Nina Simone would have a hard time being cast in her own biopic."

But that very blackness is what made Nina Simone, Nina Simone. Her voice contained the worry of her family's survival after a decade of middle class existence, of seeing her mother become a housekeeper to help keep the family afloat after six years of tending her own home as a loving housewife caring for her six children. It's the narrative of a black girl in white America long before James Brown recorded, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud."

In 1956, after years of study and accolades, Eunice applied and was accepted to the Julliard School of Music in New York but only stayed a year, limited by her expenses. Then she decided to apply for a scholarship to the Curtis Institute of Music. So certain of her admission to the prestigious school, Eunice's parents moved their remaining brood of four children from Tryon to Philadelphia, to be closer to their daughter. Two weeks after they set up house, the rejection letter arrived.

To aid the Waymons' coffers Eunice tutored students, then, in time, followed a friend to Atlantic City and worked the cocktail bar circuit.

"I couldn't let my family know that I was singing in a lounge, playing the devil's music, so I created a stage name. Nina from a nickname my Spanish boyfriend gave me, and Simone because I liked the films of the French actress, Simone Sinoret."

Even in a bar known for attracting barflies and degenerates, Nina's musical talents stood out. However, the introduction of her voice to the public came through more practical means.

"The patrons tip more when we have a singer," the owner explained to Simone after her first week.

"I don't sing," she answered.

"Well, you do now."

So, we have a bullying bar owner to thank for that voice.

Four years later, after her first album propelled her into stardom, Simone performed at Carnegie Hall. Promoters did not believe she could sell out the famous venue. So Simone and her husband put up the funds.

There's an image of Simone taking a bow on the CD cover from the event, her light blue sequin gown skimming the stage, her hair set in a Diana Ross style bob. The style was in vogue. However, when you look at the photo, it seems clear that the hairstyle functions as a dam holding back the real Nina Simone from the world.

But not for long. The June 1963 murder of the civil rights leader, Medgar Evers in the driveway of his Mississippi home, and the September bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that left four little black girls attending Sunday school dead, moved Simone to write one of her most powerful anthems, "Mississippi Goddamn." Set to a bouncy show tune beat, this quodlibet masked rage.

Alabama's got me so upset,
Tennessee's made me lose my rest,
and everybody knows about Mississippi goddamn.

"I wrote 'Mississippi Goddamn' in an hour," Simone would later claim in her autobiography. "After my husband stopped me from making a zip gun in our garage and going out and hunting some white people."

Now Simone ditched designer duds for African caftans. Her protest songs became her standards. Little Girl Blue was now an angry black woman. At some later concerts, according to Simone's autobiography, in front of all-white audiences, she'd switch out a line from "Mississippi Goddamn" from, "we're all going to die" to "You're all going to die." Simone used her keyboard like a Molotov cocktail.

And all through this evolution, the more Simone embraced her blackness, the more beautiful she became. Even to herself. In one photo she even dons a Cleopatra style headdress, now a self- anointed goddess on and off the stage.

Black and white America has always been slow to embrace dark beauty. Since the age of six, I've known my brown hue was not an asset, once my caramel skin began to shift into a different, darker shade. My parents never spoke of race so I have no idea how the message got in. But got in it did.

"Stay out of the sun, you don't want to get any blacker," my maternal grandmother advised later.

To call someone, or something, black as an insult. And still is.

"The pot calling the kettle black."

"Blackmail."

"Blackball."

In freshman year at Parsons School of Design, in the early eighties, weary from managing my press and curl, I grabbed a pair of scissors off of my fashion designer roommate's desk, and chopped off my shoulder length hair.

"You look amazing," Vickie said when I called her into the room for the viewing. I felt empowered, free.

A few months later, when I strode into my parents Detroit home on Christmas Eve, my mother covered her eyes and burst into tears.

"Oh, now I have a third son," my father announced. The Christmas tree twinkled with lights and my eyes with tears.

While my mother had fretted about pre-marital sex and drugs in New York City, never ever did she think she had to tell me not to cut my hair, my glory. Two years later, when I ended the short-cropped Afro, my dad finally stopped the son jokes. I couldn't take the wounding anymore.

My dad wasn't alone. It wasn't until 1974 that Beverly Johnson became the first African American woman to grace the cover of *Vogue Magazine*, eight years after Donyale Luna appeared on the cover of *British Vogue*. Black beauty is still a rarity on fashion runways. An astonishing "82.7 percent" of designs "were worn by white models," according to a 2013 *New York Times* article. To my mind, it explains the supermodel Naomi Campbell, her rants, her behavior. She's the Nina Simone of the fashion world.

Classic black beauty is still held in higher esteem across the pond. In 2008 *Italian Vogue* published the July "black issue." "With more than 100 pages of the issue, including the cover, feature[ing] images of black women taken by the acclaimed New York based photographer Steven Meisel." The issue sold out in America within hours. I had to call an Italian friend to secure a copy for me.

"Jenine, I got the last two," Luisanna later texted back.

Six months after its printing as I flipped through the pages, tears soaked my eyes. Outside of a few photography books, I'd never seen the beauty of black women **so** exalted.

As an advertising creative person, I've participated in meetings where the skin color of multicultural models is substantially traded on.

"Can we get more mixed race models?" my clients ask, after I push the headshots of brown skinned women, women who look like me, across the boardroom table. The reason is simple. Businesses want more bang for their advertising buck; if consumers can't identify the race of a model as clearly black or Latina then both camps will claim her, maximizing their ad dollars. It's all so much smoke and mirrors. Creative license.

The writer/director of *Nina,* Cynthia Mort, must think so too. Mort wrote a screenplay that remade Simone's real life gay manager into her fictional lover, and then she began the biopic in the 1980's after Simone was living broke and broken in Europe, rather than in the 1960's when Simone wrote her greatest songs and created her legacy. And then cast Zoe Saldana, a non-vocal actress over the rumored lead, hip-hop icon and nine-time Grammy winner, Mary J. Blige.

It's hard to believe Mort, a white woman born in Detroit, could make creative choices from racial insensitivity. Yet, she kept the images of Saldana, an actress known for her appearances in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, the *Star Trek* remake, and *Avatar,* under tight control. No one knows who released the first pictures. Bloggers and journalists speculated that Mort was the source, in an effort to create buzz for the film, while halting Internet bashing. It had the opposite affect.

The images of Saldana first arrived in my e-mail via my African American friend, back in January of 2016, only marked with the email subject line: OMG!

I clicked on the PDF. *She looks like Al Jolsen. My God.*

Of course actors have always played challenging roles. However, Angela Basset became Tina Turner in her biopic, by embodying Turner's spirit, her will, and her stilettos. Cate Blanchett became Bob Dylan in the 2007 film, *I'm Not There*. Through acquiring access to a man's mind and the study of male mannerism. This is a testament to the diversity of acting hires in Hollywood. But, at the time, the most you can do to improve the racial divide is to see race. And as those images of Saldana prove, this is how diversity goes maddeningly wrong to the point of offensive. This

is how it becomes an acceptable idea for a fair-skinned actress to co-op Al Jolson's black face. This is what happens when there is no African American in a power meeting to stop the blackface makeup train from leaving the station. This is how a film that could have meaning will become meaningless.

Still, I can have my Nina my way. I can still be myself and listen to Simone's lessons of survival, hanging in the air of my home, speaking their truth, just as my father did. I can listen to the words of "To Be Young, Gifted and Black," written by Simone after the death of her friend, Lorraine Hansberry at the age of thirty-four from pancreatic cancer, and know that although I am a grown woman with a mortgage, and a 401k to fund, and a kid to raise, Simone is still reaching out to me when she soulfully serenades:

To be young gifted and black.

Oh what a lovely thing to be.

All I can do is pray that others like me who need Simone will find her.

Today, Simone's legacy is carried on in Esperanza Spalding's massive Afro, in her 2011 freshman Grammy winning CD, in her protest song about Guantanamo Bay "We are America." I see her in Erika Badu, singing in a downpour, she and the cloud of her Afro, defiant. I see her in the brown skin of Viola Davis as she commands the camera on ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder,* every Thursday night, thanks to the vision of another black woman, Shonda Rhymes, a mega talent who has revived commercial network television with her vision of America, one that isn't whitewashed or offensively black faced.

Sometimes the best you can do in the colorblind society is to see color. Remove the camouflage. And all this freewheeling diversity undoubtedly led to no one stating what is so obvious to any thinking person: putting dark makeup on a light-skinned actress is an affront to society and in fact, Simone's legacy, the very things she battled against all her life. That may not make them racists but stupid and insensitive does not give you a pass either.

No matter how talented, how dedicated Saldana is to "making a movie for her sisters and brothers," as she has claimed, she is not a visual descent of the South African woman dubbed the Hottentot Venus, born Saartjie Baartman, displayed in the 1810 Paris exposition, because over her overly pronounced buttocks. I doubt she can tap the roots of the dark-skinned Sojourner Truth, who through her unique talents helped

enslaved Africans escape to freedom and proclaimed, "Ain't I a woman," at the 1851 Ohio Woman's Rights Convention, and bared her breasts on occasion some claimed, to quell rumors that she was a man. I do not believe Saldana can ever successfully portray Simone who was denied entrance to The Curtis Institute because they had already accepted the soprano, Marion Anderson, and one talented black woman in their school was enough. Then forty-seven years later the institute conferred Simone with an honorary degree two days before her death. I do not believe Saldana has ever had to redefine herself again and again in a world that tends to value beauty in a world so far from hers.

Ultimately, after Mort and the film's producers move on to their next project, Zoe Saldana will still bear the weight of that makeup. It's one thing for an actor to use the tools of their trade: costumes, makeup and voice coaching to access a roll. It's quiet another to apply qualities of makeup that evoke a painful past for those the roll is supposed to inspire.

What did Zoe think each day in the hair and makeup chair, watching her beige face go dark? Watching her face disappear. Seeing her skin go from passing the paper bag test to becoming a woman who would have had the bag snatched from her hands. I can't presume to know for sure. But the real question is, after the release of *Nina,* how will Saldana go forward?

We brown girls have always known we were never the ideal, the trophy. We've always known our otherness will never transcend the American ideal. But through that knowledge we have created a music icon that still resonates nearly two decades beyond Nina Simone's death. Fortunately, for us brown girls still walking the earth, trying to find the path, Simone left a trail of tears and music to follow.

Lori Wenner

Savasana Tears

"The wound is the place where the Light enters you."

—Rumi

A tear trembles in my left eye's outer rim. I lie on my back on the yoga mat, holding my body as still as possible. In response to the tear, my muscles stiffen as I enter the final pose of yoga practice: savasana, or corpse pose. But holding back is pointless. Volume exceeds capacity; the tear courses down a well-earned crow's foot wrinkle. It pools in my ear, and I suppress a sniffle. A drop glides from my right eye; I squeeze my eyes shut in a vain attempt to subdue the silent streaming. It is futile, and I give in. I surrender as the final song of the communal yoga practice swells:

"*The water is wide, I cannot cross o'er…*
and neither have I wings to fly."

It has been five years since my husband and best friend of twenty-five years, Rohn, succumbed to colon cancer at age forty-eight. This was not my first encounter with death: fifteen years earlier, we'd lost Alexa Christine, the first of our four daughters, to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at the age of seventy-seven days. Since Rohn's death, I have managed to liquidate and sell his business, continue my nursing career, complete graduate studies, maintain a ninety-year-old home, start a business, discover a new passion as a writer, run two half-marathons and raise our three teenage daughters. I accomplished none of this alone. Many people have bolstered me, pushed me, walked beside me and sometimes dragged me down this road: two therapists, three priests, a psychiatrist, a spiritual director, devoted parents, friends and family, a grief support group, countless books, and several writing workshops.

Back in the yoga studio, on the mat, my arms are splayed at my sides. My hands are open, legs extended, feet apart. The earthy smell of sandalwood incense tells me I'm home. The studio's old honey-colored wood

floors creak beneath me as the barefoot instructor pads across the room to extinguish the last light. I am wrapped securely in a blanket of darkness.

Yoga practice is a ritual, no doubt a reason for my initial attraction to it and for my faithful practice. As a cradle Catholic, fifth or sixth generation on both sides, the Church's rituals have fed me through the years: regular Sunday Mass, catechism classes, participation in church ministries, baptisms, weddings, funerals… Catholicism was my identity, the lens through which I viewed myself and the world. But now, I find more peace and serenity here.

"Give me a boat that can carry two,
And both shall row, my love and I."

The tune, "The Water is Wide," fades away, but it continues to waft through my mind. Tears spill down my face. This is a traditional recording of the 15th-century English folk song, not the Christian version sung by a friend at Rohn's funeral Mass. I'd chosen this song for its nautical theme, its depiction of a boatman like Rohn seeking the final shore.

I imagine Rohn in a polished teak rowboat. On the shore waits our daughter Alexa, now a toddler, held by my grandmother. Alexa's arms are outstretched. After seventeen years, she reaches for her Daddy. The boat glides to shore without its captain. Rohn has abandoned his oars, jumped from the boat and pushed through the water; running to embrace his daughter. He holds her close. Alexa nuzzles him with her head of jet-black hair and wraps her fat, porcelain arms around his neck. He raises her into the air, throwing his head back with his loud, hearty laugh. His parents, my grandparents and his friends, gone before him, flank Alexa. They surround him. He is enveloped in a barrage of kisses, hugs and backslaps. *Welcome home, brother,* they say. *Welcome home.*

I took up yoga nine years ago. I'd never been much of an athlete, but pride and vanity can be counted among my sins: thus, the attraction of a toned, lean yoga body. I first practiced alone in our living room with videotapes and studied yoga books to learn poses and their healing properties. Contorted poses were my preference; as I practiced, I paid little attention to my breathing and hoped Rohn or my daughters would catch me in the most impressive, twisted positions. I never took the time for *savasana* (pronounced sha-VAH-suh-nuh). I was busy; who had time just to lie around? A friend repeatedly asked me to attend yoga classes

with her, but, for reasons I didn't quite understand at the time, I put her off.

A year after Rohn's death, I participated in my first communal yoga practice while on a spa weekend. The coordinated breathing and movement, dim lights and instructor guidance led to my most peaceful yoga experience ever, and I joined a studio in town as soon as I returned home. The studio's quiet, gentle atmosphere became an oasis from my over-scheduled life and Rohn supported my yoga practice with his usual vigor. An entrepreneur who had started his successful photography and videography business while still in high school, he possessed the gift of optimism bordering on delusion. Rohn knew he could accomplish anything and projected his confidence onto anyone fortunate enough to know him.

A few years into my yoga practice, I had a surgical biopsy of a suspicious area in my breast and Rohn insisted on attending the pre-surgical consultation. The attractive, young male surgeon proceeded to teach me, an RN, self-breast exam technique. I sat topless under the fluorescent lights as the physician praised my expert arm positioning for breast symmetry assessment. Rohn squared his shoulders and said, "Well, yea. She does yoga."

My biopsy results were negative, but, four years later, Rohn's were not: we learned that he had stage-four colon cancer with multiple liver metastases. My yoga practice waned and then ceased as his condition worsened. After exhausting all the treatments at his disposal, he died fifteen months later.

The support of our family and friends buoyed us through Rohn's illness. They delivered home-cooked meals three times a week, transported our daughters to school, hung our Christmas lights, and gave us generous, anonymous financial support. In the last month of Rohn's life, friends prayed rosaries twice weekly in our front yard under the canopy of our one-hundred-year-old oak trees. Through the nursery monitor we used with our babies, I piped the sounds of our friends' prayers and music to Rohn in our bedroom. The familiar rituals of Rohn's funeral Mass comforted me: the placement of the pall on his polished wooden casket, the girls' graceful reception of sympathy from hundreds of fellow mourners, the prayers we recited that we'd committed to memory so long ago, the songs we sang together. After Rohn's death, attending Mass provided me with some comfort; its predictable sequence gave me security

in my new role as a widow. I knew the meaning of every word, gesture, and ritual. After all, I'd taught my girls that, left empty of meaning, the words and gestures of the Mass were mere superstitious chants.

In Hatha yoga, each pose is coordinated with *ujjayi* breathing: with gently closed lips, we draw breath in and out through the nostrils. The word *yoga*, from the Sanskrit root *yuj,* means "to join or unite." *Ujjayi* breathing yokes the mind and body, unifying breath and movement, head and heart. Gentle throat constriction creates resistance to air, generating the soothing internal sound of soft ocean waves lapping the shore. As *ujjayi* breathing begins before physical yoga practice, I surrender. Distractions and frustrations melt away as my attention turns to the present moment and my mind's chatter grows silent.

Maintaining *ujjayi* breathing can be challenging in difficult poses. I forget to breathe, breathe faster, or breathe through my mouth. When I struggle, a conscious return to *ujjayi* breathing increases the space for movement and I can ease into the pose. When I can't return to *ujjayi* breathing, I back off, stop the pose and rest.

As I'd learned the flow of Mass as a child, I learned the flow of yoga practice. And, as I had in Mass, I began to close my eyes as I practiced yoga. Without sight, I couldn't check my pose in the mirror, compare myself to others or measure today's efforts against yesterday's. The world often overwhelms me: the constant stimuli, my desire for praise and approval. Inside and outside of the yoga studio, I found that closing my eyes quieted the noise in my mind. I craved the peace that lingered after yoga practice and time on the mat became a priority.

Today, on the mat, my soul is exposed and I can no longer deny the magnitude of my loss. I've lost my partner in marriage and family, laughter and sorrow. In the year after Rohn's death, I stifled my grief with the whirlwind of activity that was necessary to put an estate in order. When my life finally calmed, I dove into the chaos of dating. I hadn't dated in twenty-five years, and things had changed significantly since 1988: online dating, texting, email. Naïve and gullible, I faced a steep learning curve. It seemed bizarre to date again just as my oldest daughter began to date for the first time. But I desperately wanted a man in my life. Who was I if I wasn't being valued by a partner? As each new relationship faltered, I fell deeper into sadness. Each failure was a blow to

my self-worth, a blow that I felt was inflicted by a God who I no longer believed cared about me personally. To divert my attention from my grief and pain, I plunged into yet another relationship.

Anger fueled me through those years. It was easier to be pissed at Rohn for the mess he left behind than to give in to my grief. I bemoaned his lack of preparation, his denial of his impending death. I began to see Janet, a spiritual director, six months after he died. With her guidance, I realized it is impossible to understand the essence of a relationship while you are in it. No longer in a relationship with Rohn, I finally began to tie up the relationship's loose ends, alone with the self-acceptance and mindfulness of yoga as my backbone.

But I couldn't truly mourn Rohn until I had mourned Alexa.

Three years after his death, my daughters and I had found our groove; we had our routines; we functioned well. The girls attended a grief support group, earned good grades, enjoyed extracurricular activities and had good friends. I had my act together, protecting my pride by asking for as little help as possible. People said: *You're doing such a good job with your girls. Rohn would be so proud. I don't know how you do it.* But they couldn't see my sadness and my longing. In my few quiet moments, I realized something wasn't right. I confessed this to Janet, and she said, "Lori, you're too hard on yourself. Extend compassion to yourself for all you've suffered." My gaze fell to the floor, then to the single candle glowing in the room. I nodded with hesitation. I could extend compassion to others, but to myself?

The next week, I moved my oldest daughter to college in Dallas, five hours away. On a scorching hot day, I walked through her dorm parking lot alone, arms loaded with boxes. A middle-aged couple walked in front of me holding hands, their freshman son just ahead of them. Dad was balding with a bit of a belly; Mom was dressed for comfort in Capri pants and tennis shoes. It hit me: *I shouldn't be doing this alone. Someone is supposed to be helping me. I am supposed to be holding hands with Rohn.* In the dorm lobby, a dad held his daughter as she cried into his chest and said good-bye. *My daughter shouldn't be doing this without her daddy*, I thought. On the drive home, I waited until my two younger daughters fell asleep and then I sobbed for hours. I cried for my daughters and all they'd lost; I cried because I couldn't protect them from the pain of losing their Daddy; and I cried for myself: my lost future and sense of self.

Around that time, I inexplicably began to say to myself: *My baby died.* Alone in my bedroom, I repeated it out loud, over and over, amazed at the statement's novelty and its ability to wound me even after twenty years. I have always believed that only slivers of a loss are revealed to us over time. The full realization would kill us if it hit us all at once. Perhaps this is the reason it took me twenty years to come to terms with Alexa's death. When she died, I felt devastated, shocked and lonely, but I didn't allow myself to become angry. I continued to believe that God was interested in me personally, that if I prayed and loved my neighbors, kept the commandments and followed church teachings, He would take care of me. In doing so, I propped up a false image of God and of myself in my mind. I hadn't had the courage, strength or maturity to lose my God and myself as I saw them.

Following Alexa's death, I'd minimized, even rationalized my loss, denying the horror of burying an infant. I told myself that babies die every day. I wasn't the first mother to lose a baby; I wouldn't be the last. I'd seen it over and over as I'd cared for babies in the neonatal ICU. There was always someone worse off than me. I had a wonderful husband and family, a supportive church community and co-workers. Some people didn't even have these. I was blessed. Alexa didn't suffer, and I could have more babies.

With my belated comprehension of Alexa's death, the implications of Rohn's death finally became clear. With that came an emotional and spiritual crisis. I'd doggedly clung to my beliefs, and now every part of me—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual—screamed in protest. W.H. Auden notes, "We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the present and let our illusions die." But what would replace my beliefs? Although they were socially acceptable and I believed they made me who I was, they no longer held true to my experiences. I became forgetful, flustered and confused; I showed up for appointments on the wrong days, became increasingly irritable with my girls, and my sleepless nights were plagued by a relentless loop of negative thoughts. I found it difficult to focus during yoga and practiced irregularly.

I'd used anger to protect myself from the full realization of Rohn's death: anger at Rohn, anger at the Church and at God. My fury provided a wall around my heart, to protect it when it could take no more pain. It was effective for a time, shielding me so that I could function, but even-

tually, it gave out. I cried through most every Mass. One Sunday, we sang the responsorial psalm, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him" four times. I'd always sung these words with sincerity before, but I couldn't do it any longer. With each repetition, my agitation increased; my face grew hot; I fidgeted and sighed. Then I did something I'd never done before. I rolled my eyes. In Mass.

The next week, I drove my girls to the Frio River for a summer vacation. During a Buc-ee's restroom break, the usual crowds overwhelmed me: people touched me, shouted across the store and got in my way. Short of breath, I panicked and darted for the nearest exit. Back on the road, we arrived within five miles of our destination, but I couldn't find the campground: I drove the same stretch of road over and over. I couldn't understand the directions; the GPS didn't help, and there was no cell phone service. My heart beat faster; I began to shake; I cursed as sweat dripped down my back. I choked back tears, and when they finally overwhelmed me, I pulled to the roadside. The air in the car hung thick with tension; the girls sat wide-eyed, quiet and fearful.

I apologized. "I don't know what's wrong with me, girls. I feel so stupid. I'm sorry; I'm so sorry."

I took a deep breath and drove the stretch of road one more time. I had missed the large, hot-pink TURN HERE sign at least three times.

A week later, after a Mass that upset me more than usual, I called my girls into the kitchen. I cried quietly as I told them I was depressed: I missed their Daddy, I needed help, and I was going to get it. I apologized for my screaming, irritability, and erratic behavior. I told them I loved them. They stared at me with dumbfounded concern, stroked my arms and shoulders, and said that they loved me. We stood together in silence for a few minutes. As they left the room, I hoped I hadn't damaged them too much.

No matter how hard you tamp down your questions and doubts, there are some that just won't stay submerged. I now permitted myself to ask: Why had God taken Alexa *and* Rohn? I'd followed God's rules: brought up my daughters in the Church, fostered Rohn's involvement in our parish, and told others about Him. Not only had I buried my child, but Rohn had become ill, suffered terribly, and died. Now I felt that my daughters were watching me lose my mind. I'd had enough.

I stopped discounting my losses. Yes, there were people worse off than

me, but that didn't make my pain and loss any less real. My enduring attraction to Rohn crystalized at last. Raised in a loving, caring, intact home, my parents and grandparents had been cautious: following rules was paramount, risk aversion a must. Rohn's adventure-filled spirit had drawn me in. I rode his coattails through an audacious life I wouldn't have had the courage to make for myself. I paid a steep price for that life: I often had to act as clean-up crew for the messes he left in his wake, and some of my real desires were neglected along the way. But the victim/martyr role fit me nicely for a very long time: I complained about Rohn's messes, hobbies and business ventures, and then received kudos and pity for my patience as The Good Wife. Our marital dynamics became clear to me; I understood our dysfunction and accepted responsibility for my role in it.

At a spiritual direction session, I said, "Janet, I used to think I had all the answers. I hate to admit it, but I realize I've had a *quid pro quo* arrangement with God."

She nodded her head.

"I thought if I followed Church teachings and was a good person, God would take care of us. Me and my family." My voice faltered and tears welled. "I knew bad things might happen, that things might get tough, and I was okay with that, as long as God took care of us."

"The arrangement didn't work out?"

"No, it didn't, and I feel betrayed."

"Perhaps you've outgrown it. Perhaps it's time for a deeper spirituality."

I continued taking my daughters to Mass, but my participation in other parish activities dwindled. I no longer rolled my eyes or cried as I sat in the sanctuary's wooden pews. I searched for teachings and scriptures that rang true to my experience. I let go of the God I felt the Church and society had presented to me: a God of rules, condemnation and shame; a God who received credit for the good in the world and none of the blame for the bad. I'd viewed God as an individual, a father figure with a personal interest in me and in the people I loved. This limited belief led to intense hurt and feelings of abandonment when things went wrong, culminating in my spiritual crisis. A priest advised me to stop trying to name or fathom God. I stopped trying to meet others' requirements. I stopped trying so hard, period, and my stubborn mind and heart finally opened to new ways of thinking. I felt an increasing

connection to God through nature, to a benevolent Creator who I could trust to love me as a flawed human being.

My anger at the Church ran out of steam and I recognized it for what it was: another wall of self-protection. The fog of disillusionment and self-righteousness lifted, and I came to appreciate the spiritual foundation Catholicism had given me. But in my heart, I knew I had to search for a deeper spirituality. I had to move beyond the rules and rituals that once comforted but now suffocated me. This scared me to death: it wasn't an easy thing for a Good Catholic Girl to think about, much less act upon. When, in my heart, I returned to the Church, I returned not for confirmation of my dualistic beliefs or for ego stroking. I returned for comfort, for community, and for a reminder of my foundation.

On the yoga mat, a love for my body, wonder for its beauty and awareness of its limits emerged. When I ignored my body, I injured myself. When I returned to practice too soon after injury, I was reinjured. Once I accepted my body's limits, it became easier to accept my emotional limits.

Modification of poses is encouraged in yoga: we are encouraged to perform poses only as our bodies are able at that time. I delight in holding a balancing pose without falling to the floor, although falling to the floor is quite acceptable. Some days, my breathing is uncoordinated, my mind won't quiet, the music gets on my nerves, and the supermodel yogi across the room irritates me. Things just don't click. But that's ok. On these days, I know my effort is enough.

Rohn and I traveled the United States throughout our marriage. He planned trips in painstaking detail, packing our days with visits to every tourist trap and historical marker he could find. We did not relax, take naps or hang out: there was too much to do and see. I've often wondered if, deep inside, Rohn knew he wouldn't live as long as he would have liked. After his death, I traveled to Europe for the first time, alone. I'd done some research, made a list of sights to see, but set no itinerary. I spent ten days in Florence wandering the city alone, captivated by the beauty of its art, architecture, cuisine, people, history and language. I often became lost, discovering treasures I would have missed if I'd stuck to a plan. I took the spirit of adventure Rohn had stirred within me and made it my own, immersing myself in Florence's culture. I heard him

cheering me every step of the way.

I began driving ninety miles to weekly writing workshops in Houston, where I met diverse writers from a variety of intriguing backgrounds. Writing freed my creativity and stimulated my intellect in a way it hadn't been since Rohn's death. I wrote about our life together and our mutual support for one another after Alexa's death, our good times building a family, the headaches of renovating our old home together, cross country vacations, birthday parties, and the laughter we shared. The details of events I had kept submerged in my memory for years gradually surfaced. It was messy, heart-wrenching work, and when my wall of anger finally fell away, I remembered my love for Rohn and faced what I had lost head-on. It hurt like hell to acknowledge the loving, happy husband and dedicated father who was no longer with me, but I found solace and liberation in appreciation of our life together. After five years, I felt finally able to mourn him as he and I deserved.

Around this time, I also sought the help of a psychologist named Nancy. My sleep patterns and eating habits improved. Initially vehemently opposed to the idea, I eventually acquiesced and began taking antidepressants to ease my anxiety. Nancy encouraged me to make yoga and writing a priority. I read the poems of Hafiz, Rumi and St. Francis of Assisi and studied the *Tao Te Ching*. I left my twenty-seven-year comfort zone, resigning from regular hospital work and starting a lactation consulting business where I assisted breastfeeding mothers and babies in their homes.

I'd wasted an enormous amount of energy seeking answers that would help me organize my world into neat columns. I have few answers now, but I've found I don't need them. Yoga has led me to judge others and myself less. Instead of rules and rigidity, I focus on life: on learning, creation and growth. I aim to instill a zest for exploration, adventure, and bending—if not breaking—the rules in my girls.

I appreciate process more, outcomes less. I do not *try* to practice yoga—I *am* practicing yoga, whether I learn a new pose, perfect an old one, modify a difficult one or tumble to the floor with a giggle. Showing up is what matters. I am rooted in the earth, even if I'm making contact through a creaky wooden floor. And when, in poses, I reach for the sky, I reach not only with my hands but with my heart. Within me resides a safe and compassionate space. In this space, stone by stone, the walls of

my defenses have been dismantled, as my dualistic beliefs, imposed from outside and within, have melted away. On the mat, I have found another temple. My inner critic is quiet.

Back in the yoga studio, my tears cease. A soft, padded mallet massages the metal rim of a Tibetan singing bowl and its mesmerizing timbre emerges. I receive the undulating echoes with quiet joy. Like gentle rolling waves, or a fern billowing in a tender breeze, the tones rise and fall until every cell of my body resonates with waves of sound.

I rise from savasana to a cross-legged position. Tears fall from my brimming ear and trace the jaw Rohn caressed. They meander down my neck to the collarbone he kissed and exhaust themselves on a breast that fed our four babies.

Prayer hands to heart, I bow a low *Namaste*. The divine within me honors the divine within you.

Maria Romero

Friending Mom

The shock of learning that your mother is on Facebook is tripled when she is an immigrant. The equation starts early on and doesn't add up. This was the woman who picked dirty underwear off the floor of our bedroom with her feet, ate chicken and rice with her hands, threw pennies into the corners of our house to keep evil spirits away, and sent us to school with scrambled-egg-and-ketchup sandwiches. She didn't stop perming her hair until 2002. The woman who stomped all over my pleas to attend sleepovers, birthday parties, or any social event between kindergarten and tenth grade, was on Facebook. And, it turns out, she listens to Kelly Clarkson.

When you are the child of an immigrant the only thing you want is to be is understood. You don't want a mother who stinks up the garage by frying inkfish or forces you take folkdance lessons or drags you to the Filipino Community Center every weekend. My mother didn't understand what it was like to be an American kid. It was hard to make the case for a new pair of Nikes every school year because she didn't own shoes as a child. It was hard to argue for anything material when the standard retort was, "When I was five I had to walk three miles barefoot through the jungle in the dark to get a bucket of clean water for my family."

I was ashamed of my mother because she was different; short, brown, foreign, and perpetually yelling "Animala ka!" or "Ay-sus-mariajosep!" We'd go to K-Mart or Pay-N-Pak where I would do my best to separate myself from her in public. At K-Mart I would check to see if my hand-painted Madonna mole had smudged in the mirrors of the cosmetics section. At Pay-N-Pak I'd pick out paint samples for each room of the house I was going to live in sometime after the age of 13. I was most embarrassed when she called me in places like Value Village. Why did she name me Maria if she couldn't pronounce it? Somewhere near the clearance rack I would hear, "Mar-ya! Hoy! Come try this on!" which meant, "Stand in front of me while I measure the waistband of these jeans against the circumference of your neck."

In some household far from mine there was a mom who made chocolate chip cookies, not *bibingka*, and listened to her daughter agonize over her 6th grade crush on Gavin Graves. That mom sent her daughter to Barbizon and let her daughter walk the runway in fashion shows at Nordstrom on Saturdays. That mom gave her daughter a hug and "the talk" when she got her period instead of bursting unexpectedly through the bathroom door and yelling, "Don't get pregnant!" before stomping away.

My plan to achieve total independence by thirteen was delayed. I moved into a studio apartment immediately after high school. I took illustration classes in community college. I wrote plays. I was as foreign to my mother as she was to me. A year later I bought a one way ticket to Atlanta. In her stubbornness, my mother refused to believe I was leaving. I showed up on the porch of her house one rainy spring morning to say goodbye. "Ay-sus-mariajosep, stay here!" she bellowed.

"Mom, I told you, I bought my ticket months ago," I said angrily. "You just didn't listen."

"Stay here, I told you," she growled.

"My plane leaves in two hours," I said. "I'm going."

Enraged, she let out a long string of curses in Tagalog as she found her purse. "Be careful, okay?" she said gruffly as she shoved fifty dollars into my hand. Then she gave me a hug and pushed me out the door.

When you are the child of an immigrant you don't appreciate her until you grow up. As an adult, I understand why my mother lived in an acrimonious skin. She was a single working mother with an absent ex and two young, precocious daughters. Most days she was just trying to make it through.

My mother grew up in Palompon, Leyte, a place that still takes three planes, a ferry and several hours in a Jeepney over choppy jungle roads to reach. Her parents couldn't afford her education past the fifth grade but somehow she made it to Manila to work in a Planters Peanut factory. She left a young son and her entire family in the Philippines when she decided to follow my dad to America but I never saw her cry out of loneliness or self-pity. I saw her cry twice in my early life: when she learned her father died and couldn't afford to return to the Philippines, and when my sister and I drove her to hysteria by fighting in the backseat of her 1970 baby blue Chevy Impala on the way home from Grandma's apartment.

When I was thirteen my father took me to dinner and said, "I want you to know my side of the story with your mother. I was a nineteen-

year-old kid in the Marines. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was in 'Nam, then I was stationed in the Philippines. One day I saw this beautiful girl—the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen—standing in an open-air market and I wanted to marry her. We came back to the States, had you and your sister. The problem was I was just a dumb kid when I left Seattle. Then I went to war and when I came back home I saw all my friends who never left and they were acting like they should—like dumb kids. They didn't have a wife, a three-year-old and a three-month-old to take care of, and at that point I didn't want a wife and kids to take care of either. I did a lot of stupid stuff and that's why you're mom and I aren't together anymore."

The "stupid stuff" involved Rainier beer, weed and women. When the drinking and drugs got out of control, when my mom found her blouses in the corner of their bedroom, saw that her lipstick had been sampled, she kicked him out.

Her life had not turned out the way she thought it would. My mother loved my father deeply and sacrificed her life in the Philippines for him, but he chose his teenage lifestyle over her. She was alone in 1980 in a strange new country with kids who were foreign to her; two daughters who fought like feral cats and made fun of her accent.

One day she was so sick of my sister and I screaming at each other that she tore out of the kitchen with a machete in her hand. "Animasa ka! Take it!" she bellowed, shoving the machete towards us. "One of you kill the other so I don't have to hear you fighting all the time!"

We burst into tears, scared. "I don't want to kill her!" I cried.

"Michelle—" My mother shoved the knife in my sister's direction but she screamed and shrunk away from it.

"Why don't you want to kill each other?" she demanded.

"Because," we sobbed in unison. "She's m-my s-sister!"

"Then stop it!" she thundered as she stomped back to the kitchen.

The fighting ceased for fifteen minutes, about as long as my mother muttered curses to herself in Visayan.

Despite our behavior, despite the challenges of being a single immigrant parent, when my mom and dad divorced my mother put herself through trade school, held a job at the phone company, bought a house and two cars, and was remarried by 1987. My baby sister, Tanya, was born the same year.

When I found out my mother was on Facebook all the old feelings came back. It would be like Value Village all over again, I thought.

Except, instead of a handful of people witnessing the measurement of jeans around my neck in the clearance aisle everything would be laid bare for the entire online world to see. She'd shame me by calling me out for something I didn't want my friends to know or embarrass me with her abominable spelling. There would be visual proof of the accent I was ashamed of in elementary school. Maybe she'd comment about something I posted against the GOP or in support of women's rights. Or maybe she'd publicly admonish me about how I spent my money. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

When I commented on a friend's video, the post showed up in her feed. "Maria, I can't figure out what this is," she wrote.

"Mom, this is the introduction to my friend's musical artist," I responded.

"Oh!!okay,ididn'tknowthanksMom," she replied.

The exchange made me cringe. It brought back the shame of a mother who didn't understand; not elementary school, not social mores, not even Facebook. Later she tagged me in a picture of herself with my nephew. Her comments were like her text messages to me: "Maria, I didn 't know ho, what happened i put Q's name before i tag it. Can u chng. It. I tryed but i can't do it. Mom."

The same year my mother joined Facebook she came to visit me. Tanya, now in her twenties, came with her, and together we lectured our mother on Facebook 101. We explained news feeds, likes and sharing, confirmed her friend requests, and suffered through her attempts to post pictures of the flowers in her garden. "Who are all the people who've been friending me?" I asked, "Like Phet Boyles Jr. and Maryfe Villamor and Imelda Barreda Apolinar?"

"Shhht," she exclaimed, a standard nonsensical utterance that meant we should pay attention. "Are you friends with them?"

"Some of them are your friends and some of them are Auntie Betty's friends," I said.

"Some of them I don't know. Some are your cousins, your Uncle Turing and Auntie Alice's kids. Why did you accept if you don't know who they are?" she demanded. Then she lowered her voice as if they were all listening. "Don't accept if you don't know them."

I laughed hysterically as Tanya rolled her eyes in annoyance. "They're our cousins, Mom, oh-my-God," she said.

Tanya is a Millennial. She hasn't outgrown frequent frustration with

my mother. Perhaps I haven't either; I just live far enough away that it's a non-issue. Two weeks ago when I told Tanya I was writing about our mom on Facebook she said, "Did I tell you about the mini-horse?"

Hearing my sister recount stories about our mother is like watching my own private episode of *Parks & Rec* in which my sister, as April Ludgate, is the narrator. "Oh-my-God, Maria," she says in her racing deadpan voice. "She spent like an hour showing me pictures on Facebook of these people who were supposedly our cousins but I've never seen before. I kept asking, 'Mom, how are these people our cousins?' and you know Mom, she never gives a straight answer. One photo album was of this wedding in Dubai that would've been like a Kardashian wedding here. And the other photo album was of a baby shower and it seriously was like the most expensive baby shower I've ever seen. They had a mini-horse, Maria. A mini-horse."

"You mean, like a Shetland pony?" I asked.

"I think it was definitely smaller than a Shetland pony," she said.

I really wanted to see a picture of that magical Dubaian mini-horse.

"Can you ask her to tag me on the pictures?" I begged Tanya.

The next day Tanya called in a huff. "I don't understand her!" she ranted. "She spent like an hour showing me those pictures! And when I asked her to show them to me again she said, 'What pictures, Tanya?' She *knows* what pictures I'm talking about! But I tried to explain to her, 'You know, the ones you spent *an hour* showing me the other day?' and all she said was, 'I don't know what you're talking about'."

It's hard to get information out of my mother. When I texted her to ask about working at the Planters Peanut Factory she texted back, "Who told you that?" It's as if she's an operative for the Philippine government and we're on a need-to-know basis. My mother's date with Tom Selleck at Klahanie, her pride in my academic excellence from Kindergarten through high school, her talkative nature in the checkout line at Seafood City—all hearsay. My grandmother once told me that my middle name was a combination of my mom's first name, my dad's first name, and the word "together." When I asked my dad about this he said, "Ask your mom. She's the one who picked it out. I had nothin' to do with that." When I asked my mother she impatiently responded, "Ay, I don't know. Ask your father."

My mom's presence on Facebook reminds me of a story by Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat in which she secretly follows her mother

through New York City and is shocked to see her buy a hot dog from a street vendor. The shock is not just from seeing her mother interact with the world as a single immigrant woman but also because she's never seen her eat a hot dog. My mother doesn't realize that I cyber stalk her, reading her comments and looking at her pictures, always full of curiosity about the woman I don't know.

We have seventeen mutual friends on Facebook. I approve every friend request from women and men I don't know with names like Cording So and Melyn Capalac Tero. I have no idea who these people are but I know they found me through my mother. I look at her feed and her profile and frequently roll my eyes and smirk at her comments and likes. Aside from Kelly Clarkson, she likes an entertainer named Carson Dean and the groups *Catholic and Proud* and *Our Mother of Perpetual Help*. More than once I've seen pictures of Santo Domingo or Mary Magdalene in my feed with Tagalog captions and her comment of "Amen."

She goes through spurts of activity, comments a lot but posts rarely. When she does, there are pictures of my niece and nephews or smiling selfies in the yard before she leaves for the casino. She posts pictures of pictures, cell phone captures of the old framed photos on the walls of our house. Her writing is hardly worse than some of my friends' texting shorthand. I'm still shocked that she knows how to tag people and use emoticons.

Sometimes I'll see a post from her and miss that fried inkfish or wish I was rolling *lumpia* in her kitchen. On Mother's Day I tagged her in a post:

> *Happy Mother's day, Linda Asbill! The older I get the larger my appreciation and gratitude for you grow. We always had a roof over our heads and food on the table.*
>
> *It wasn't always an easy road as a single mother with two young girls but we made the trip anyway—and survived. I love you and I can't wait to hang out with you in*
>
> *—Boise.*

Her reply was typical.
Thanks!

When you are the child of an immigrant mother, you learn to give up

on dreams of June Cleaver. Love, acceptance and understanding are just inspirational words painted on reclaimed wood at Pottery Barn until you grow and learn. If you listen closely and uncover the clues, you can translate what your mother means. For instance, when I posted the picture of a professor's note that said "Do you plan to be a writing teacher? I think maybe it's your fate," my mother commented, "Good do it. Or write a story book. u always been like to write. Even when u r at u r highschool. Love u Mom," which I took to mean, "Go for it. I'm proud of you. I accept you and love you unconditionally."

Dana Huebler

Oh My God, Cape Cod

Introduction by Judith Dancoff

Reading Dana after her death is both strange and wonderful. In a way, it is the first time I have fully appreciated her writing, free of the need to critique or give feedback. We were writing partners for years, even after she married and moved to Germany when we emailed our drafts and gave our comments in long, thoughtful telephone conversations that encompassed not only our writing but our lives. We knew things about each other that the closest people in our lives did not know, and at the same time, because we were writing partners, could hold the knowledge with the utmost care, allowing it to amplify our feedback without ever entering into judgment.

Now when I read her essays, that door is irrevocably shut, and I can only stand back in awe at what remains—this writer with such a strong sense of place, firmly grounded in a reality that invariably gives way to magic. Her father dies, she dreams of Pegasus pointed east, moves to Cape Cod, and finds love.

I knew Dana when she made that move, a beautiful young woman who had wandered into one of my writing classes and never left my life. For a time she joined me with Kerry in the Silverlake Writers Workshop, but she was afloat in Los Angeles, and when she asked me if she should make the move east, I'm glad I was one of the people who said yes.

My heart is broken that she is gone, this talented kind writer who read my own work with such intimacy and skill, and at the same time, I comfort myself that her writing remains. I don't do well with death, with people I love leaving my life, but with Dana's death, I have come to understand that the depth of my pain is a reflection of how important she was to me, and for that I will forever be grateful.

A writer is lucky to have such a friend and reader in their life—once, twice if they are really lucky. Dana was mine.

Oh My God, Cape Cod

It's the place on earth I love above any other. No matter where I am, I can always call back the smell of salt and sea, of washed-up seaweed and rotting shellfish; hear the soft roar of the ocean, the gentle lapping of the bay; and see the stubby pines, the windswept dunes, and the whitecaps rolling across the green-blue water. On the arm of land carved out by slow-moving glaciers, where ancient trails trod by the Wampanoag still wind through the woods, I found my paradise: Cape Cod.

As a child, I spent nine summers there, in a house in Truro that my parents built in the sixties, when land could still be bought cheap. Most days, we went to the beach, laying for hours in the sun or bodysurfing in the icy water. On rainy or overcast days, my mother found ways for us to reap the fruits of the sea. We fished for flounder from the shore of Ballston Beach, for bass and bluefish from a friend's fishing boat. We walked along the Pamet River bed at low tide plucking mussels from barnacle-crusted rocks and raking the sand for sand eels, thin green fish we coated with flour, fried in butter and ate like French fries. At Cold Storage Beach in North Truro, we waded through waist-deep water digging our toes into the sand in search of sea clams; when we felt one, we'd dive down to retrieve it, fearing the "bite" of the waiting clam. Once, we scoured a sandbar covered with pebbles and shells for periwinkles, tiny sea snails no bigger than a fingertip that we boiled, speared with a toothpick and dipped in melted butter.

At night, while our parents sat on the deck drinking cocktails with their friends, their voices and laughter a low, steady hum in the fading light, we ran through the woods playing games until it was too dark to see each other's faces. Sometimes we camped out under the trees, lying in our sleeping bags and searching the sky for shooting stars while keeping our ears open for ax murderers tromping through the dark.

Cape Cod was my second life. During the school year we lived in a cold, grim Massachusetts milltown on the Merrimac River, near the New Hampshire border. Most of my classmates were Catholic from working class backgrounds and spoke with the harsh accent of the region—with broad vowels (*Bawston* for Boston, *lahf* for laugh) and dropped "r's" (*caah* for car, *de-ah* for dear). My father taught art at the elite all-girls college in town and he was an atheist; we were being raised without religion. Both my parents came from the Midwest, and my brother, sister

and I spoke more like them than our classmates. My mother sent me to school with a brown bag filled with a tuna sandwich on crunchy wholegrain bread and a bruised apple, while my classmates wielded shiny lunchboxes with peanut butter and fluff sandwiches on Wonderbread, with Devil Dogs and Ding Dongs for dessert. From the day I started first grade, I felt like an outsider, and when my parents took us out of school one or two weeks early every June (when my father's vacation began) that feeling was only emphasized. But I didn't care. Once we crossed the Sagamore Bridge, connecting Cape Cod with the mainland, my other, better life began. I felt myself again, happy and free, like I could breathe and relax.

My summers in paradise ended when I was thirteen, when my parents divorced. My father got the house, and visits became complicated affairs; I had to fight with my mother for my right to go there, and when I did visit my father and his new wife, I felt like a guest.

More than twenty years passed before I returned to Cape Cod for more than a week and often, years went by between visits. During college, I left Massachusetts for California, moving from south to north and back again, never feeling truly settled anywhere, then chose Los Angeles as my home, though it never felt right. For almost everyone I knew, LA was the dream city, the promised land—gorgeous, shiny and slick, with perfect weather and beautiful people, overflowing with opportunity, but not for me. I never stopped missing the change of seasons, the cold, and most of all, Cape Cod.

*

It was my father's diagnosis of pancreatic cancer that brought me back for good. Because of his illness, I took a break from my life in LA to be with him during the last weeks of his life. By then he was retired and living year-round in our old summer house with his wife and young daughter. Now winterized and renovated, the summer house we'd grown up in, with its plywood kitchen cabinets, particle board floors, and raw pine walls, no longer existed. Plush carpets covered most of the floor, the kitchen was shiny and modern, the walls painted white or adorned with metallic, mirrored wallpaper, and two fluffy white couches sat on a gleaming hardwood floor in the living room.

Outside of the house, though, little had changed. Truro looked pretty much as I'd remembered it growing up. The town center was still small enough to escape the notice of out-of-towners who often asked direc-

tions to the center after passing through it. The weather-beaten, water-logged, overpriced Mom and Pop store where I'd bought penny candy and comic books was now an overpriced gourmet deli that sold cappuccino, wine, cheeses and jams and jellies. The crumbling one-room post office had evolved into something large and modern. On the edge of the marsh, behind the post office, a string of stores had sprung up in the sand, looking like a street in an old Western minus the tumbleweeds. Every morning, I'd walk down to the center and buy a coffee and a muffin, then walk back up the hill, breathing in the morning air as I prepared myself for another day of caring for my dying father. At night, spent and exhausted, I'd lie on the deck gazing at the panoply of stars in the unbelievably black sky, and trying to ignore my fear of what animals, or people, might be lurking in the woods, invisible in the blackness.

My father's last weeks were anything but peaceful. In the months before his diagnosis, his marriage had unraveled. His wife had left him for another man, and their ten-year-old daughter was living with him. Just a week or so after he and his wife had signed a separation agreement, he found out he had only a month or two to live, and the weeks leading up to his death were consumed with meeting with his lawyer, making arrangements for his estate, especially his body of art, and trying to settle his differences with his wife.

The last outing he made before he was too weak to leave the house was to Edward Hopper's studio, which stands on a lonely dune above Fisher Beach. His three daughters accompanied him on this final journey—me, my older sister and our 10-year-old half-sister. In more than 30 years, I had never seen Hopper's studio, had not even known it was there in Truro, just a mile or two from our house. Even worse, I had no idea until I was an adult that Hopper was one of my father's favorite artists, that he might have chosen Truro as the place to build our house on that basis alone.

The road leading to the studio was almost hidden from the main road, a sandy, rock-covered path so narrow that the pine branches slapped our car as we pushed our way through. We parked in a clearing about 30 feet above the beach and 50 or so feet below the studio, a small yellow cottage unreachable from where we were. My sisters and I played with the dog on the beach while my father sat in the car, the window open to a view of the studio above.

As stressful and harrowing as this time was, my six weeks on Cape

Cod renewed my love for the place. After my father died, I regretted having to go back to LA. Once there, I collapsed into an intense grief, entering the life-transforming process that many people experience when they lose a parent. I started therapy and began to take stock of my life, determined to fix what wasn't working. I allowed myself to finally admit that I wasn't happy living in Los Angeles. I had always felt out of place there—an East Coast exile among so many sun enthusiasts. I hated the desert climate—the dry heat, the relentless sunshine, and the smog that made my brain feel dusty and fatigued. When the Santa Ana winds blew hot and dry from the east, I suffered from wretched headaches and a soul-scorching emptiness. I felt trapped and claustrophobic amid so many millions of people and miles of concrete.

If this is a love story about a place, then Los Angeles was the husband I'd married in haste, without thinking, the passionless marriage that I couldn't muster the strength to walk away from. And I couldn't understand why I didn't feel more. What was wrong me with that I didn't love this great catch of a city?

I had fantasies of moving back to Cape Cod, but I passed them off as crazy. Unrealistic. I was single and in my 30s; I wanted to marry and have kids before it was too late. What would my chances be if I moved to a place whose population dwindled to almost nothing nine months of the year? But what would they be if I stayed in Los Angeles? Lately, my love life had been a disappointing mix of comically bad dates and seemingly promising romances that went nowhere, leaving my heart bruised and weary.

If I was going to make a move, now was the time. I had enough savings to cushion my income for a few months and, as a freelance writer and editor, I could work from anywhere. So, when old friends near Boston offered me their house and car for three weeks that summer in exchange for cat-sitting, I jumped at the opportunity. In July, one year after my father's death, I flew to the East Coast and began my quest, visiting towns within an hour or two of Boston: Northampton, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; Portsmouth, New Hampshire. I spent a day or two in each place and tried to imagine myself living there. And while I had no problem picturing myself drinking coffee or shopping in the quaint downtowns, passing a Saturday morning in the offbeat bookstores I happened upon, or taking the yoga classes I saw posted at the local health food stores, as much as I tried, I could not *feel* myself living

in any of these places in a way that felt normal and right. I was certain that if I picked up and moved to one of these cities, I'd feel stranded and alone in a strange, faraway place.

For most of the three weeks, I went everywhere but Cape Cod, the one place that truly pulled me. In spite of my love for the Cape, I could not see myself living there. Truro and Provincetown seemed like my only possibilities—I knew them both well and still had friends there. But in winter, Truro's population dropped to about 2,000, and Provincetown was an incompatible mix of an ever-growing gay community and a generations-old, shrinking Portuguese fishing community. Where would I fit in?

With only a few days left before my flight home, I set off to visit friends on the Outer Cape. On the way, I planned to check out Sandwich, a town just across the Sagamore Bridge, close enough to Boston to keep me connected to friends, culture and civilization. But the trip ended up taking nearly three hours in the summer traffic, and when I finally crossed the bridge, I had to stop at a seafood stand for a lobster roll before driving through Sandwich's quiet downtown, with its simple Quaker aesthetic. Sandwich is the oldest town on Cape Cod, and many of its narrow, wooden houses date back to the 1700s and earlier. I stopped near an old mill and fed the geese, then drove out to Sandy Neck Beach to take a swim in the bay. It was a perfect summer day—the sky a brilliant blue, the sun glittering on the sand and water. After my swim, I lay in the sun, luxuriating in my return to paradise. But as good as I felt, I knew Sandwich was not the place for me.

My friends weren't expecting me until the next day, so in the late afternoon, I began looking for a room for the night. Until then, I had not had a single thought about how hard it might be to find a room on a Saturday night during peak season on Cape Cod. Now, I realized how foolish that was—every place I passed had a No Vacancy sign. I drove through Sandwich, Barnstable, Yarmouth, and Dennis, then dipped down and started heading west again, through West Yarmouth, Hyannis, and Mashpee, checking for Vacancy signs and sometimes going inside to ask at the front desk if anything was available. Every hotel, motel, and bed and breakfast was full. A small panic rose up in me as the afternoon dwindled away. I was driving into Falmouth, a part of Cape Cod I had never been to but which I'd always looked down on as the congested and touristy cousin of woodsy, sand-swept Truro, the *real* Cape Cod. I had

never considered Falmouth as even a remote possibility.

But now, as I drove past the Stop & Shop and Starbucks, down a long and busy Main Street, something began to stir in me. *I could live here*. This was not a city, but it was a far cry from the empty desolation that Truro offered in winter. There were coffee shops, restaurants, a large library, a gym. I drove around, turning randomly on side streets, making my way down Surf Drive, past Nobska Lighthouse, and into Woods Hole, where I parked and walked around. The architecture was a blend of modern brick and concrete buildings and classic Cape Cod shanties: tucked between two world-renowned research institutes were T-shirt shops, art galleries, and seafood restaurants. Houseboats and sailboats swayed on their moorings on Eel Pond, a picture waiting to be painted. On a community bulletin board outside the general store, I saw announcements for science lectures, yoga classes, and auditions for the community theater.

By now, night had fallen, and I realized I would have to drive off the Cape to find a hotel room. And as I did, something strange happened. As I headed up Route 28 toward the Bourne Bridge, Cape Cod called me home. I felt a quickening in my heart, an electricity charging through me. My entire being pulsed with conviction. *I could live here.*

Driving up the two-lane highway, I watched the moon rise above the trees, the sky turning darker shades of blue before collapsing into a blackness jeweled with glittering stars. The breeze blowing in through my open window carried the smell of pine and sea, and I breathed it in deeply, each breath amplifying the feeling: *I could live here. I could make this my home.*

I found a vacancy in a worn out motel in Marion, a nondescript town on the other side of the bridge. The next morning, I returned to Falmouth and Woods Hole to explore as much as I could in a few hours. A sense of rightness kept growing stronger, and I booked a room at the Sleepy Hollow motel in Woods Hole so I could return in a few days and spend more time in the area. The feeling of rightness never left me.

What had begun as a fantasy, a pipe dream, a fun excursion for the summer had become real. I could see myself moving to Cape Cod, if only for a nine-month adventure in a winter rental. I told myself I could always go back to California if things didn't work out.

When I returned to LA, I agonized for another couple of weeks before finally allowing myself to say yes. Yes, I would make this move. Yes, I

would take the leap and embark on the most exciting and risky adventure of my life. In the next five weeks, I had a garage sale, moved out of my apartment, packed a few pieces of furniture and boxes onto a moving truck, and loaded my tiny Nissan with clothes, artwork, a box of vintage Christmas decorations, and Mickey, my nine-year-old black cat.

On my last night in Los Angeles, I dreamed about a Pegasus: the winged horse in Greek mythology who sprang from the blood of Medusa. The horse in my dream was not a living horse, but a symbol, a red horse with wings enclosed in a circle. I realized, upon waking, that it looked like the winged horse on the Mobil gas station sign; but my Pegasus faced in the opposite direction—its nose pointed East instead of West. I took the dream as a reassurance that this was the right move for me.

One week later, on Columbus Day, I pulled into the driveway of my winter rental in Woods Hole, a sixties A-frame with worn but modern-looking Danish furniture, a white brick fireplace, and wall-to-wall windows looking out over a sea of trees, all just steps away from a private beach. I felt like I'd won life's big lottery. As I unpacked and settled in, I reveled in the cool October weather—sunny skies, bright and blue, the air apple-crisp. I took long walks every day, and at night, watched the sunset from my deck. Mornings, I drove into Falmouth and drank lattes at Coffee Obsession with all the locals. And with the help of friends in Boston and Truro, I began to meet people.

One month after landing in Woods Hole, I was invited to dinner by a woman I'd met through the friends whose house I'd stayed in that summer. Together, they'd cooked up a plan to introduce me to Kai, a German post-doc who worked with my new friend's husband and who'd recently broken up with his girlfriend.

Love happened faster than I ever could have imagined. By Christmas, I knew Kai was the person I wanted to spend my life with. We were married almost one year to the day of my arrival on Cape Cod, and now, ten years later, I am happy to be sharing my life with him and raising three children together.

By following my heart back to the place I loved, I found love. But finding the love of my life ended up taking me away from my other great love: Cape Cod. Even though Kai and I tried to make our home there, doors kept closing on us. We searched for a house in a market where prices were rising by the month, very quickly beyond our reach. Then

Kai got an offer for a professorship in Germany, which came with tenure and the opportunity for him to lead a research group. The offer that was too good to pass up.

And that's how I find myself living on the other side of the ocean, in northern Germany, a world away from my beloved Cape Cod. We live in a hundred-year-old townhouse near the center of Bremen, a city that dates back more than a thousand years. The city has a river flowing through it, a dynamic culture, a world-class soccer team, and bike paths everywhere. We've made a life here and it is a good one; I can honestly say I'm happy.

But it is not my paradise.

Yes, I am sometimes charmed by the riverboats that float down the Weser, impossibly long and flat and carrying strange cargo—gray pebbles, logs and sand piled in pyramids—but it has never taken my breath away like the sight of Nantucket Sound on a sunny day. The water, a different shade of blue depending on the time of day and season, sparkling in the sunlight or gray under a heavy sky; whitecaps rolling to the shore; seabirds diving; a ferryboat faintly visible on the horizon on its way to Martha's Vineyard.

In winter here, at twilight, the trees along the Osterdeich can resemble a painting, their black, naked branches etched into a sky that changes from pale blue to dusty pink to deepening shades of blue as the sun sets. But no winter vision will ever come close to what I saw one frigid January night walking along the beach on Buzzards Bay. For the first time in years, the bay had frozen, and the water near the shore was covered with deep, craggy snow speckled black with shells and seaweed. The snow looked purple under the night sky, and I felt as though I'd stepped out of time, into a prehistoric world.

Of course, in the dead of winter Cape Cod can be a desolate, lonely place, and the region has the highest rates of drug and alcohol abuse in Massachusetts. The last time I visited, during a particularly wet, cold spell in February, the girl who took my order at Starbucks was so out of it she could barely complete the simplest task. I saw a pizza delivery car screech into the parking lot of a nursing home, driving treacherously fast past old people teetering on walkers. High on meth, he had to have been. And there were bored teenagers in sloppy jeans and bad hair cuts shuffling along Main Street smoking cigarettes and talking into their cell phones. My husband has never forgotten the bad taste of the water on

the lower Cape, virtually undrinkable and possibly toxic; and whether there's a connection or not, the breast cancer rates are 20% higher among Cape Cod women than for the rest of the nation.

But still, when I think of Cape Cod, I think of the warm sun shining on the blue Atlantic, the rolling dunes, the endless pine trees, the promise of a warm summer day. On the walls of my new home, I've hung several Edward Hopper prints to remind me of the place I love so much. One, which my husband got on eBay soon after we moved here, shows a man in early middle age standing at a gas pump on the two-lane highway running from the Sagamore Bridge to Provincetown. There are no cars in sight, no customers at the station, just the lone attendant at the pump. It took me years to notice the red Pegasus in the painting, the blurred Mobil sign hovering near the corner. There was the red winged horse from the dream I had the night before I left California for my new life on Cape Cod. I can only guess at the connection between the painting and the dream, but I can get lost staring at the Cape Cod that Hopper captured with his brush: the mystery hidden in the deepening darkness between the sand and the trees, the sun-yellowed grass beside the highway, the watery gray of the twilit sky. But it is the man at the center of the image that holds my eye; so alone but not lonely, he could be anywhere in the world.

Bernadette Murphy

Whitney

Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.
—T.S. Eliot

Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States at 14,494 feet, has been calling me.

I've always been an avid outdoors woman, camping and hiking. Four years ago in my forties, I went backpacking for the first time with my son Jarrod, then 16, both of us learning by trial and error what we were doing. The experience was exhausting, frustrating and painful —but mostly magical. After a particularly difficult day, Jarrod and I found ourselves sitting on a massive outcropping facing the snow-encrusted Western Divide as the sun sank behind us, painting the ice and rocks purple and pink. It was the summer solstice. The moon played coy at first, taking its time to make an appearance, but once risen, lit up the entire forest. Back in our tent, my hulking son asleep next to me, I watched that outlandishly bright moon through the bug-netting, the pine trees swaying above. A sound like horses galloping made my chest tighten until two deer passed a hair's breadth from where we lay. The next day, sore and achy, we hiked homeward, and when tiredness overtook us, we shouted lines from "The Jaberwocky," Jarrod's favorite poem. "O frabjous day!" we sang to the trees as our legs protested against each further step. "Callooh! Callay!" And then we quieted down and hiked in silence, passing the trail mix back and forth.

That trip had taken us along the High Sierra Trail on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada, Whitney still some 70 miles further on. Every hour during that trip, and monthly since then, Jarrod's refrain has been the same. "I really want to do Whitney."

So do I.

The truth is, I don't know if I'm able. Even if we were to attempt the summit from the eastern side—the route most people take—the hike

would cover 22 miles roundtrip with an elevation gain of 6,135 feet.

Every year, there are fatalities and horrific scenarios along the Whitney trail—people slip on the ice in June, are struck by lightning, or are held hostage by rogue storms. Known as the highest "walk-up" peak in North America–you don't need technical equipment or special know-how to climb it —Whitney is far from a stroll in the park. And yet, what I fear most is not death or injury but embarrassment. I don't want to be the one the group is stuck waiting for, the person they wish they'd left behind —the one who causes the summit to be abandoned.

But that's the thing about the human condition: it cries out for revelation. There's something that drives us to test our limits and risk exposure even as we try to inoculate ourselves from the very exposure we seek.

I contact my friend's husband, Rich Toyon, a Boy Scout leader who's climbed Whitney seven times. If I'm going to risk making a fool of myself (not to mention risking my life) it would be good to have an old-hand along.

It's decided: our little group will include Jarrod, who's now 20, Zane, who at 14 is in tip-top shape from Scouting adventures, his dad Rich, who's been leading the Scouts on all those adventures, and me, the middle–aged lone female whose exercise regime is centered on dog walking and occasional yoga classes.

In the lottery for Whitney hiking permits, we are given an early October date.

"Won't it be too cold?" I ask Rich.

"We'll have to carry some serious cold-weather gear, but we'll be fine," he explains.

More weight? You expect me to carry even more?

I get serious about training. Instead of simply hiking local mountains, I carry ever-increasing weight in my backpack as I climb, inching toward the 30-pound mark. Slowly, the pack stops being an enemy and becomes simply part of me.

Less than a month before we're to leave, the largest fire to occur in Los Angeles County in a century explodes in the mountains a mile above my house. The fire will burn for more than a month, charring some 53 square miles. Smoke fills the valley I inhabit, seeps into the bedrooms. Despite a powerful air filter, the inside of my house smells of campfire. My asthma is triggered. Doctors put me on steroids. I can hardly walk across the street without heaving in distress. Only three and a half weeks

until our permitted dates. This may not be possible.

I start slowly. A walk with the dog. A stroll with my daughter. The air quality just about kills me.

I call Rich. "I'm getting better, but I don't know if I have enough time."

He suggests the treadmill in his house; it can be adjusted for an incline and I can hike it in an air-conditioned space.

I look ridiculous, wearing hiking boots and backpack, trudging on a machine in his house, but I begin to get stronger. Rich tells me his Boy Scouts (many of whom are classmates of my 14-year-old daughter) are pulling for me. I hike with more gusto, thinking of them.

Jarrod comes home from college and we pick up Rich and Zane, my heart wild with adrenaline. I'm scared and exhilarated; I can't wait and am scared silly.

We camp two nights at Whitney Portal, enjoying the stream, the nippy weather, the quiet, and acclimate to the elevation. At the Ranger Station in Lone Pine, we rent bear canisters to store our food, and pick up our Whitney permit and WAG (Waste Alleviation Gelling) bags—there are no toilets on Whitney. Our final night camping at the Portal, the weather gets even colder. We put on all the clothes we have and buy more firewood.

"Was that an earthquake?" Zane asks, suddenly alert, sitting by the fire. We'd read about the rash of earthquakes that had been plaguing this part of the Owens Valley before coming. We wait, attentive. Another one hits. It's not huge, but big enough to cause swaying. The largest is 5.2 –good sized. But everything stays calm in the forest. No rocks tumble down, no alarms go off. It's just part of the risk of being alive, I remind myself. We turn into bed early. Another earthquake hits while we sleep.

Packing the next morning to begin our ascent, I note the clouds over the saw-toothed peak that is our destination. They race across the sky, sporting huge black underbellies. The day is the coldest so far. I'd planned to leave my down jacket behind, relying instead on multiple layers and a down vest, but now pack every piece of clothing I can.

We pass a group of male hikers in their 30s. They look outfitted well, if a bit out of shape. They pass us when we stop to rest. Then it's our turn to pass them when they stop. After a mile or so, we see them for the final time. Did they give up? From what I read, two out of three hikers who attempt Whitney will fail to make the summit.

"You guys headed up?" A group of descending hikers stops to chat.

"The weather's changing fast. I hear they're expecting winds up to 90 miles tonight," they warn.

I try to dismiss the talk as so much gossip. There will be hardship involved. This is part of the game. The only things I can control are my effort and attitude. Weather is beyond my ken.

"How was it?" I ask. "Did you make it?"

"Ah, man," a look of ecstasy crosses the young man's face. "It was amazing."

We hike on. All along, I've told myself that hiking the six miles to Trail Camp where we'll camp tonight, the easy part of the journey. But everything is so much more difficult than I'd imagined. The huge step-ups are like climbing a massive set of stairs while balancing on a precarious dirt ledge and carrying way too much weight for a body this size. I am a human, I want to cry out, not a mule.

But I take one step at a time. I don't have to set any speed records. I keep humming the song from *Finding Nemo: Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming.*

We pass Lemonheads back and forth. Young Zane's pack towers over him. "I knew this would be work," he says as he drops his pack when we stop for lunch, "but this is harder than I thought." It's both shocking and a comfort to know that even Zane, the youngest and most energetic among us, is finding the trek difficult.

We fill up on water from the spring; it's ice cold but delicious. We don wind gear and gloves. The weather is turning.

"When this is done, I'll have buns of steel," I announce once we hit the trail again.

"Forget steel," Zane counters. "Buns of titanium!"

We pass the treeline and altitude takes over. There is nothing but rock and rock and rock as far as the eye can see; an occasional wind-twisted tenacious tree seems to grow right out of the granite. All four of us are having trouble breathing. At every brief stop we take, I'm huffing like I've just run two laps. Rich still leads the way, but stops more frequently now. Then a lot more frequently.

He leans over his walking stick to give his shoulders a rest from the weight of the pack. "Oxygen break," he calls. Though he's climbed Whitney seven times, I learn only now that his last time here was more than 20 years ago.

The day has gotten progressively colder and as we've gained elevation, the winds have picked up.

"Why don't I sprint ahead and grab a campsite before it gets dark?" Jarrod suggests. He's the freshest among us. He hands me his jacket and down vest so he'll be lighter. The day is beginning to lose its color; everything is the color of the granite surrounding us. We pass a hiker who's walking down the mountain as if he's burned the soles of both feet, looking almost drunk. He's wearing a red permit on his pack—a day hiker. He probably began his adventure at 2 or 3 this morning and has been at it for 12 or so hours already.

"Have you been hiking long from the Portal?" he asks.

"Hours."

"Oh…" His whole body collapses. " I thought I was almost there."

I worry after he passes. It's miles to the bottom and he looks terrible. Plus, he's hiking alone. Why would anyone hike this alone? As soon as I ask the question, I know the answer. It's the same reason I almost didn't attempt the outing. No one wants to embarrass himself in front of others. One way to ensure that won't happen is to leave all the others at home.

After the next switchback, we run into another troubled hiker on his way down. He's carrying what looks to be a sleeping bag in a huge muslin storage bag—not its stuff sack—like he's carrying Santa's bag of toys. He's by himself, too. As we move ahead of him, I look down and see him below us on the switchback. He's stopped now, sitting on a rock. He's talking to himself.

A few paces later, I note a packed tent and sleeping bag tucked alongside the trail with a large rock resting on top to keep them from blowing away. Why would someone leave this expensive gear here? Were they too tired to carry it down?

I keep thinking we must be almost there, but we never are. *Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming.* The final mile lasts forever. The wind picks up. We're wearing wind shirts and down vests and wooly caps and gloves on top of a number of hiking layers. I wish the wind would stop. *Just keep swimming*. Maybe by the time we get to the campground it will stop. *Just keep swimming*.

The only way I know we've reached the campground is the sight of a few backpacking tents staked there, looking almost as if they were planted by mistake. Everything is rocks. Big rocks on top of more big rocks.

There's a small lake to one side and a handful of tents among the rocks to the other. It's like a campground on the moon. The wind is really thrashing now. Jarrod signals to me from up on a ledge. When I reach him, he's trying to put up the tent and is in a surly mood. Bent tent stakes litter the area, but the tent's almost up. He asks me to do the rain fly.

"I can't do this alone," I protest. "I need your help."

"I've killed myself trying to get this tent up so you'd have a place to rest," he barks. "I'm freezing and tired and don't feel well." I realize I still have his down vest and jacket. He's been freezing. I give him his clothes and let him warm up. He pitches in, sheepish over his outburst, and places rocks inside the tent to keep it from blowing away.

As soon as it's up, we climb into our sleeping bags for warmth and shelter. The sound of the wind is giving me a headache.

Rich and Zane are next to us, trying to get their own tent up. Rich, who's been nothing but gentle with Zane, speaks sharply. "I can't do this by myself, Zane. You have to help." I'm surprised by his tone; he's been so tolerant. It won't make sense until later, when Rich will tell me that hiking that last mile felt like the hardest thing he'd ever done. Like the lone hikers—like all of us—he didn't want anyone to see his vulnerability.

Why do we do this? What am I out to prove? I no longer know for certain. I simply know that pushing myself to the extremes wakes up a part of me that otherwise remains dormant. I live a cushy life: enough food, enough heat, enough rest on a regular basis. This experience wakes up the part of me that needs to remember how fragile and precious life is. I want to be reminded in a visceral way that I only have so much time here and that I best be careful how I spend it. For as much as we think we have mastered nature, when all is said and done, we are but puny specks in the face of nature's awesome power.

The cold, wind, exhaustion, and altitude have taken a toll. Laying in the sleeping bag, freezing, I think of how eventually we'll make dinner. Eventually, we'll call Rich and Zane over to share our stove to boil water to pour over freeze-dried packets of backpacking food. Eventually, we'll each wolf down a hot meal with a spork. Eventually, we'll venture forth to fill up on water from that lake since we'll need it for the ascent tomorrow morning.

But for now, we're too tired to move.

The late afternoon turns into serious night. The sound of the wind

whipping the nylon tent is as loud as an airplane on take-off. Jarrod and I try to sleep.

"Do you want to eat?" I ask.

"No."

I pop my head out every now and again to look for Zane or Rich, and to see what our neighboring hikers are doing. Everyone is enveloped in their tents, their hatches battened down. It's only 7 p.m.

We can't sleep more than 10 minutes at a time. The wind is too strong, making the tent undulate and lash about. I'm wearing eight layers on the top, three on the bottom and three pairs of socks. I am nestled in a 10-degree down bag with a wooly cap and gloves on. I am still cold.

I need to go to the bathroom and don't want to get out of the tent. Finally, I do, crouching over the WAG bag, my behind bare to the whipping wind, hoping I won't pee on my clothing. The full moon illuminates the stark landscape. The WAG bag instructions say to add either water or urine to make the gelling powder work. I pee for all I'm worth, not realizing that the more I pee into the solution, the heavier the bag becomes. Now I have to lug this thing in my pack, too.

I'm back in my sleeping bag when I remember the leftover food in my backpack that needs to be moved to the bear canister. I nudge Jarrod and tell him. He groans and rolls over. "Since it's in your pack, you should get it," he says.

"But the canister's in *your* pack."

We both get up, grouchy. The wind and cold have intensified. I dig out the food and Jarrod shoves it in the canister, which, in order to lock, requires the twist of a round silver disc with a coin or similar object. We pat our pockets. We left all our money back in the car. I try my thumbnail. That will never work. The wind is ripping at our faces and stinging our eyes. Jarrod searches frantically for a skinny rock. We're freezing and being blown away, but can't leave an open bear canister. *Why don't they make skinny rocks!*

"Go see if Rich has a coin," I command. Then I remember. "Jarrod, your Swiss army knife!" Altitude stupidity has clearly hit. He locks the canister and we climb back into bed.

(Later, Rich will tell me that he, too, remembered his and Zane's bear canister. He went outside, tired and not thinking, trying to shove food into the mouth of the canister. "When I couldn't get it all in, I started to use my foot to shove it in," he'll explain. During the night, the rain fly for

their tent will fly off and their tent will collapse two times.)

I keep waiting for morning to come. The night goes on and on. There's a sound the wind makes, like a train in the distance, before it hits. And then, bam, it lets you have it. Sometimes the sound comes and you brace yourself and not much happens. Other times, it's horrible—like the train is about to run you over.

The alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m. According to our plan, it's time to summit.

"Go check with Rich and tell me what he says."

"Dubious," Jarrod reports. We decide to check again later.

5:30 a.m. Still dubious.

6 a.m. Other hikers are bustling about. I call down to one group. "What do you think? Are you guys continuing?"

They shake their heads no.

"Let's rest and see what it looks like when the sun's fully up," Rich suggests.

As the time ticks away, I know my chances to summit are going with it. I can only control my effort and attitude, I remind myself. I'm here for some reason and if I don't get to summit, I'm still here to learn something—though I have no idea what.

When the sun rises, we see the lake where we'd planned to get water last night. It's frozen solid now with wave patterns inscribed across its surface. Serious looking mountaineers are gathering equipment on the ledge below us, adjusting goggles.

"You summiting?" I ask.

Of their group, two have decided to go back down, two are planning to go on.

"If it's this cold and windy here, will it get worse up the trail?" I ask.

"Oh, it's going to get worse. Much worse."

The four of us confer. "I didn't come on this trip to pursue misery," I tell them. The adventure had called to me, not bagging the peak. Rich is in agreement. Zane and Jarrod are bummed, but no one argues to go forward. We've all had enough. We're hungry, exhausted, thirsty, and more tired than we ever imagined.

"Let's get some sleep and then, when it warms up a bit, we'll head down."

For weeks I have been picturing myself at the little shelter on the top of Whitney, raising my arms in exaltation, shouting to the world "I did

it!" I imagine I can see for miles in every direction, view almost the entire lower 48 in one fell swoop. I'm on the top of the world and I feel glorious.

As I drift off to sleep, I let go of that dream.

We doze; the wind begins to die down. All other hikers staying at this base camp have either gone down or up. We're alone. I assess the tent. The items I'd placed in the hanging mesh bag for storage are all missing. My glasses have been tossed about and are askew. The bag of ibuprofen not only went flying during the night, but the pills came out of the Ziploc baggie and are now scattered around the tent. The watch I'd brought has stopped working. The headlamp has ejected its batteries. I look for the water I'd brought inside the tent last night to keep it from freezing. A thick scrim of ice prevents access.

We try to make some kind of breakfast, holding Nalgene bottles and Camelbak reservoirs over the steaming kettle to melt the liquids. All Zane and Rich can handle is a taste of instant soup. I make Jarrod a small serving of oatmeal but he vomits instead of eating. "I told you I wasn't feeling well." All he wants is what's left of his Gatorade from yesterday; it's a slushee. I melt it for him and offer to pack up his things to allow him to rest. Rich tries to break through the ice on the lake to get more water but yields no more than half a liter —and a thoroughly frozen hand.

I pack Jarrod's sleeping bag. Each shove of the down bag into its stuff sack requires as much energy as running a block. I'm sitting on the tent floor, wondering why this simple task is so amazingly difficult, when Rich calls out.

"Hey, do we have hot chocolate? We have a guy in bad shape here."

A youngish man, probably in his early 30s, is sitting on a rock talking with Rich who's covering the man in a down sleeping bag and a silver emergency blanket. I rummage through the bear canister. No hot chocolate, no soup.

"What about the Gatorade?" Rich asks. I dig out the single-serving instant packets. I melt water and boil it to fix a mug of hot Gatorade and electrolyte mix. The man can't stop shivering. After a mug-full, he's able to talk.

His name is John and he's from Glendora. He's in excellent shape and carrying all the right equipment—along with a serious case of hypothermia. He attempted a one-day summit, leaving at 2:30 a.m. last night. For hours, he hiked in horrible conditions, joining a group of hikers he met

on the trail. When he got to within a mile or two of the summit, though, he became disoriented and lost the others he'd banded with. He knew he was in trouble and turned back. Coming down the trail, though, he passed out repeatedly and prayed he'd find someone still in Trail Camp to help him.

We are the only people left.

"Would you be able to take more Gatorade?" I ask. We're now using what little ice water Rich was able to get from the lake, the last of our water. John slowly drinks the second mug. By now, the wind has finally calmed and the sun has come out. The high at Trail Camp today will not break the freezing mark, but the sun feels like a benediction. After about an hour, John says he better head down the mountain.

"If you wait for us to finishing packing," I offer, "we'll walk with you."

"I want to start moving now that I'm a little warmer." He's still shivering, but standing and walking around. He hands back the sleeping bag but takes the emergency blanket with him, wrapped around his shoulders.

I watch him fade down the trail. A flash of silver and then he's gone.

Finally we start down. We're dehydrated and have no water. We pass waterfalls that only yesterday afternoon were flowing; they're nearly solid ice now. We run into a ranger and tell him about John.

"Man, that guy's lucky he found you," the ranger says. "If not, he probably would have perished."

Really?

"This is a really dangerous time to be doing this hike," the ranger explains. "The weather turns so quickly. Tonight, it's going to be even 10 degrees colder."

We mention the helicopter we heard during the night.

"We had to rescue a hiker on the Mountaineer Route," the ranger says. "A lot of rescues this time of year."

I think about his words as we hike on. Was this a foolish endeavor? We planned well, we trained hard, carried all we needed. And we got unlucky with the weather. Bottom line: life will hand us what it hands us. It's up to us to decide what to do with it. We could have pursued the peak, but we might have ended up like John—or worse. Then again, we could have decided not make the attempt at all and stayed back home in our soft, warm beds, but what fun is that?

Not that this is exactly fun.

This is about something more than fun. And, I realize now, more than about making the summit. It's about becoming more awake to my life as it's unfolding, being alive in the moment and feeling it all.

We stop for water and lunch at the spring. Jarrod can only eat small amounts. It's funny: I was sure he would be the one giving me a hard time for being a slow poke. And here he is, curled up, barely able to eat, asking me to get him some water. Rich was wrecked last night. And the lone hiker, John? Out of the lot of us, he's the one who should have made it. He was young, fit, outfitted, and ready to go. And yet he ended up in the worst shape of all.

We never know what's in store. While we can prepare as best as possible for what we *hope* will unfold, we can never make the unpredictable go away, nor insure that things will work out the way we'd have them. Even when we've given the best effort we can muster, sometimes things don't work out. And then it just comes down to attitude, and accepting what is.

The final leg down takes forever. When we reach the Portal in the late afternoon, we chat with two hikers. They stayed at Trail Camp last night, too, but unlike us, had left at 4:30 a.m. to summit.

"How was it?"

"Let's see: our equipment registered wind chill temps of -17 degrees. The wind was blowing at nearly 90 mph," one answers.

"It was interesting," the other one adds. "Not many people around."

I think about it. If we'd pushed through, we might have made it. Maybe I would have discovered I'm stronger than I think I am. But when I'm honest with myself, I'm glad we didn't.

We inch our way to the car, disposing of used WAG bags and rejoicing in access to solar toilets. Every step hurts. I can't wait to pull off my boots.

We ride home in our stocking feet. Jarrod, who's feeling better now, plays disc jockey, introducing the rest of us to new music.

At a rest stop, we stand to get gas and go to the bathroom. Choruses of "ouch, ouch, ouch" erupt from all four of us. Every body part hurts.

"So, next year?" I ask as we get closer to home. "One-day summit, or reservations earlier in the season?"

Jarrod proffers the idea of the 71-mile ten-day hike from Sequoia National Park, which Zane likes.

"Let's decide in February when the permit lottery applications are due," Rich answers.

As Jarrod drives, the rest of us doze. We hurt. We are tired and cold

and hungry. But we're on our way home. And we received from this journey exactly what we'd come looking for: over the past four days and counting, we have been magnificently, gloriously alive.

POEMMEMOIRSTORY

Claire Guyton

Casting Off

A few days before my 40th birthday I felt in my fingers what I feared was an early sign of arthritis. No, I told my work friend Angela, who is only a few years short of retirement and knows the symptoms of arthritis too well, nothing felt stiff. Nothing ached. I flexed my fingers, then typed on an imaginary keyboard. "They feel… urgent?" Like they couldn't stand to be still. By the next day both hands buzzed with vibration, though Angela swore she couldn't hear the low hum, and neither of us could see the tremble I felt. The vibration was contained in my veins, then, or deep in my bones. I laced and unlaced my boots, rubbed my cuticles with lotion, and invented reasons to type. If I kept the hands moving, the buzzing was quieter, the urge to pound the nearest hard surface with my fists suppressed.

The night before my birthday, instead of crawling into bed after brushing my teeth, I sat at the dressing table in my mother's old room to brush my hair with her gilt and rhinestone brush. It was an early gift from my father and the only thing I saved. The hands loved the cool metal and the heavy sweep through my thick, hip-length hair. The right hand would do ten strokes on its side of my centered part, then transfer the brush to the left hand for the other side. Ten, then another hand-off. The buzzing hushed to a sweet whisper. The glass gems flashed in the lamplight like fireflies.

When my scalp was so tender I winced with each descent of the brush, I stopped. The hundreds of strokes had brought so much oil, that from my part to my jaw my flattened hair clung to my skull and shone like glossy black paint. I smiled at my Mona Lisa face, ignored the answering roar in my ears and the frantic pulse from wrists to fingertips, and climbed into my mother's bed.

The next morning I awoke early with my blanket twisted and bunched in a dense pile across my midriff, my legs shivering, and my hair in a hundred braids. My hands were running up and down my chest, buttoning and unbuttoning the long neckline of my nightgown. I could

hardly hear my thoughts but decided that wasn't necessarily such a bad thing, then headed for the shower, where I stayed much too long while the fingers lathered, rinsed, and repeated many times over. They loved the massaging and caressing almost as much as I enjoyed the relaxed strumming in my ears.

I had to focus to control them and to ignore the ever-rising pitch and clatter of their frustrated vibration whenever I forced them to provide the usual, mundane service of well-behaved hands. The kind of focus that just wears you down. On the way to work I let them go. I steered the car with my knees while my fingers flicked dust from the dashboard, refolded papers I'd left in the console, found a left-right rhythm opening and closing the driver's side window and then the glove box… the window and then the glove box… the window and then the glove box….

When I met with Ray in Marketing to discuss the right slant for the next brochure, I got so tired of the shrieking vibration that I closed my eyes for just a moment, while he was flipping through my proposal. When I opened my eyes again I discovered that my hands had reached across the table to pick nubs from Ray's sweater. He told me gently that he never dates co-workers. I thanked him for his candor. At lunch the hands spent twelve minutes rearranging Angela's carrot sticks. She presented me with a birthday cupcake, then trashed the carrots and advised me to find a distraction, to *occupy* myself. "Here's a thought—try dating." I shook my head, hoping to reduce the purring in my ears. "Well, I won't be dating Ray," I said, and told her about our misunderstanding. She responded by increasing her volume, her lips peeling away from her teeth. "I SAID TRY KNITTING." She leaned closer. "KNIT. TING."

Increasingly that afternoon my hands went to my hair, where they were most calm. The silky strands soothed the sting in the finger pads, slowed the pulse in the palms. The hum became a soft melody whenever I let them braid. Sometimes they would wrap themselves over and over in long handfuls, then hang from my scalp in tangled nests. I spent a lot of time in a bathroom stall, then decided to leave work early to investigate the yarn store Angela told me about. I walked the aisles of floor-to-ceiling yarn with my fingers twined in my hair, feeling uninspired. But then I saw a faint purple just the color of sweet peas and brushed it with an index finger. Both hands plunged into the skein of plush yarn and *would not let go*.

Soon a tote bag stuffed with yarn and needles was my constant com-

panion. I knitted through staff meetings, phone conferences, lunch. I created the "knit break," an excuse to step outside, hugging my latest scarf-in-progress, every time our most addicted smoker rose from his desk, already reaching for his Camels. I could manage about twelve stitches at a red light.

Each stitch was a tap of the bow on the violin, or, depending on color and texture, wind over harp strings or even a jazzy run at the piano. As long as I knitted my life had a soundtrack, the light springy movie music that tells you to relax, settle in—a joke is coming or a reunion. She got the job, his cancer is in remission. As long as I worked the needles and slipped the yarn through my fingers a warm pool of energy filled my palms, radiating in liquid lines through my knuckles and into my fingertips, glazing long, strong fingernails. When I couldn't knit I kept the hands as busy as possible, but just the promise that they would soon be raveling the soft yarn, tap-tapping the needles, weaving strands into fabric kept them in good form, the faint murmuring between music, the white noise of patience. As long as my current project was in sight, the hands were content.

My colleagues seemed delighted by the tote bag attached to my hip, the scarves sprouting from my fingers, my willingness to talk about my new passion. Angela said she could see the glow of creativity in my cheeks, and my boss told me twice that he was pleased to see me so engaged. I was used to my quiet, dim cubicle, and thankful for the space everyone had given me since Mother passed. So the new attention was a bit overwhelming for me, but the hands loved it. Whenever anyone admired my progress, the fingers would rev up the pace a bit and exaggerate their movements.

My hands made four pear-shaped scarves before they developed the right needle rhythm and played out the yarn at a consistent tension. That fifth scarf was a beauty, eight feet long and straight-edged as a sheet of paper. And it was a study in simplicity—the hands and I had decided to use only the most basic knitting for every scarf, the garter stitch. Even purling was a mystery to us. A mystery soon to be solved, for the smashing success of Scarf # 5—even strangers at the grocery store and the gas station couldn't help stroking the end I tossed over my shoulder—made the hands ambitious.

We graduated to socks and then to hat-and-mitten sets, mastering the rib and then the seed stitch, the stockinette and the reverse stockinette.

When I had fortified every relative and co-worker with knitted accessories, the hands and I went on a cardigan tear. We twisted and plaited the stockinette, we went after the simple, chevron, and diamond variations on the seed stitch, and then we increased our repertoire with the basket, the quilted diamond, the waved welt.

In those days the soundtrack was more dramatic, resonant with promise but tipping sometimes into unexpected melodies that made me leap to my feet to pace the room while my fingers worked. Over time I found that I could influence the composition with color and texture, preferring to take up Easter pastels when I wanted an early night and a living room minuet, simple and delicate, my feet in slippers. Or I leaned into a chili pepper red with charred-black accents, my feet pounding on the mud room's stone floor, the heels of my boots applauding. We made our own symphonies, the hands and I.

As we became expert in every stitch and technique—casting on with confidence, casting off with laughs of triumph—I invested more in our labors, buying silk yarns in intense, hand-dyed jewel tones, rustic wools in the hues of a desert landscape. I chose for beauty or shock, for the pleasure of scent or the taste at the back of my tongue, throwing over any wish to control the music. I wrapped myself in the colors of a cashmere pashmina we made with special love for Angela, weaving strands of mellow Spanish sherry with peanut shells. We caressed, danced. Breathed in the scent of cooked raisins and toasted wheat, tasted the metallic salt of the needles, let the notes fling themselves at one another. The hands got nimbler, greedier, eating up the yarn so fast I was tossing off a sweater every couple of days. When Angela pointed out that I had far too many items to give away, that it was time to start selling, I went straight from the lunchroom to my boss's office to quit my job, then launched an Internet business.

If I have one good quality, it's my ability to adapt. When Mother was diagnosed, I moved her into my new home so I could see to her needs myself. I didn't waste time thinking, planning, discussing. I just did it. A 16-month death sentence turned into seven years of salvaged life, limited mostly to our home, true, but rich nevertheless with shared memory and a quiet, warming peace. I approached my new business the same way and within a month I had a list of orders as long as that first scarf, but it wasn't enough. The hands streaked through the projects and scrambled for more. We knitted a cozy for my phone, the television, the computer.

We knitted a desk skirt and a shower curtain. Each remote control now lived in a ribbon-tied knitted baggie, and a knitted tube with a slit sheltered my paper towels. The instruments were all brass.

Still, I couldn't get ahead of the insatiable hands. In the garage I'd piled stacks of bedspreads and decorative pillows, six crates of puffy Christmas ornaments, scores of sweater dresses and shawls and a set of special orders to be posted the next day. Every movable object in my house had been draped, cozied, or bagged. I brooded on possibility, thankful for a rare, calming, fluttery flute that accompanied the hands on a dark and testy afternoon. They were making fast work of an intricate afghan in twelve shades of purple for a Finnish folk singer who had put his order in only yesterday.

Then my eureka. The windows had been rattling in the early spring gale, its grieving wail winding through the seams of my Cape Cod when the idea announced itself: "A *house* cozy!" My shout stilled the hands for an instant before they took on an even more frenzied pace in their dizzied expectation of such an enormous assignment.

The hands and I chose a thick, rust-colored chenille for the house cozy, a nod to the brick home of my childhood. We unraveled the skeins, stroking the fabric, and I buried my face in it, gulping the aroma of my mother's brownies. I worked up a simple pattern based on a tissue box cozy, and we began knitting panels I would edge with hard plastic rods before whipping them together with fishing line. For old-time's sake we used the original, the tried-and-true garter stitch. On dance nights I conjured mosh pits and slammed into arm chairs, my shocked hands temporarily stalled by the antics of my youth.

Angela and I still have lunch every week, so she was the first to learn about the new project. A day or two later I mentioned my giant cozy plan when chatting with my neighbor at the mailbox, and that Friday a newspaper reporter knocked on my door. I was loath to appear on camera, but the hands were ecstatic. There was no denying them, so I taped a spot for Channel 9 while the hands pranced and posed, completing only about half the stitches they could normally manage. I thought that would be the end of it, but no. The whole town went into carnival mode, and soon I was calling in regular progress reports to a local radio show, though I had to struggle with my fingers to get them to dial the number. The hands were only interested in being *seen*. I got used to the fuss and grew bold enough to use these opportunities to market my business, and

now I have enough orders to fund a comfortable retirement.

When Darla, the golden-haired, toothy TV reporter for public television, asked what made me go so crazy for knitting, I said, "Gosh, I'm not sure I can put my finger on it." She didn't react to that, just smiled, waiting. So I said, "It's the seductive whisper of the loops as they slip over the needles, the caress of the yarn raveling through my fingers…." I could see she liked that, so I leaned in, my hands maintaining their usual furious pace. "It's that spun sugar smell of soft, the lemony lush of silk and woodsy bite of wool, the lilting lyric of a perfectly executed stockinette—" The hands had dropped the work to cover my lips, but I didn't fight them—Darla was wrapping up. "I love interviewing artists," she said, teeth up to her hairline. "I always hear something fascinating!" Of course I didn't tell her about my hands. "I just love to create," I said, on her way out the door.

The yarn shop, hardware store, and a church that insisted my knitting was powered by Jesus put together the money to hire a helicopter. A local engineer volunteered his services, and between him and the pilot, the placing of the house cozy could not have been simpler, though the news teams did their best to create suspense with their tense voices and arched eyebrows. I gave four triumphal interviews, then knitted through my own rousing speech—"Knit, Purl, Dream"—at the ribbon-cutting ceremony, where our strutting, shiny-faced Mayor wielded the gigantic, fake scissors.

I would have chosen a yellow closer to butter for the ribbon, but otherwise the afternoon pleased me and the hands, who were slumming on a pair of knee socks. I waved, then lifted the narrow flap of the cozy, noting that I couldn't have positioned it better—plenty of room to open the door—and stepped into my mud room, dropping the flap over the rainfall of applause and some goof-off golfer's call, "In the hole!"

I stood in the thick, darkened hush. The chenille pushed into the windows and the gaps in the siding, so soft, sweet. The house settled, pressed. That familiar, now so gentle, between-knitting wave of buzzing closed over me, and I relaxed into my sanctuary, ready to knit more of the things I know how to make.

No. I was wrong. The house cozy is not my masterpiece. The house cozy is my shield. For once I am as eager as my hands, for once we have the same impulse. The story "Crazed Knitter Stitches House!" dies a quick and easy death, and the phone stops ringing. I put a hold on business orders.

The music now is the hum of attention and planning, and, as the knitting progresses, conversation. I pass along my mother's stories as the shapeless, bunched mass of yarn in my lap grows into my little one, who will spend most of her time there once I'm done with her. "Your Grandmother was born in a place called White Russia," I tell her, "a country far, far away. She spent her childhood in a city called Minsk, where the buildings look like they're topped with ball gowns." She was famous for her refrigerator pickles and beautifully worded thank you notes, but of course those accomplishments wouldn't impress a child. "She made her very own rose. Did you know a person can create a flower?" My little gal is made with top-dollar ivory silk yarn I kiss every ten or twelve stitches. Wasn't born with much hair, just a scattering of Arabica brown I curl into ringlets. She likes carrots and potatoes with gravy and begs me to play Johnny Cash, of all things, early Johnny Cash.

Her older sister has a darker complexion, light champagne. Her Arabica brown hangs to her slim shoulders. She's a sweetie, but of course the hormones will soon descend, and who knows what I'll have to contend with then. For now I disguise my advice in hapless stories about my own school days. How I tried to manage the diplomacy of unwanted Valentines. Or the day I mastered the multiplication table by copying it over and over, unreadably small, on a paper towel my mother saved for years until one day she said, "Do you remember this?" and it fell apart in her hands. I'm considering easing the transition to middle school with a puppy, as my mother did with me, but like the hormones, middle school is still a ways off. The girls like to say how glad they are I never had a boy, and the truth is, I'm glad, too—what do I know about raising a boy?

My mother-in-law's face requires a variety of rib stitches, of course. Her color is good, medium peach melba, creamy with that splash of raspberry pink. I put special care into her back and hips to protect against a fall. Nana tries my nerves with her statements about how *she* always cooked a stew, and how *she* was taught to set a table, but she means well, and I know I will be thankful when she's gone that I was willing to bring her into our home when she needed us most. I know my husband appreciates the allowances I make for his hunched, arthritic mother.

He is the tour de force. I select multiple wools to blend the exact color of his tan—dark champagne, toasted almond, desert sand. I use the hand-dyed amethyst for those movie star eyes my mother would have so admired, and a black and gray mix for that full head of salt and pepper. Sure his shoulders are on the narrow side, and yes, he has a paunch. To

me, these things only make him more lovable. I will say the same when his hair recedes, when he needs glasses all the time, when moles sprout along his ears. I set aside a mellow hazelnut silk for this last, a small skein it took me an hour to select.

When I have seamed the last arm to shoulder, I seat my family at the dining room table. Sheltered under our house cozy, we are free to keep each other company with no distractions. Johnny Cash plays low in the background, the girls are poised over a well-scarred Monopoly board. Coffee steams at my husband's place, his soft hand curled around the handle of the over-sized mug. I have nothing at my place, because I need nothing. I am silent, eager to watch and listen, too full to make space for conversation. I can say only this, after sighing and looking around my table for the better part of an hour: It is good.

The hands are silent, too. They rest in my lap, still as stone.

Jane St. Clair

Touched by Copenhagen

My best summer was the summer I wished I was Danish. Almost everyone at the hair salon where I worked that summer was from Denmark, and they talked English like Arnold Schwarzenegger and when we were alone, they talked Danish. I booked clients and ran the cash register, and they sang as they styled hair with this amazing Danish *joie de vivre,* especially when they sang "Wonderful Wonderful Copenhagen," which they pronounced "Vonderful Vonderful Co-pan-hagg-gan" with too many guttural Gs.

The day I first came to the Little Mermaid Salon was a rainy Friday afternoon in May. I was on my way home from the last week of college about to climb down under the streets of the lush Chicago suburb and ride the subway down into the grimmer inner-city when a hand-lettered sign caught my eye. It was perched above a bright blue window box of red geraniums in over-bloom hung outside an adorable shop that belonged in a European alpine village. With its yellow brick exterior, blue door and blue window box edged in crimson paint, the shop could have been Hansel and Gretel's cottage. Since I desperately needed a summer job, I would inquire within.

The receptionist's room was chaotic and crammed with newly-coifed women trying to book appointments and pay their tabs, overwhelming a sturdy blond man at the cash register. He was in his 20s and dressed in a white shirt and jeans, and he was no good at taking money, could not make change, was barely able to book appointments, and yet frantically trying to do all three at once. Despite the long queue, these clients were in a happy mood, but to add to the chaos, they were opening umbrellas, tying scarves over their hair-dos, and doing all the other little practical things people do when it rains.

When I finally got the man's attention, he said, "Sorry, we is closing."

"I'm here about the job," I said.

"Oh jah," he replied. "They show you the ticket, you take money, you book them next time—jah?"

"Jah," I concurred, realizing that my on-the-job training was over.

The blond man fled back to his station, and I began reaching for tickets and making change. The customers kept coming like computer-generated zombies in a preteen horror movie, so that within 15 minutes, I had collected over $500 in cash.

Meanwhile I was also absorbing the ambiance of the salon. The blond man hummed the intercom tunes as his scissors went snip and as he told each client how chic she was looking. Another blond man, also in his 20s, worked next to the first, and a third hairdresser, a young woman ample but perfectly proportioned with a beautiful face, worked alongside them. The trio acted as if something funny was always happening so they could not stop laughing.

Several hours passed before the first blond man appeared in the reception area once again.

"How you do?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Goot. You come back tomorrow, nine o'clock," he said, handing me a $100 bill. "Is okay?"

"Jah."

"What your name?"

"Mary."

"MAY-ree," he repeated in his accent. "Elo, Carsten and Eva here."

"She has a cute face," Eva said. "We make her hair and she'll do."

That night I rode the subway in the now dangerous darkness of the city with its summer smells of urine and garbage as I avoided the old man fondling my waist and hips, his violation shielded by the anonymity of the crowded train. The subway was always an uneasy transition from the bubble of my college campus, where everyone seemed wealthy and beautiful and free to fret about frat parties, to the apartment I shared with my mother, a domestic servant. Outside the subway windows the reality of city survival flashed by like so many yellow glinting stills from a movie about the Stellas and the Stanleys of the world. I always felt as if I fit into neither place.

The next morning I got to the salon an hour early but it was already brimming with customers, music and the laughing banter of the Danes. I watched the customers—mostly college students and locals—who, like Dorothy and the scarecrow, were being puffed, curled and spoofed for some special presentation. They came for weddings, funerals, baptisms, proms or make-overs or just because.

Around noon Eva came and sat in my reception area.

"I need a cigarette before I do Miss Vonn," she said.

I had only just met Miss Vonn and her entourage, but I had taken an instant dislike to them. Miss Vonn was getting married at the end of the summer and nearly every day until then, she had appointments for colors, cuts and comb-outs for various showers and parties connected to her society wedding.

We could hear Miss Vonn complaining about waiting. Eva angrily crushed her cigarette into a shredded stub of green straw.

"I hate that bitch," Eva countered.

Later when the salon closed, Elo, Carsten and Eva sat in the reception area, smoking and laughing. I felt awkward but Elo was his usual expansive self, "Welcome Mary! Welcome beer!" They each took a bottle and offered me one. I had never had a beer in my life, but I took one out of politeness.

Eva was describing her plan for Miss Vonn.

"I hate that horse face," she was saying. "And once that bitch is married, I cut her hair good." Then she got up and walked like these snobs as they paraded into the shop, noses in the air, all puffy dresses and fancy shoes, like the royal family trotting down the aisle at Westminster Abbey.

"I cut her good!" Eva vowed, snipping imaginary scissors in the air. "And she gets short bangs that make her horse face horsier, and I let her gray roots show through! Ha!"

Elo rolled his eyes.

"She'll be on her honeymoon," Eva went on, "and her hair sticks out of her head and her husband takes one look and jumps out of their bed! Oh my God! There's a dog in my bed!"

"They never come back if you do that!" Elo insisted.

Eva looked at him as if he didn't get the point.

"I shear her the day after her goddamn wedding like a little bald sheep," Eva reiterated.

"What are you laughing at, Miss Mary?" Carsten asked me.

Exhausted from a day so frantic I had not taken time to eat lunch, and high from beer because it was my first beer, I was laughing and unable to stop.

"I like this one," Eva approved.

When I got home, my mother asked why I was so late.

"No reason," I said.

"My god, have you been drinking?"

I replied by opening my purse and pulling out the $150 cash Elo had given me —more than my mother made in a week. Her eyes opened wide for in her world, there was no such thing as easy money much less having fun at work.

"I don't like these Europeans," she complained.

That summer was the summer of my first love. My love had gone home for the summer, so he and I were left with long phone conversations that ended in just listening to one another breathe. I would read his precious emails over on the subway, at home and at work until I knew the words by heart.

The next Wednesday Eva and I were sitting in the reception area with little to do, and she was scrutinizing me so intensely in her frank Danish way.

"When's my next one?" she asked.

"45 minutes."

"Goot, we make your hair."

My hair was the brown color shared by most rabbits and rodents, and I wore it in an artless ponytail. Eva mixed up a purple concoction the consistency of Elmer's Glue, and then she smeared it on my head. She sectioned off my hair, wrapping parts of it in foil, until I looked like some strange robot with a human face. Then she blow-dried, curled and sprayed, and handed me a small mirror. I gasped. Mouse girl had turned into a blonde with glinty gold highlights.

"You need makeup," she said, pulling out her beauty box. "Emerald liner. Mint shadow. Peachy cheeks—"

She was working so quickly with her big fluffy brushes and tiny artist combs that the transformation took only a few minutes.

"Your boyfriend will love it," Eva said. "The one who writes the letters. Wear heels. You cut one heel a little shorter, and then you get sexy walk. Cut tips out of your bra and the nipples are very piquant, *n'est-ce pas?*"

Everything about her was piquant, dramatic and womanly, and everything about her had a story. Her ivory beads came from a boyfriend who had taken her to South Africa. Her ruby earrings were a souvenir from a love affair with an emir in Paris. Several times a day, the phone would ring and a deep German voice would say, "This is Mr. Rolf for Miss Eva."

And she would take the call, and her face would get glowing and sexual because she was madly in love with her new husband. With Eva, it

did not matter I was an uptight scholarship commuter because she made me feel as if we were in a sorority of our own. She made me feel like the Little Mermaid herself, looking up from the black depth of ocean and seeing light and a whole new world up above for the very first time.

Our dislike of the Vonn party also bonded us. We hated their imperial ways, the way they spoke in front of us as if we were wallpaper, and the lack of appreciation for all our efforts in their behalf. Eva would assure me again and again how Miss Vonn would be required to sacrifice her hair as reparation for her sins. And we both knew that Miss Vonn's only claim to beauty was her expensive hair.

All eight bridesmaids, Miss Vonn and her mother wanted individualized hairdos and criticized Eva's every attempt. Eva could do better: she could make the lame walk, and she could make the butt-ugly pass for beauty.

One night as I was balancing the register, the others tried to dissuade Eva from her evil plan.

"You brought in more than $1,500 today," Elo reminded her, "plus the big tips."

Eva's eyebrows crunched together in two angular wings.

"I don't care," Eva spat out the words. "I hate that horse face."

I looked at her sympathetically for the Vonn party always treated me like horse manure too, but she was in such a snit that she took my expression as pity.

"What's with you?" she snapped. "About time you sleep with the boyfriend, you horny little virgin."

My face turned hot and red. I was what she had surmised. I tried to will myself invisible, but inside I was devastated. I slinked out of the salon as tears flooded my face. My struggle was transparent to Eva, who exposed the central issue of my soul, reducing it to something embarrassing and trivial, making me feel absurd. I looked out the subway window and saw lovers younger than me who were already married with their diapered babies, passionately doing what came natural—those things that gave me agony and indecision.

The next day I got to the shop early. Eva put her fingertips on my desk, leaned forward and smiled at me.

"I went too far," she said. "Is okay?"

I nodded. She was the kind of person you wanted to forgive so that she would go back to being her exuberant self again.

That Saturday we were not spared Miss Vonn, although she was just

in for a comb-out. Eva came into the reception area before working on her.

"I need a cigarette," she told me. "Before I comb the bitch."

I looked up with the usual question in my eyes.

"Yes, I will do it, I am not fooling," she replied, taking a long drag, and then smashing the butt into the ashtray. "Soon I have to give these up because of the little one."

I smiled broadly, knowing that revealing her secret was another concession to our friendship.

The summer was ending, a new semester was approaching, my boyfriend was coming back to campus, and then it was the day of the Vonn wedding. We all got to the shop early for the bride and her entourage. I served coffee and Danish pastries as Eva's swift comb teased and snipped ten heads of hair, and a guest cosmetologist drew black eyes and blue shadows, and pink and peach rosebud lips and cheeks. It was a rite as universal and cross-cultural as henna hands in India, red Mandarin silks in China, bright-colored cotton in Africa, and May Day bouquets in Britain—a celebration of virginity and a rite of womanhood. I told the bride I would like to see pictures from her wedding.

When I went back to the reception area, Eva came to sit next to me, allowing a forbidden cigarette before she did the bride's hair.

"The fucking bitch," she snarled.

The baby inside her was beginning to swell her belly, and her breasts had already rounded out, but there was nothing sentimental about her that day.

"I want to see pictures of the wedding," she mimicked me in a sing-song voice. "The thing is, you really do want to see them. You're the sweet one."

"But I wish I were more like you!" I said passionately. "I wish I were just like you."

"And I wish I were shy and sweet like you," she replied.

I looked at her in amazement.

"It's true," she said. "Now here goes the bitch." She rose to her feet, threw back her shoulders and marched forward like a soldier doomed at Gettysburg.

Later that night my boyfriend came to the shop, having just arrived on campus a few hours before. Elo, Carsten, Eva —all of them came out to inspect him. I was worried they would say something teasing, but

they only shook his hands, and Elo said to keep me safe, as if I were his daughter. But my boyfriend and I were oblivious to them the way lovers are when they are enclosed within that enchanted glass globe that only has room for two.

After an entire weekend of wedding dinners, dances and champagne breakfasts, Miss Vonn came in the following Wednesday for her honeymoon haircut. She did not bring me wedding pictures —for who was I in her life? —and she was dressed in blue sailor pants and a French striped terry top, ready for her island cruise. Eva chatted about how chic and cool a short cut would be on shipboard, and how she could manage this style with just a towel and fingertips. Elo looked at Eva as if she were holding a dangerous grenade instead of scissors, and Carsten just shook his head. But she had fatal vision in her crocodile smile, and she was ready and aimed to pounce.

Soon Miss Vonn's carefully colored, permed and highlighted tresses lay on the floor around her high chair, and then with a snip! snip! snip! she had bangs that were too short, sideburns instead of curls, and a shaved neck instead of long blond swirls. She could not see herself in the mirror, but I could see her, and it was not a pretty sight. Every bump in her misshapen head, every flaw in her face from her irregular eyebrows to her George Washington nose and thin white lips no longer had a place to hide in glittering blond curls of distraction. She sat before us completely exposed with her habitual hateful expression and a face devoid of symmetry.

Eva handed Miss Vonn a small mirror, and she let out a howl like a rabbit cornered by a predator, and then she began to wail and cry hysterically.

"I can't go out like this," she shrieked. "What the hell have you done to me, you fucking bitch?"

"Is very chic," Elo said.

But she would not be conned or diverted by him or anyone else. She refused to take her eyes off the disaster of her face. She threw the mirror on the floor, and its silver gleaming shards shattered in the soft little swirls of fallen hair. She did not pay her bill. She pranced out of the shop and vowed to sue us.

After she slammed the door, a quietus fell over the salon. Something momentous had happened. As we listened to Miss Vonn's car drive away, the charge in the room changed from heavy fake sadness to celebration.

Elo and Carsten looked at Eva with great admiration. She had liberated us. Eva began to laugh and click her scissors at Elo, saying, "What are you laughing for? I give you little bangs."

It was my last night in the shop, and so we had a party. Eva had bought me a beautiful pink cake with glitter frosting and candles.

"Poor girl! I miss you so much, my Mary!" she said.

Elo gave me three hundred dollar bills, and told me to come back the next summer. I fought back tears. Although I wanted to get back to classes and my life as a student, I knew part of my heart would remain at the Little Mermaid.

Outside the door, my boyfriend was waiting for me. He grabbed me with his whole body because he had been waiting for weeks to embrace me, and we kissed again and again. I did not think much about weddings anymore, for I had been touched by Copenhagen, and that made all the difference in my life, and it was why I said yes. I kept saying yes.

K.C. Mead

Key-holders

There was a private garden outside my window that summer. Key-holders only. I had a key, but never went in because I always hated the idea of a locked-up park and because, really, it was Papa Nelson's key anyway and not mine at all.

Actually, it was his window too, looking out from inside his apartment, and I was just a visitor there while taking summer courses at NYU.

Not that I was really going to class or anywhere else back then, let alone to a locked-up garden. All I seemed to have the energy for was going to the corner grocer for pancake mix. I must've gone through a hundred boxes of it before Independence Day.

Stir, cook, flip, dump in the trash.

Stir, cook, flip, dump in the trash.

I threw the pancakes away because I was never hungry in those days—hadn't been since moving into the apartment. And I only cooked them in the first place because it seemed better than crying on the floor or standing naked in front of the window wishing someone would acknowledge me.

Around the third week of me calling my mother crying, crying, Why-Can't-I-Stop-Crying, she suggested I might be depressed and asked me to Please-Stop-Calling and Maybe-See-a-Doctor.

Only, I didn't figure I was really-truly *clinically* depressed because, when I actually managed to drag myself out of the apartment, I faked things pretty well. It was mustering the energy to go anywhere to begin with that was the problem. So instead of going to a doctor, I'd just start making pancakes again.

Papa Nelson, my papa's Papa, was spending the summer in DC with his new wife, so he'd agreed to let me stay in his New York place while I was in school. The New Wife didn't trust me though, and Papa Nelson was either too cowardly or too senile to stand up for me, his only granddaughter, so every day I had to be ready in case they decided to "drop in" and make sure I wasn't pissing on the rugs or fucking the doorman on the New Wife's precious antique settee.

The apartment itself looked and smelled thickly of other people's lives. I felt like a ghost haunting the wrong house. Had that stain on the carpet been there for years (juice spilled from a sippy cup), or was it recent (wine sloshed at a cocktail party)? And how long had it taken Papa Nelson to assemble that wall of matchbooks in the kitchen?—one from every restaurant he'd ever been to in New York.

Hundreds of them. Hundreds of logos, names, and colors. And *thousands* of matches.

He stopped collecting them after Nana Ruth died. Or, maybe because Nana Ruth died.

I only ever met her once, at a Christmas party, and that was well after everyone agreed that the Alzheimer's had sucked her dry and left only the bitter, frightened parts behind. The slime coating the insides of an eggshell.

When I first arrived back in May, I spent hours staring up at the wall of matchbooks, wondering why Papa Nelson had put a cap on the collection. Had he lost some spark or drive when he lost Nana Ruth? Or did her death simply strike him as a good time to start ending other things as well?

By June I didn't wonder about it anymore. And by July I only wondered about how mad he'd be when he "dropped in" next and found that I'd struck through nearly every one of his beloved matches. There were only two of them left. Two matches in a single book from someplace I'd never heard of called Teddy's Reddy.

I was about to strike up one of that final pair to light the old gas stove, ready for another batch of garbage pancakes, when a knock hit the door.

Maybe they'll go away, I thought, but then the knock came again. It felt like someone had snuck up and rapped their knuckles straight across my forehead—*Hello? Anybody in there?*

No, I would've told them. Now go away.

Only, they kept knocking. I looked down at the match, sighing, and decided to go see who it was. After all, if I used up a perfectly good match only to get interrupted by an intruder or something, then there'd only be one left before I'd have to go out to the grocery store and restock.

Maybe I'll get one of those plastic, long-necked lighters, I thought, shuffling down the hall. *Probably burn myself less that way.*

I opened the door and found Nana Ruth frowning up at me from her wheelchair.

"You certainly took your sweet time coming to let me into my own home," she said, and ran over three of my toes as she wheeled in past me.

Nana Ruth had always been a big woman. Even when she was bedridden and losing weight all the time, she'd still been big. And death, it seemed, was no exception. The chair squeaked miserably beneath her weight and her wrinkly breasts hung off her chest like a pair of giant, white bats.

"Nana Ruth, hi. Come in." I was already exhausted. "I didn't know you were coming over."

"Where else would I go in this damned chair?" she said, keying the New Wife's antique settee as she passed it.

"Why'd I have to let you in if you already had keys?"

"For the garden," she said, and waved for me to follow her back into the kitchen. "You were making us pancakes, weren't you?"

She stopped before the great wall of matchbooks, their covers all bent and discolored from my handling them and tearing out their insides. I was afraid she might be angry, but instead she only grinned at them and said, "You always were a sentimental old dope, Nellie boy."

Wheeling into the kitchen, she heaved herself onto one of the breakfast bar's cushioned stools and watched as I used up the second-to-last of Teddy's Reddy's matches.

I nearly trashed the fresh pancakes just out of habit, but then Nana Ruth cleared her throat and I remembered to plate them instead.

"Any syrup?" she said, pulling a fork out from inside her helmet of hair.

I checked the fridge and cabinets. "No syrup. There's some strawberry jam that hasn't expired yet."

She made a face like I'd suggested she try smearing shit on her food instead. She shook her head at me. "Just come sit next to me," she said, and patted her stool's neighbor.

It was easy to do as I was told. Comforting, even. I sat next to her, but hadn't thought to grab a fork from the drawer or to keep a spare hidden on my person like she had. I stared at my plate, too tired to get up again, and then realized I could just fold up the dry cakes and eat them like taco shells.

"What's it like being dead?" I asked.

She shrugged as she chewed, her sharp jaw working like a machine. "What's it like having depression?"

I shrugged back. "I don't know. Your bones kind of hurt, so you don't want to move anymore. Then you realize you wouldn't want to move anyway, because moving is pointless. Not in a bad way, exactly—not like a super negative thing. Just pointless."

"You cry an awful lot for it to just be pointless." She said it thoughtfully rather than sad or sympathetically. Interested more than concerned.

I shrugged again. "The crying's pointless too. It just happens. You get trapped in it, and then you realize you don't care anymore. You forget what it's like to care about things."

Nana Ruth nodded grimly. "I know everything there is to know about being trapped," she said. "And I know even more about forgetting things."

"What's your favorite thing to remember?" I asked.

She chewed a while, which I figured was probably the same thing as thinking. Her jaw working as a crank for her brain.

"The wizard," she decided.

"The wizard?"

"The wizard trapped inside that tree out in the garden. The private one," she said, nodding, eating more pancake. She'd nearly finished; I'd barely begun. "Merlin."

"Nana, Merlin isn't in the garden next door." I said it as if I knew.

She slammed her fork down. "Yes. He. Is. The witch Vivien sealed him up in that tree centuries ago and that's where he's been ever since."

"Merlin was a Brit, Nana Ruth. If he ever lived, he lived in England—That means not here."

"Well, look who knows everything all of a sudden! And here I thought it was all pointless." She scraped her fork over the breakfast bar, digging Zen garden-esque lines deep into the laminate. "We nabbed that tree off its island a long time ago. Dug it up, stuck it on a boat, and carted it here. Just another immigrant."

I didn't say anything, but she could tell I still didn't believe her. Maybe she read it in my chew-crank.

"Come on then," she said, hoisting herself up and back into her wheelchair. "I'll show you—And don't you forget to bring that last match either."

I thought about saying I didn't want to go, but couldn't work up the energy to argue. I thought about offering to push her chair, but then decided to do it without asking. It gave me something to lean on as we went.

*

The park was small, shaded by dozens of trees, and surrounded by people walking their dogs and wishing they could go inside. A woman in pink walking a Dalmatian watched Nana Ruth's key-holding hand with particular nastiness as I pushed her along. Nana Ruth didn't seem bothered though, not by the glares or by the yellow July heat. She only reached up her trembling hand and rattled the key in its lock.

The gate creaked as it opened and a deep green shadow rolled out before us like a carpet. I pushed Nana Ruth inside and, though neither of us ever looked back, I had a notion that the gate itself took care to lock up again behind us.

Inside, the trees hugged beautiful, well-mown glades and red poppies stood guard alongside bright blue benches. Against the gravel path, Nana Ruth's wheels churned like watermills.

I didn't need to ask which tree was Merlin's.

The other trees all had very typical tree-like looks: trunks made of wood, branches made of skinnier wood, and leaves that weren't made of wood at all. But the Merlin Tree didn't look like it was made of any of these—only hard, wrinkled skin. Almost like Nana Ruth's skin, if hers hadn't been soft and white as glue.

I parked us at its base where some of the roots had boiled up over the ground.

"What now?" I asked, watching as she plucked one of the red poppies that the little sign said you weren't supposed to pluck. It occurred to me then that the sign probably didn't apply to people anymore once they were dead.

"Teddy's Reddy," was all she said, and held out her hand.

I laid the book in her open palm and took an instinctive step backward as she struck up the final match. With only the lightest touch, she turned the flower into a torch.

"Nana Ruth?" I said, but she wasn't listening to me. I looked around behind us, but no one seemed to notice us the way they had outside the gate.

I turned back as she struggled to her feet once more. The flames threw an orange glow across her lined face like a campfire on a cave wall, and suddenly she looked exactly like the kind of woman who might know a thing or two about wizards.

"Alright," she said to the tree, nestling the burning flower down amid

its roots. “Here you go.”

I helped her back into the chair and moved us off to a safer distance as the roots began to shift and shiver. Making a funnel of themselves, the roots sucked the flames up and into their trunk. It was about then that people started noticing us again.

“Now what?” I whispered, staring at the tree.

“Now what?” she laughed back.

I watched the tree, half-expecting blood or wizard-yoke to come bubbling out from its knotholes, but then the sound of sirens distracted me. Purple lights flashed over the bordering apartment buildings as coppers and firetrucks came bugling onto the scene.

The firefighters tried to get in, but there was nothing they could do. It was a private park, after all. Helpless, they gathered up with the cops around the garden’s gate in a big hat-dotted bracelet.

The neighbors quickly realized what was happening, but none of them were willing to give up their keys. Instead they took to throwing great buckets of water out their windows toward the flames. When their arms got tired, they switched to using their showerheads and kitchen sink sprayers, aiming them out garden-ward till it looked like we were standing in the middle of an aquatic tickertape parade. But it was no use.

The tree had transformed into a roaring fist before us, billowing black and orange against a summer blue sky. A sound like thunder cracked down its center and I took Nana Ruth’s hand without meaning to.

She squeezed my fingers so I would know she loved me. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ve got you now. You aren’t alone anymore.”

Suzanne Kamata

A Real Job

You're ready for a real job. For the past fifteen years, you've been fitting in random part time gigs while raising your multiply-disabled child, supplementing your Japanese husband's salary as a high school P.E. teacher. But now, you've had enough of reading *Everyone Poops* to preschoolers, enough of kindergartners groping you during "Duck Duck Goose," enough of sullen businessmen forced to study English after hours in a company class. Enough of scrounging between the sofa cushions for one-hundred yen coins and tofu (only 88 yen per pack!) for dinner. Enough of your husband saying, "Don't you think it's time to go back to work?"

When your Canadian friend who teaches full-time at the local university tells you about an opening—instructor of American Culture—you immediately update your resume. You're American, after all. In between driving your kid to Deaf School and physical therapy, between once-a-week kindergarten classes and twice-a-week businessmen, you've managed to write and publish seven books. You have a Master's degree from a prestigious American university. You know all about Lady Gaga.

You submit your application.

Your husband buys wine. "I have a good feeling about this," he says.

Although a celebration is premature, you drink the wine together. You wait. A week passes, then two weeks. The phone doesn't ring. No one from the university sends email. Finally, you get an official looking letter in the mail, along with a package containing your seven books and various other publications. "We regret to inform you that…"

Your Canadian friend tells you that someone else was hired for the position—a guy from Jordan who wrote a book in Japanese on the U. S. government's complicity in the events of 9/11.

"Sorry," she says, and you can tell by her pained expression that she really is. "I'll let you know when something else comes up."

A year later, you publish your eighth novel, but the advance is small, hardly enough to cover the cost of your daughter's new wheelchair. Your

house is falling into disrepair. Your husband keeps saying, "Why don't you get a full time job?" But there are just so many things that you can do as a middle-aged American woman in rural Japan.

One day, you and your Canadian friend are having lunch at Starbuck's (her treat, because this is something that you really can't afford).

"You know that Jordanian guy we hired?" she asks before taking a sip from her matcha latte.

"Yeah, what about him?"

"Well, a couple of weeks ago he announced that he is no longer going to teach American Culture."

"Can he do that?"

She nods. "He has tenure."

"So what's he going to teach instead?"

"Islamic Studies."

"Huh." Maybe that's what the university wanted all along.

"But there's an opening in the Literature Department," she tells you. "One of my colleagues is going on maternity leave. You'd be perfect for that."

You *would* be perfect. You majored in literature in college, and you've written several works of literary fiction yourself. Although you've heard that foreigners are rarely given jobs teaching literature in Japan, and are usually consigned to teaching English conversation to freshmen, it's worth a shot. This time, you prepare your resume on expensive vellum paper. To compensate, you'll be eating tofu twice this week.

This time your husband doesn't buy wine. He's become more cautious, more crafty. "You need a connection," he says. "That's how things work in Japan. If you don't become friends with the right people, you'll never get a job."

You mention your Canadian friend, a well-liked insider with tenure. And you know a couple of other people who work there—a guy from Uganda and a few part-timers from various countries.

He shakes his head. "Foreigners don't count. Only Japanese."

Two weeks later, your books are returned along with a letter: "We regret to inform you…"

"I didn't get the job," you tell your Canadian friend the next time you meet for coffee.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I put in a good word for you. I told the chair-

man about your literary awards, but…"

"So who got it?"

"This German guy. He's been working in a contract position."

"A German. Huh. And he's going to teach American Literature?"

She waves her hand dismissively. "He wrote his master's thesis on superheroes in American comics. I think his specialty is *The Incredible Hulk*."

"Well, I bet the students will enjoy his class," you say, trying not to sulk. They'll probably enjoy comics more than the Fitzgerald novel you fantasized about teaching.

"Maybe they were intimidated by him," she says. "He has gangster tattoos and he's always yelling at people. Maybe they were afraid of what he'd do if they didn't hire him."

You're not a yeller. After sixteen years of being mother to a child with special needs, you've developed reservoirs of patience. All these years in Japan have changed you. Your street smarts have atrophied. You speak too softly and apologize too much. And now you're not tough enough even for rural Japan.

"But there's another opening," your friend says.

"There is?"

"They're looking for someone to fill the contract position. It's not tenured, but it's full time."

You're already exhausted by this whole job hunting business, but you made too much money in your part-time gigs to remain on your husband's health insurance. Now not only do you have to pay income tax and cover your own pension, you also have to use your meager earnings to pay for obligatory national health insurance. You are now working more but making even less money than before. How is that possible? Obviously you have no future in Mathematics.

You send in your application again, printing your resume on recycled paper. This time you send only three of your eight published books and a handful of articles and book reviews, not all one hundred.

To your amazement, you're called in for an interview. You buy a black suit and a white blouse. You take special care with your make-up. When you arrive at the room where the interview is held, several professors are seated already in a row of chairs. One of them, an older gentleman, says, "I know your husband. We sometimes go drinking together."

"Oh, really?"

Everyone asks a question. They want to know how you will improve students' TOEIC scores, and whether or not you are planning on pursuing your doctorate degree. One asks you to name your favorite Japanese writer. *"Is this relevant?"* you want to ask. Instead you cast about for a safe answer and come up with "Natsume Soseki," even though you've never read any of his books.

When the interview is over, you pick your daughter up from Deaf School, go shopping, and make dinner. Your husband comes home, he looks in the pot and frowns. "Curry and rice again? We had it for school lunch today."

You want to dump the pot over his head and watch the gravy slide over his face like lava, but you don't. Instead, you tell him about the interview. "Who was that guy, anyway? The one you go drinking with?"

"He was the principal at the first high school where I worked," your husband says. "Now he's a college professor."

Later that evening, your husband gets a phone call. It's his mentor saying that you've got the job.

This time, you do celebrate. With champagne. And the next time you go to Starbuck's with your Canadian friend, you pay for the coffee. You tell the preschoolers and businessmen that you won't be teaching them anymore. The preschoolers make cards for you out of construction paper and host a party with juice and rice crackers. The businessmen take you drinking and give you a vase thrown on a wheel by a famous local potter. Your first day on the job, you go to the main office. A secretary gives you a key. "Your office is on the second floor of building eight. Do you know where that is?"

"Umm, I'll find it."

Inside your office is a desk with a big box on top. You look in the box and see a computer that you have no idea how to set up.

Once you're settled in, however, you find that you enjoy the job. Your students are bright and motivated and they don't try to grope you. No one asks you to read *Everyone Poops* or explain business etiquette in Duluth. You don't get to talk about Lady Gaga or *The Great Gatsby*, but you now have health insurance and pension payments, not to mention your own office which you decorate with plants and art. Tofu is now an optional dinner choice.

You now have to attend faculty meetings as an "observer." Most of the time, you are the only foreigner in the meetings, which are conducted entirely in Japanese. Most of the time, you are the only woman. During one, at which the German Associate Professor of American Literature is present, you venture to ask a simple question.

The German turns to the chairman and says, "Isn't she supposed to keep quiet?"

"He's trying to pull your tail," your husband says when he hears about the incident. It's a funny expression. You imagine that you are a monkey being yanked out of a jungle tree. But it seems as if your husband may be right. For whatever reason, your new colleague doesn't seem to like you. Suddenly, there is a savage one-star review of one of your books on Amazon.com written largely in non-native speaker English: "The author is clearly not knowing about the Japanese tea ceremony." "This book is continuing until I feel boredom to tears." Etc. It must be him! Pulling your tail!

You do your job conscientiously, teaching classes which last the full ninety-minutes, making yourself available during office hours, and helping Japanese colleagues with their academic papers. You're desperate for your three-year contract to be renewed. The thought of once again having to scrounge for one hundred yen coins makes you weep. But as you reach the end of your contract, you realize that it hasn't been enough. You've published your ninth novel and taught as many classes as were asked of you—hundreds of students every semester—but you haven't made the right connections.

Although you do your best to stay alert to potential openings, nothing comes up. You learn that an Australian guy who used to run a pizza parlor for homesick foreigners has been hired for a new position that you somehow didn't hear about. Apparently, this guy's had a Master's in Education all along. Also, he has the right friends.

Your contract is dwindling. Your husband is worried. Your daughter needs a new hearing aid.

While scrolling the job listings, you come across a full time English teaching position at a nearby language school. Health insurance is provided, plus four weeks of vacation. There's the possibility of a promotion. The job calls for someone with experience teaching small children, preferably a native speaker. You sigh and send in your resume.

At the interview, the harried young woman who owns the school serves you tea. She doesn't ask you about methodology or how you'll improve TOEIC scores. She doesn't seem to care if you have a degree. Children are crying in the background.

"We're very short-staffed," she says. "When can you start?"

"Right away," you tell her. In fact, you'd be happy to start immediately. You reach into your briefcase and pull out a book: *Everyone Poops.*

A Conversation with Ann Pancake

KM: Can you just talk a little bit about your family? As a girl, what books did you have growing up? And did you go to the library—did you go to the bookmobile, did your mother take you—I mean, how did you fall in love with writing books and stories? I'd like to know a little bit about your life with books growing up.

AP: Okay. Well, my parents were both big readers, which was fairly unusual where I grew up. They both went to college. Their parents were also readers, so we had books in the house from the very beginning and, yeah, my mother took us to the library from the time that we were really little. There were no bookstores, but the few times I got in a bookstore, that was really exciting. So I started telling myself stories when I was really little, and then, like I said, I did have a lot of access to books and not a lot else. We were pretty isolated and we had one channel on our TV. Reading voraciously, that's instrumental when you're becoming a writer. All my siblings, I'd say all of them, yeah, read a fair amount, certainly more than other kids we grew up with, again because it wasn't such a part of their household. And no one read as much as me.

KM: Who were some of your earliest influences as a kid?

AP: I liked the dog books, you know, like *Sounder* and *Where the Red Fern Grows,* and um, Old Yeller, so all the dramatic dog books… Anything I could find that was actually rural, because I don't know how that was for you, but most of the books that I found were set in urban areas, which I couldn't connect to. *Where the Lilies Bloom,* that was very important to me.

KM: And what town did you grow up in in West Virginia, where was that?

AP: I lived in Summersville until I was eight, which is in the central part of the state, a county with coal mining. Then when I was eight we moved back up to Romney, which is where my dad's people have been for a couple of hundred years. That county was more agricultural.

KM: Well, let's stay with childhood a minute. So did any teachers encourage you as a writer, growing up? Did you know that writing was a profession then?

AP: I don't recall much talk about me becoming a writer when I was little, but I did have some teachers, one in junior high and a couple in high school, who encouraged me. I knew that writing was a profession, but I didn't think it was something I could do. If I remember right, until I turned nine or ten, I believed that I could be a writer. Then I lost that faith in myself. Although I wanted to be a writer and I wrote all the time, I didn't think that I would ever have a book published. That was just an unlikely dream.

KM: So when you went off to college, how did you know what to major in? You know, even my friends said that I don't think you can major in writing, so you should just be a journalist. So I was just wondering what your experience was.

AP: I majored in pre-vet at first because I wanted to be a veterinarian, and I thought, I'd be like James Herriott and be able to write. Then it became clear that I just didn't have the math skills… So you know, it's a very familiar story. I switched over into English just because I loved reading, and that's what I was really good at, and in high school my verbal test scores were very high. I think I still wanted to be a writer but thought that I wasn't good enough to be one professionally. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. I intentionally did not get a teaching certificate because I knew I did not want to get stuck teaching high school in West Virginia.

KM: I hear you. So did either parent advise you to do that?

AP: No, they were really good about that. Partly because I think their

parents had pressured them a lot, especially my dad, about what he should major in. So they were relatively hands-off with us, which was pretty unusual. My brother, for example, majored in theater and my grandfather was pretty upset about that but my parents told him to go ahead and do it. He's been an actor in L.A. for almost thirty years now.

KM: So can we talk a little bit about voice? I just love the way you find voice in a character. So when did that start happening? When you sort of fell into the language? I mean, I'm just in awe how in a certain sense they could almost be monologues. And you capture that so beautifully. So could you talk a little bit about voice and how that comes to you in a story?

AP: Yeah, it's interesting that you ask that. There are a couple of stories I wrote in high school that already have the same voice. I find that kind of fascinating. I mean, not all of them, but there are at least two or three that have the same voice I've had ever since. It's very intuitive. I work from ear and I work from sound and cadence, and sometimes I just hear a rhythm and the rhythm propels me to figure out the words. Sometimes I hear the character speaking. Sometimes it's third person, but I still hear it as a voice speaking. It all begins aurally, and then I try to get as much of that down as I can capture intuitively. And when that flow stops coming spontaneously, I try to keep moving forward by copying what I heard and letting that launch me into more words. What comes later, through the copying and then launching forward, is not as raw, it's not as pure, but I can usually capture some sense of what gave itself to me intuitively and then make up more as I go along.

KM: And you were talking about how it begins with voice, never plot. I have friends who just plot like crazy. So could you talk a little bit about that?

AP: There are a lot of students who kind of have the assumption that they've got to start with plot. I've never been that interested in plot. I think I always start with voice, but I guess I could start with character or image. Sometimes I do start with image, but plot always comes

for me later, and it's usually something I have to make up in retrospect. After I've got down the imagery and the voices, then I start looking at all the material I have and trying to see what's in there that could actually be turned into a plot. And sometimes the character's voice will provide that and they'll tell the story and it'll have an arc, but um, yeah, for me it's—I've really had to make myself care more about plot. Because readers, including me—I mean, I want to read some kind of narrative. All that became more of an issue when I started writing the novel. With the novel, I HAD to have decent plotting, and I think got a little bit better at plot by writing the novel.

KM: And how did you figure it out? Because plot is something I've struggled with. I mean, also –people have told me to use Scrivener, which just sounds awful to me. And so I just wonder, do you map it out on the wall or what do you do? I know this is the most basic, but I'm just curious… do your characters tell you?

AP: Like you, I kind of figure it out as I go, so I think part of it is characters telling me. And part of it, especially in the novel, is—well, I have a West Virginia friend, Kevin Stewart, who's good at plot. I asked him for advice and he said: give each character a destination. That was incredibly helpful. I made up a destination for each person in the novel. What did each character want? What obstacles did each one have to get over to get what they wanted? What happened when they got it, what happened if they failed? What happened if they got it or did not get what they wanted. I didn't map it out so much as just make a list: this needs to happen, and then this needs to happen. I constantly revised that list as I got into the material and worked with it. So the plot plan is always changing, but at least what I did gave me some kind of direction.

KM: And so, how, when you were first starting off, how did you manage time? I know that teaching full-time was probably—I mean, you were very protective of your writing time, and that's what I tell my students, that they've got to learn to say no and to be protective. So did you start off thinking that you could teach and write and then realize that was too much. How was the process?

AP: It's kind of complicated because I started teaching when I was twenty-two.

KM: And where did you teach at twenty-two?

AP: In Japan.

KM: Oh, so tell me about Japan. Let's talk a little bit about Japan. I taught English in China in 1987 with my husband, Kiffen. It was our first year of marriage. It was crazy. As much as I fit into England as an exchange student, I did not fit into China. I couldn't eavesdrop there, that's what I found so hard and what I missed. Did you experience culture shock or did you find your writing voice sort of going back? I found that when I was in China, the Tennessee part of me that I'd intended to leave behind was very present.

AP: Yeah. And I think that's exactly what happened for me. I taught in Japan and then American Samoa and then in Thailand, so I spent four or five years in non-Western countries. And that's the first time I realized that West Virginia had a culture that was interesting and that the language was interesting and that there were actually subjects I wanted to write about. I'd gone to those other countries in part because I wanted to find things to write about and have interesting experiences. So, Japan. It was an enormous culture shock. I'd never been—you know, I'd been on a plane once when we flew to the bowl game in Houston, Texas with marching band.

KM: So when you went to Japan it was your second time on a plane?

AP: Yeah, yeah. But the first time it was a charter plane, so I mean, I didn't know how to do anything. I didn't even know that you picked up your luggage at the other end—like I didn't know how you did that or where you did that. Anyway, Japan was completely mind-opening. There was of course no internet then—this was 30 years ago—so it wasn't like you could do a load of research about where you were going, and you also did not have constant communication with somebody back in the States, as an American would now.

KM: We had *Lonely Planet China.*

AP: Right. So I was incredibly homesick, and it was an enormous culture shock. I was very moved by the culture of old Japan. My students, who were mostly adults, were very generous with me and took me all over the place on my days off and showed me—you know, they just showed me so much and taught me so much. They opened me up to how to see art, how to be present with art and with beauty. So, yes, going to Japan was completely transformative. It wasn't physically hard like I know China was, but it was psychologically hard. Very few white people lived in my city, and there I am, with my blonde hair, and as I imagine you were, I was pointed at, yelled at, touched…

KM: It felt kind of like being famous. I always vowed that if I ever saw someone famous, I would walk the other way. There was no sense of personal space. We were two of four foreigners. There was a Canadian and a Brit. I loved my students. I did plays; I had the students write plays that they performed, and they started an English-language newspaper. Called Venus. But because it was a brand-new university—I didn't really know what I was doing. The administration informed me that I was teaching 'Extensive English' and 'Intensive English.' I didn't really know what that meant. They gave us these bootleg copies of Kon-Tiki , so I was winging it.

AP: Yeah, me too!

KM: So what were the living conditions like?

AP: Oh, that's another story. I taught for a private language school, which, you know, it's like ballet lessons there. It's just this—you know, this fly-by-night little hobby. So at first they had me living with the secretary's friend who turned out to be a prostitute. And that's another story. High-class prostitute. And eventually I got into the school owner's parents' home—they had this little sort of guesthouse in the back of their house. It was really run down, but it was a very traditional old Japanese house with these enormous cockroaches and an inside outhouse and you know, the non-flush toilet. But I

loved being in that house, because I felt like I was in the nineteenth century or something.

KM: And did you write a lot of letters home? Did you write a lot?

AP: Oh yeah, I wrote a lot of letters, which I don't have anymore, which just really makes me mad at myself, but yeah…

KM: Have you ever written about Japan?

AP: I've written about Japan but not very well. I think that's when I realized I needed to be writing about West Virginia because the things I tried to write about being overseas were shallow and voyeuristic compared with what I wrote about West Virginia. I saw that then. I realized what I wrote about West Virginia was art and the other stuff really was not.

KM: So were you there about four or five years?

AP: No, I was only in Japan for one year. I was in American Samoa for two years and I was in Thailand for close to a year.

KM: Then how did you decide to get back? Did you think, I want to get back to West Virginia, or that I just want to get back to the States? What was the journey there?

AP: Well, I was back and forth. Because I lived in Albuquerque between Japan and American Samoa and then I realized after American Samoa that I needed to get a master's, so I went back and got a master's at Chapel Hill and then went to Thailand from there and then, you know, realized I didn't really want to teach ESL forever and also—I'd done about a year and a half of substitute teaching in the public schools and I knew that I probably couldn't teach fulltime in public school. I went to get the Ph. D. with the hopes of being able to teach at the college level.

KM: So what was your first job after your PhD?

AP: Oh, it was in Erie, Pennsylvania, at a branch campus of Penn State.

KM: And then where after that?

AP: I in Erie for four years and then many things happened, including a medical crisis and a divorce. I took a year's leave of absence. During the four years in Erie, I realized that I was going to have to do things very differently if I were going to write and teach. At Penn State, I didn't tell people no when I should have, so I felt completely overwhelmed trying to accommodate everyone from my colleagues who wanted me to read their memoirs to students with personal problems. I'd started writing *Strange As This Weather Has Been* by then. So I took a year's leave of absence and moved back down to Charleston, West Virginia to research the novel. After that year, I realized that I could probably limp by without a tenure-track job if I could go without healthcare and retirement. It's now been fourteen years, and I continue to get by by cobbling work together—and I get to write almost every morning. If I'm not writing—probably it's the same for you—I just get depressed and distressed.

KM: Absolutely.

AP: So it's not really an option. I can't do a heavy teaching load. I have to be writing, so it's not really negotiable.

KM: Right, I know, I'm exactly the same. I was freelance until 2009 and then took this tenure-track job, so it's, you know, it was getting two kids through college and now the younger one's coming up. And that's what I'm kind of writing about in this essay now, just sort of figuring out about having a life in two states. I think readers always just want to know how do you do it. I have students about to graduate and you know, they're scared and they're just figuring out, you know, how do you do it? And you do just figure it out, so…

AP: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, there's a million ways to do it.

KM: So you're the oldest of six. So what did your siblings end up doing? Did they go into the arts?

AP: Catherine's a filmmaker and she teaches film at Temple. Sam is an actor in LA. Yeah, so the three of us went into the arts. Laura

was never really interested in the arts. She's the fourth one; she's a social worker in LA, which is what my dad was—a social worker. Catherine used to be a social worker. And my youngest brother is a geologist in Pittsburgh who does hydro-fracking, which is a little twist in the family. Yeah and then my um, number five, he's the one who's a drug addict and he's still back in Romney.

KM: Is he the baby?

AP: No, he's the next to youngest. He is a baby, but he's not the baby.

KM: Do you want to talk about addiction at all? And also, do you ever write about the family and have they ever gotten upset? That's another question that comes up. I just got back from Pat Conroy's funeral. He wrote about everybody and was kind of fearless and so, that's something I struggle with. I've written about my son in essays even before the drugs and he was okay for a while, but then of course—when I've written about his addiction, he just hits the roof.

AP: Yeah. You know, I'm writing about them more now. My newest book has more autobiography than any of the other books.

KM: In the one you're working on now?

AP: No, in *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley.* "Sugar's Up" is basically about my dad and "Me and My Daddy" is about my brother Michael, and his son. *In Such Light,* the first novella, is about my uncle and me. My dad can't really even read anymore because of his dementia, but when he could, he's so eccentric that he thought what I wrote about him was flattering no matter what. My mother, on the other hand, is very invested in propriety and keeping the family secrets, well, secret. You know this stuff.

KM: Yes, yes…

AP: My mother is very upset about the story "Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley." It took me a long time to decide whether to include that story in my collection. I'd already published it in a journal that

I knew my family would never see. For a couple years, I struggled over whether to publish it in the book, but everyone I knew was very insistent that I did include it. Eventually things got to such a destructive state with my parents and my brother that I no longer cared what they thought about my publishing it and I did not ask their permission. You know, I've published an essay about Sam growing up gay in West Virginia. Before I published that, of course, I got his permission and had him read it and approve it. But I just went ahead and published "Me and My Daddy." My mom is very upset about it. My nephew, Mikey, I told him the story would be in the book, and he was all excited and he loves a story. He's 14 now. My brother Michael doesn't seem to care, but Michael's about to die. He doesn't seem to really care that much about anything.

KM: Oh, that's sad. That's so hard. So did you go to Al-Anon or things like that just to help you cope, or did you just sort of go into your writing?

AP: I didn't just go into my writing. I've done a lot of therapy; I've done Al-Anon. I have a strong spiritual practice. All those things have helped me. I'm not really angry at my brother anymore. But his addiction has destroyed him, destroyed my parents, and has now destroyed our family farm. And then there's Mikey. My main concern now is my nephew, Michael's son, and he's not in good shape. So it's just a huge mess, and um, yeah. You know.

KM: I know, we do know. And my husband, we've been really united, so it's really so far as just keeping our son out of the house.

AP: Good.

KM: Because we have to.

AP: Good.

KM: But it's been years and years and we think Jesus Christ, can't we be beyond this, but we can't be, because he's still in his addiction.

AP: That's right.

KM: And so we just…the more I focus on me and what I have to do and the girls; Lucy's 25 and Norah's 17. In the old days, I used to tell them, "Well you know, come on, he's your brother, we've got to pull together." But that's, the worst, that's like death, I can't do that anymore. So the girls are doing really well and they're strong. Lucy has a lot of anger because she's just two years younger.

AP: Oh God. Yeah.

KM: But they just get to feel how they need to feel. Otherwise the disease is—like well, you know, it just takes you. It will take you. It will take everybody down.

AP: That's exactly right. It does take everybody and it's not, you know—it takes you all the way to death. It's not just some psychological problem. I really admire you and Kiffen for handling it that way because I know it's excruciatingly difficult, but yeah, you have to look out for the people who are healthy, including yourself.

KM: So how did it start for your brother?

AP: Oh, I think it started with pot when he was 14 or 15. There were a lot of drugs available in Romney back as far as the 70's because of our proximity to Baltimore and Washington. Michael was born in 70 and using by the mid-80's. He's always had a lot of anxiety, he was shy, so he self-medicated, and then it turned out he had the addict gene. What about your son?

KM: That's the thing—he was not shy. He was the performer. He was in like Battle of the Bands in high school and was an actor growing up, and very charming. I'm sure it was self-mediating too. I don't know. My brother-in-law died of it, my aunt—I mean we have it on all sides. We come by it honestly.

AP: We do too.

KM: But I thought if you raised them in an environment where we really celebrated them—I mean, we really celebrated our kids and tried to see them and encourage who they were growing up. Their art was

on the wall, you know, their paintings and poems… I've got a sponsor tells who me, "Quit talking about the art table because it doesn't matter about the art table"… So I mean, yeah, and you just go back and keep thinking, what did I do wrong? And I think if there was a door I could go into or if I could just see him. He really—he did plays, he graduated from UCSB, he started working at Disney, he did a movie with Allison Anders, he went on a tour with a band for four months. He's done many, many things. And he's obsessed with Jean Harlow, obsessed. He was a huge reader as a kid. This is the one we thought would be giving all of us jobs, because he was a very gifted kid with a lot of sweetness and kindness.

AP: Wow.

KM: The disease just—it stole it. It just stole it. And you know, we finally had an intervention three years ago. My parents were there—I mean, Kiffen and my mom and dad and I all went to Betty Ford Family Clinic. That's a story.

AP: Wow.

KM: Well, he didn't go. Our son didn't go. So I was in these group therapy sessions having to, you know, talk to the empty chair.

AP: Oh God.

KM: It was crazy. But you know, the thing is—well, I used to try to write him letters, but it's like the words, the words meant nothing. And now I just send, I send a lot of pictures. I sent a batch from South Carolina while I was at the funeral because it's so pretty, the Low Country, you know… And he'll write back sometimes. So we do have communication with him.

AP: Interesting. And that's a really wise way to do it, yeah… Do you know what state he's in? He's in California?

KM: Well, he's in LA, and Kiffen—actually Kiffen and Lucy are both in LA at the moment. Lucy is an athlete, and she was playing basket-

ball in Chicago where she lives and blew out her knee badly. And she had to go back to LA because she's covered there under our insurance until she's 26 and she's got to have surgery, but she's—anyway, she was home and they saw each other and it wasn't good.

AP: So is Lucy—how much younger is Lucy than him?

KM: She's two years younger. She's a wonderful artist. Norah's ten years younger. Norah's a writer. She wrote an essay called "Qualify Me" and it's really heartbreaking, about being the little sister. I know that it made her—well, she's an easy teenager. I actually say "you can be wild before you go to college," but she doesn't. And that's a relief. I don't think I could do it again. She doesn't push it. She says, "I know, it's okay, Mom." It's only the two of us here so she has a lot of freedom. She's got great friends and it's just—I don't think she has the gene.

AP: Yeah.

KM: And I know Lucy doesn't because she's just very matter-of-fact and she surrounds herself by really good and strong people who care about her. She also doesn't stand for any bullshit. She's very protective of Norah and of us. It just makes her so mad. She's got a great loving heart too. I didn't understand addiction really until we'd been in it. It's not just about behavior and making stupid choices or what I think are stupid choices. They're really sick.

AP: Yeah. Wow, that's huge, Kerry, you guys have done so much work with this. Man, it's so hard.

KM: Those older Al-Anon ladies are so…I mean, I haven't worked all the steps or anything but I go and I just listen a lot. I see a lot of serenity there. And I told this one guy, I said, "But I write books for kids. Our boy was an editor and inspiration for so many stories and such a generous spirit. So how can he be an addict?" And the counselor said, "What's that got to do with anything? The disease doesn't give a shit." So did you ever think maybe you'd want to try writing for a younger audience at some point in addition to, kind of like *Where the Red Fern Grows* or something like that?

AP: Yeah, I have thought about that and I've played with it a little bit but I've had a hard time getting really deeply engaged in it. Although I still have that kind of a - I still have some ideas jotted down and stuff like that.

KM: The adult voice in your stories is so amazing. They're from so many places and have so many experiences, but I just thought, I could definitely see you writing an eleven-year-old girl or something like that.

AP: Well, that's encouraging. I definitely will hold onto that.

KM: I've started writing, because I have to teach it, picture books. It's like writing a 32-page poem because it's so mathematical, and the discipline of that has been—I thought, oh, you know, a picture book. That's so easy, that's a thousand words. And it's so hard. So, what are your writing routines each day? How do you carve out the time? Just to give students a sense of that.

AP: I get up and get some caffeine in and write immediately, because if I postpone it I usually don't do it. I'll find ways to distract myself or I'll start thinking in such a way that I can't get back to that more dreamlike state. So yes, I do it right away and I make myself do it for a couple of hours. And you know, if I'm lucky I'll do it for three or four hours, but I can't go much beyond that.

KM: Yeah. Have any kinds of conferences or writing retreats been beneficial to you? Do you find those helpful, or do you prefer to stay in your space?

AP: I think I'm different from a lot of writers. I'm pretty solo so I really don't do any of those things unless I'm teaching. I did go to Sewanee maybe fifteen years ago and I loved that.

KM: Who are some of your influences now as an adult? Who do you turn to for comfort, like, oh, God, I just need a dose of this? Is there a writer that feeds you?

AP: It's the same ones who have fed me for decades, Faulkner and Jayne Ann Phillips, and Breece D'J Pancake and Jean Rhys. Those are probably the four that I go back to over and over again. Jean Toomer, too.

KM: And can you talk a little bit about what you're working on now?

AP: I can talk a little bit about it. I'm in the very early stages of a nonfiction book about environmental devastation in West Virginia and the demise of my family. I see the destruction of West Virginia, as a kind of a microcosm and a forerunner of what is happening environmentally and economically on a national and global level. And then I see my family and their demise as a microcosm of Appalachia and the ruin of our culture. In addition to those two strands, I have a third strand which is about reimagining relationships with the natural world; developing new relationships with the natural world that will be more sustainable—physically, psychically—than the relationships we have with the natural world now. So I'm trying to do that and we'll see if I can pull it off.

KM: Have you read *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood?*

AP: Yeah, I need to reread it. That's a great suggestion.

KM: Are you involved with Silas House and that group of writers involved with mountaintop removal? I just wondered if you were part of that, because I know he's published a lot about it.

AP: Well, I know those guys and I've done stuff with them, and I've taught with them in places and read with them in places and I really admire them and really love them. I've written some journalism about mountaintop removal but I don't do it regularly. I prefer to work with the slower forms, fiction and creative nonfiction. You know, one of the great things about Silas is that he likes to be public and I'm pretty private so yeah, it's kind of hard.

KM: I'd like to link some of your other pieces here too. This is all so wonderful, Ann, thank you so much.

AP: You're welcome. And thank you.

More Ann Pancake links:

http://garev.uga.edu/fall13/pancake.html

https://orionmagazine.org/article/ann-pancakes-reading-list/

http://thebarking.com/2015/06/our-own-kind-by-ann-pancake/

https://grist.org/article/2009-11-13-jacklighting-appalachia/

contributors

Liz Abrams-Morley's newest collection, *Inventory*, was published by Finishing Line Press in September of 2014. *Necessary Turns* was published by Word Press in 2010 and won an Eric Hoffer Award for Excellence in Small Press Publishing that year. Abrams-Morley's poems and short stories have been published in a variety of nationally distributed anthologies, journals and e-zines, and have been read on NPR. Co-founder/co-director of *Around the Block Writing Collaborative,*(www.aroundtheblockwriters.org), she lives and writes in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, amid grandchildren, grown children, husband, friends, students and two dog-like cats.

Kathleen Balma is a teacher and librarian from the Ohio River Valley of Illinois. She is the recipient of a Fulbright grant and a Pushcart Prize, and she was a 2015 finalist for the Montreal International Poetry Prize. In 2016 she will be a Tennessee Williams Scholar at Sewanee Writers' Conference. Her poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review, Crab Orchard Review, Fugue, Hotel Amerika, The Journal, Mid-American Review, Rattle, storySouth,* and other magazines. A former resident of Australia and Spain, she makes her home in New Orleans.

Sarah W. Bartlett is an experienced poet, writing coach, facilitator and mother. She runs *writing inside VT*, a creative writing program for Vermont's incarcerated women. In her published poems and personal essays she celebrates family courage, nature's wisdom, and her work empowering women to create change in their lives and their worlds. She enjoys her three grown children, writing and a wide variety of creative arts in the Vermont mountains and Massachusetts shore.

Danielle de Ojeda is a native of San Jose, California and has recently graduated from San Jose State University, double majoring in Creative Writing and Dance. She currently works as a dance instructor and is diligently working on her short story and poetry portfolios. She grew up with a strong single mother who never needed to tell her that a woman can be whoever she wants, because she showed her that neither gender nor age can defeat a person with solid goals and a hard head.

Morgan Finn couldn't stop thinking about Picasso's mural after seeing it at The Museum of Modern Art many years ago. Over time, the characters began speaking to her in dramatic monologue form. Not just for the fallen Basque people, but as universal symbols of brokenness in search of healing everywhere. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in many journals, including *Kalliope, Thema, Jane's Stories*, and on *Inventing the Invisible* radio program. It won several prizes, including first place recently from *Writers-Editors Network Competition 2016.* One poem was chosen by CPTV, in conjunction with the CT Commission on the Arts and Wood Thrush Poets, to help open poetry to a wider audience. Upcoming this fall is a short story on the theme "HOME" in *TallGrass Writers Guild w/ Outrider Press* anthology.

Claire Guyton is a Maine writer, editor, and writing coach. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *CHEAP POP*, *The Citron Review*, *Crazyhorse*,*The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Mid-American Review*, *River Styx*, *Sliver of Stone Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is a Maine Arts Commission Literary Fellow, and received her MFA at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Lisa Higgs' second chapbook *Unintentional Guide to the Big City* was published by Red Bird Chapbooks in April 2015. Her work has been published in numerous literary journals and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards. Currently, Lisa teaches at the University of Illinois Springfield and is the Poetry Editor for *Quiddity International Literary Journal.*

Jenine Sanford Holmes received her MFA from Spalding University in 2013 where she studied with Molly Peacock, and her essays have appeared in *The New York Times, The Detroit News,* and *Forbes.com*. When she is not submitting essays into the wee hours, she's an advertising copywriter chasing a six year old around the isle of Manhattan.

Dana Huebler was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1960 and died in Bremen, Germany, in 2015. Her interest in writing was awakened during her teenage years, when it helped her express her feelings about her parents' divorce. In her twenties and thirties she studied at NYU and UCSF and lived in California where she worked as an editor and

freelance writer. She received her MFA in Creative Writing at the Warren Wilson College, working with the renowned writer David Shields. After college, she published short essays, among them a profile of the Philippine writer Cecilia Manguerra Brainard. When her father, the artist Douglas Huebler, was diagnosed with cancer, she decided to give up her life in LA and move back to her beloved Cape Cod. A few years after his death, she met the German ocean scientist Kai-Uwe Hinrichs, with whom she fell in love. They married in 1998. After giving birth to her daughter Lila in 2000 and her son Marko in 2002, she and her family moved to the Northern German city of Bremen. In 2008, she gave birth to her daughter Zoe. After a courageous four-year battle with cancer, she passed away peacefully in October 2015. She left behind a large body of unpublished work, including essays and autobiographical material.

Diane Hueter lives in Lubbock, Texas. She received a BA and MA from the University of Kansas, an MLIS from UT-Austin and a PhD in English from Texas Tech University. Her poem "Self Portrait #7" appeared in *PMS* in 2006. Other poems have appeared in *Cottonwood*, *Three Rivers, BlueLine,* and *Borderlands*: *Texas Poetry Review.* Her book *After the Tornado* is available from Stephen F. Austin Press.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, **Abriana Jetté** is a poet, essayist, editor, and educator. She teaches for the College of Staten Island and St. John's University, and she is a poetry columnist for Stay Thirsty Media. Her anthology series, *50 Whispers: Poems by Extraordinary Women*, debuted as a #1 best-seller on Amazon. Her work can be found in *The Seneca Review, Barrelhouse, The Moth,* and many other journals. For more, please visit abrianajette.com.

Suzanne Kamata is the author of four novels including *Losing Kei, Gadget Girl: The Art of Being Invisible, Screaming Divas*, and *The Mermaids of Lake Michigan* (forthcoming), as well as the short story collection, *The Beautiful One Has Come*. She recently earned an MFA from the University of British Columbia, and she teaches at a Japanese university.

Artist, poet, and freelance writer, **J.I. (Judy) Kleinberg** lives in Bellingham, Washington, and blogs most days at chocolateisaverb.wordpress.com and thepoetrydepartment.wordpress.com. She is

co-author of the book *Fat Stupid Ugly: One Woman's Courage to Survive* (Health Communications, Inc.) and co-editor of the anthology *Noisy Water: Poetry from Whatcom County, Washington* (Other Mind Press 2015). A Pushcart nominee, her poetry appeared recently in *Diagram*, *After the Pause*, *One*, *Clover: A Literary Rag*, the collection *Choices* (Leaf Press, 2015) and elsewhere.

K.C. Mead-Brewer is a writer and editor living in beautiful Baltimore, MD. Her writing appears in a variety of publications, including *Cold Mountain Review, Zone 3* (forthcoming), *Litro Magazine, Menacing Hedge,* and *Cease, Cows.* She also serves as an editor with *Cleaver Magazine* and is a proud member of The Roving Writers, a small group of wild women artists who got their start together at Hedgebrook: Women Authoring Change.

Ilene Millman is a speech/language therapist with more than 35 years experience teaching children who learn differently. She lives in New Jersey and currently works with preschool students and volunteers with her county/state adult literacy programs as both tutor and tutor trainer. Her work has appeared in a number of print journals including *The Sow's Ear, Paterson Review, Adanna, Poetica,* and *US 1 Worksheets*. A poem of hers won a prize last year in the *Poetica's* Anna Davidson Rosenberg Poetry Awards.

Mary Moore's chapbook, *Eating the Light,* selected by Allison Joseph as the winner of Sable Books 2016 contest, is forthcoming this year. She also has poems out this year in *Birmingham Poetry Review (BPR), One, Cider Press Review, McNeese Review;* other poems are forthcoming in an as yet untitled anthology from WVU Press, and in *Unsplendid, Canary, "Hoppenthaler's Congeries"* in Connotation Press, and *Still, the Journal.* Other recent credits include *Terrain* (one of three finalists), *Nimrod* (as contest finalist, and as regular submission), *The Moth, Drunken Boat, Cider Press Review's Best of Volume 16, Sow's Ear Review, American Poetry Journal,* and others. Besides earlier poems in *Poetry, Field, Prairie Schooner, New Letters,* her first full-length poetry collection, *The Book of Snow* was published by Cleveland State University. She has two full-length manuscripts in circulation, "Flicker," and "Imbalance My Dance," and two shorter books, "Apostle/Thistle" and "Amanda Lynn."

Bernadette Murphy's newest book, *Harley and Me: Embracing Risk on the Road to a More Authentic Life* (to be published by Counterpoint Press, May 2016) explores female risk taken through the lens of her own experience learning to ride a motorcycle at age 48, and weaves together memoir with psychology and neuroscience. She has published three additional books of creative nonfiction: *The Tao Gals' Guide to Real Estate* (with LA novelist Michelle Huneven), following the lives of six women (herself included) as they put Tao principles to work navigating the red-hot real estate market (Bloomsbury USA, 2007); *The Knitter's Gift* (2004), an anthology of creative nonfiction, poetry and fiction; and the bestselling *Zen and the Art of Knitting* (2002) in which she uses memoir and reportage to explore the connection between fiber arts, creativity, and spirituality. She is now completing a first novel about music, motherhood and madness titled *Grace Notes*, an early version of which was a finalist for the Heekin Group Foundation's James Jones Novel-In-Progress award. She has been a contributing book critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and has published hundreds of reviews there. Her personal narratives and essays on literature have appeared in *BOOK Magazine*, *Ms. Magazine, LA Weekly*, *San Francisco Chronicle, San Jose Mercury News, Los Angeles Times Magazine,* and elsewhere. She has taught at the UCLA Extension Writers Program and National University's MFA program, as well as in private writing workshops. A proud graduate of the Antioch Los Angeles MFA program, she was a member of the inaugural year's class, graduating with the Orange cohort. Her website is www.bernadette-murphy.com.

Charlotte Muzzi lives in Tacoma, Washington, where she teaches English at Charles Wright Academy. Her work has appeared in *The McNeese Review, Birmingham Poetry Review,* and *The Cincinnati Review.*

Ann Pancake's most recent book is *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* (Counterpoint 2015). Her first novel, *Strange As This Weather Has Been* (Counterpoint), was one of Kirkus Review's Top Ten Fiction Books of the year, won the 2007 Weatherford Prize, and was a finalist for the 2008 Orion Book Award and the 2008 Washington State Book Award. Her collection of short stories, *Given Ground* (University Press of New England) won the Bakeless award, and she has also received a Whiting Award, an NEA grant, and a Pushcart Prize. In 2016, she was the first

recipient of the Barry Lopez Visiting Writer in Ethics and the Community Fellowship. Fiction and essays have appeared in journals and anthologies like *Orion, The Georgia Review, Poets and Writers,* and *New Stories from the South, the Year's Best*. She earned her BA from West Virginia University and her PhD from the University of Washington, and she teaches in the MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University.

Maria Romero (neé Decaney) has written plays for the Seattle Repertory Theatre ("Fitting In"), the George Street Playhouse ("Tomboy"), and Northwest Asian American Theater ("Please Choose One"). At 20, she was the youngest playwright to be commissioned by the Seattle Rep. She was an artist-in-residence on behalf of the Seattle Rep at Meany Middle School in 1996 and has taught workshops on the craft of playwriting, most recently at Anser Charter School in Garden City, Idaho. Recently her poem, "Grandma," won second place in the Boise State University English Majors Association annual poetry contest. A nontraditional student, Maria recently graduated from Boise State University with a Bachelor of Arts, English with a writing emphasis in rhetoric and composition. Her work explores the concepts of ethnic adaptation, gender identity, and what it means to be American in an ever-changing landscape of social and economic difference.

Gail Seneca's previous memoir essays have appeared in *Fourth Genre* and *Switchback. Passages North, The MacGuffin,* and *Westview* have published her short fiction.

Jane St. Clair grew up in Chicago and graduated from Northwestern University. She has been a staff member of the TV show "Sesame Street," and a reporter/photographer for several newspapers, including the *Louisville Courier-Journal.* She is the author of 24 children's books published in Korea and a novel entitled *Walk Me to Midnight* published by OakTara Press. Her short stories have appeared in over 20 literary magazines like *Rosebud, Red Rock Review, J Journal, Brain.Child, descant, Clockwatch Review, Clare, Attic Fiction, QWF,* and *Thema*, as well as anthologies from the University of Nebraska Press, Main Street Rag Publications, Firewalkers, Omni Press, and others.

Deb Thompson grew up in Michigan in the 60s and 70s as the second of four children of a philandering Pastor father and a school teacher/organist mother. After her parent's turbulent divorce and while still a young teenager she took on the role of emotional backbone of the family. Two decades later facing her own divorce, she began to write poetry as an outlet and form of release. Now, in her mid-fifties, she is happily remarried with four grown children, time to write, and no end of subject matter.

Sarah Brown Weitzman, a Pushcart Prize nominee, has been widely published in hundreds of journals and anthologies including *The North American Review, New Ohio Review, Rattle, Mid-American Review, Poet Lore, The Bellingham Review, Spillway,* etc. Sarah received a Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. A departure from poetry, her fourth book *Herman and the Ice Witch,* is a children's novel published by Main Street Rag.

Lori Wenner is a registered nurse/lactation consultant and a mother of three daughters living in Beaumont, Texas. She has been published in *Brain, Child blog, Mamalode, Nursing for Women's Health,* and *MEDSURG Nursing.*

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