

THE SKIPPED GENERATION
WRITING PROJECT

.....

.....
Washington University in St. Louis English Department
&
The Lifelong Learning Institute

Spring 2011

.....
THE SKIPPED GENERATION WRITING PROJECT

THE SKIPPED GENERATION WRITING PROJECT pairs Washington University undergraduate writers with writers from the Lifelong Learning Institute. In the first year of the project, participants wrote works of memoir. In its second year, the project shifted its focus to fiction. Writing partners were given assorted objects as prompts for creating short stories and then worked together through an eight-week process of writing, workshopping and revising. They presented their stories, collected here, at a reading and reception to mark the conclusion of the project on April 15, 2011.

WORKSHOP FACILITATORS

Anton DiSclafani teaches fiction and nonfiction at Washington University. She also directs the Summer Writers Institute and the Creative Writing Institute at Washington University. She lives in University City with her husband.

Marni Ludwig was born in New Jersey and spent the last fifteen years living in New York City, working as a literary arts administrator and bartender. She holds degrees from Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University, where she was a Dean's Fellow, and is currently a student in the MFA program at Washington University in St. Louis. She has been awarded a scholarship to attend the Tin House Summer Writers Workshop. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Assembly*, *Boulevard*, and *Western Humanities Review*.

Aditi Machado is a first-year MFA poetry candidate at Washington University in St. Louis. She is the nonfiction editor of *Asymptote*, a journal of translation. Aditi is from Bangalore, India.

Emily Robbins is a fiction student in Washington University's MFA program. She is originally from Oregon. Before moving to St. Louis, she worked as a researcher in Syria and taught high school drama and English in Philadelphia. She is currently writing a novel about a policeman.

Caroline Wilkinson is a creative-writing MFA student at Washington University. Originally from Illinois, she has spent the past fifteen years in upstate New York. Her fiction and book reviews have appeared in many literary journals.

Lawrence Ypil grew up in Cebu, studied and worked in Manila, and is now taking an MFA in St. Louis. At one time, he dissected cadavers, collected bile, and delivered babies as a fumbling medical intern. His first book of poems, *The Highest Hiding Place* (Ateneo de Manila University Press), was published in 2009.

Lifelong Learning Institute
Katie Compton, Director
Karen Sterbenz, Project Coordinator

Washington University English Department
Marshall Klimasewski, Director, Writing Program
Kathleen Finneran, Project Coordinator

CONTENTS.....



An AZTEC Legend Lois M. Atnip • 1

Inheritance Liza Barish • 6



Higher Power Glasses Ruth Edwards • 10

Seeing Things Beth Basow • 13



I Am Dark Robin Greenberg • 17

Seize the Day! And other related activities Joanna Milner • 20



Talisman Margaret Johnson • 25

Craft Judith Ohikuare • 30



Lotus Ponderings Nina Kaplan • 33

Chinatown, 7 AM Taryn Sirias • 37



There Is a Season Randi Klasskin • 40

Lake in the Clouds Olivia Cook • 43



Superstar Ruby Lapin • 48

By the Canal Alana Ferguson • 52



The Weight of It Valerie Levi • 56

Inkling Stephanie Spence • 61

CONTENTS CONTINUED.....



Grandpa's Fantasy John A. Pierce • 66

Reginald Adam Segal • 68



Chickens and Eggs Ann Rynearson • 73

A Dusty House Carol Stoll • 82



Anniversary Waltz Jo Schnellmann • 85

Classical Conditioning Jordan Weiner • 91



Warren Karen Sterbenz • 95

A Snail, Slow but Steady Wins the Race Aliza Bran • 101



An AZTEC Legend

Lois M. Atnip

In the summer of 2003 I traveled to Mexico City with several friends. While visiting, we explored the Aztec Pyramids outside the city. Unlike the pyramids of Egypt, the Aztec structures have built-in steps making it possible to easily reach their summits. These step-pyramids, varied in size and design, scattered across an immense and barren flat plain, are dedicated to deities honored by the Aztecs. Prominent among them is the Pyramid of the Sun.

Because I enjoy exploring historic places without distractions, I parted company with my friends to move alone among these ancient structures. As I roamed about, I came upon an old man sitting quietly, almost meditatively, near a makeshift table displaying replicas of artifacts related to Aztec culture. His dark skin, black coarse hair, and rugged features identified his Aztec Indian ancestry. When I approached the table and spoke to him, he responded in perfect English; I was elated for English is my sole language. As I scanned the many artifacts on display, my eyes settled upon a medallion made of reddish clay. Seeing my interest, the old man explained it was a common interpretation of the Aztec Sun God. It bore an expressionless yet serene face, eyes closed, seeming to be asleep. Encircling the face were inverted fanlike projections creating the effect of sun rays. The old man continued, saying it was a replica of a medallion with a unique story, told for generations in Aztec Legend. My interest was piqued; eagerly I asked him to tell me the story. He nodded, smiling broadly, and began his story in a mesmerizingly mellow and melodic cadence.

“In a village not far from here lived a young woman called Amuna. In some months she would celebrate her sixteenth birthday and be required by custom to decide her future place in the village tribal culture. Her virginal state made three choices open to her: marry a man chosen by her father, become a priestess, or offer herself as a human sacrifice to the Sun God.

“In this time of choosing, Amuna grieved for her mother, Izcali, who had died when Amuna was not quite five years old. She lived with her father, Copil, and an older brother whom she rarely saw. She felt lost for she was not close to any woman who could offer her comfort and advice in this time of grave decision making. Amuna carried one especially clear and precious memory of her mother. Often, she sat on her mother’s lap, enchanted by Izcali’s retelling stories of Aztec history. While listening, Amuna played with a clay medallion that hung about her mother’s neck on a slender strip of leather. It carried a face representing the Aztec Sun God; eyes closed in calm repose.

“Amuna often asked her mother to once more tell the story of the medallion; Izcali always obliged. She explained that Amuna’s great grandmother, Quena, first owned the clay medallion; it had been given to her by village priests, praising and honoring her in recognition of her great wisdom and service to others. It had been handed down to Izcali through her mother, and one day it would pass on to Amuna. The story always ended with Izcali telling Amuna that in her time of great need, her great grandmother’s wisdom would come to her through the medallion. But after her mother’s sudden death, Amuna never saw the medallion again. All she had of her mother was a small basket holding a long and narrow scarf of rainbow colors, upon which her mother’s trinkets rested. When Amuna was feeling deeply alone, she would carry the basket to her special quiet place, dress herself in her mother’s trinkets and wrap the scarf about her head and neck. For a brief moment, her fear of the future lessened.

“The time had come to make her choice. Her father came to her insisting she make a decision by the week’s end; for whatever her decision, preparations would take many months. She did not know the man her father wanted her to marry and more importantly she did not know what “to be married” meant. The thought of being a priestess intrigued her, but it meant living a proscribed way of life, in isolation much of the time. Having been alone as a child without her mother, committing to such a life did not seem desirable. About the third choice Amuna asked of herself, ‘Do I have the calling, the courage, the strength, the commitment to willingly offer myself as human sacrifice to the Sun God?’ As the time drew near for a decision, these ruminations haunted her day and night.

“Since her father, Copil, had already expressed his desire that she marry, a decision her brother supported, Amuna felt they would not be helpful to her in coping with her concerns. Once again she sought the comfort of her mother. Taking the little basket of trinkets to her favorite quiet place, she dressed herself in the trinkets. As she lifted the scarf and placed it about her

head and neck, her glance passed over the basket. She gasped; held her breath, for resting in the bottom of the basket was the little clay Sun God medallion of her mother's. She stared in disbelief, unable to move, trying to understand how its presence was possible. Surely during the many passing years she had not overlooked it! Slowly she reached for the medallion, lifting it before her eyes. Yes, it was her mother's! Amuna held it tightly in her hand and pressed it to her breast. An inexplicable sense of comfort enfolded her. As she placed it about her neck, she felt her mother's presence. Remembering the medallion's origin and her great grandmother's wisdom, Amuna decided to seek, in prayer, Quena's guidance as she struggled to make this momentous life choice.

"Amuna returned home, placed the basket in its usual place, but kept the medallion about her neck. That night, as she slept with the medallion clutched in her hand, an old woman came to her in a dream saying, 'Dear daughter I am here to help you.' It was her great grandmother! She knew it, though she had never met her. The old woman said, 'Amuna, it has been pre-ordained that you offer yourself as a pure and virginal sacrifice to the Sun God.' Amuna did not know what "pre-ordained" meant, but she assented to Quena's wisdom.

"The next day, Amuna spoke to her father, telling him she chose to be a human sacrifice to the Sun God. Copil's cold, staring eyes looked piercingly into hers. She held his stare; she did not drop her gaze. Finally, seeming satisfied, he agreed to her decision. Copil immediately advised the High Priest, Thepka, of Amuna's choice to learn if she would be accepted. The priests of the Temple of the Sun God knew Amuna well and consented to her decision without hesitation.

"To fulfill this sacred role, Amuna would spend months in the care of the priests; she would be fed, clothed, and sheltered in ways necessary to make her pleasing to the Sun God. Amuna now belonged to the people of the village; the priests tending her in their behalf. Seeking perfection, she was daily required to endure exhausting, highly complex rituals and exercises. It was believed that physical exhaustion would reduce struggle during the sacrificial ceremony. To be acceptable to the Sun god, the ritual acts and the sacrifice must be executed flawlessly.

"Amuna's sixteenth birthday was named as the day of her sacrifice. On that morning, she was bathed; her entire body massaged with heavily scented oils that put her in a dreamy calm state. Her body, draped in white lengths of fine sheer cloth along with the effects of the scented oils, gave her an ethereal quality. Over the white cloths, another length was added, scarlet red, embellished with shimmering gold threads. She placed her great grandmother's medallion about her neck. On her head was placed a woven wreath made of delicate vines bearing tiny red blossoms, emitting a subtle fragrance. The vines, lovingly cultivated by the women of the village, grew around the perimeter of the Pyramid of the Sun. The High Priest, Thepka, was pleased with Amuna's appearance until he noticed the medallion. 'Remove it!' he

ordered, 'It is not suitable.' But Amuna pleaded with him saying, 'It was handed down to me from my great grandmother, Quena. She received it because of her great wisdom.' On hearing the name Quena, he relented, for he knew of her through Aztec legend. Properly attired, Amuna was ready to enter the interior of the Pyramid of the Sun, the place of the Temple of the Sun God where more priestly rituals would be carried out before her sacrifice.

"A procession of priests led the way to the pyramid. Amuna, protected in their midst, sat in a chair, carried on the shoulders of four slaves. She was visible to all. The priests, followed by village dignitaries, then the people of the village, and finally the slaves, halted at the entrance of the Temple. With multiple torches to light the way, the priests and Amuna silently moved into an interior chamber, a sanctuary, deep within the Temple. Torches, mounted along the walls of the sanctuary, illuminated the altar at the center of the chamber. It was fully draped with a heavily textured cloth of bold luminous colors, woven into traditional Aztec patterns.

"Amuna was led to the altar. The priests, under the direction of the High Priest, lifted her onto the altar where she reclined, her robing carefully arranged about her. Quena's clay medallion of the Sun God rested at the cleft of her breast. All was in readiness. The moment had arrived. The ritual of sacrifice began.

"Thepka, the High Priest, carrying a gold-handled knife with a glistening silver blade, moved toward the altar to perform the most significant part of the sacrifice, the removal of the beating heart from the live human sacrifice. As he neared the altar, the torches suddenly flamed up creating an unusual brilliant light in the sanctuary, causing Thepka to hesitate. He then moved closer to Amuna. Suddenly he halted, seeming unable to move further; his eyes riveted on the medallion resting at Amuna's breast. His eyes opened wide as the little clay image emitted a blinding glow, as it transformed into a beautifully filigreed gold medallion, the face of the Sun God at its center. The Sun God's open eyes, stared into the astonished and worried face of the High Priest. In spite of the threatening stare, Thepka, though visibly uneasy, moved nearer and stood at the side of the altar, his eyes pointedly focused on Amuna. He stepped closer, his rising fear confirmed. Amuna was not breathing. She was dead!

"Shocked, Thepka struggled to regain his senses for this unexpected turn of events seemed familiar to him. One of the other priests, seeing the High Priest's discomfort, approached and whispered to him. Thepka nodded his understanding, and bowing deeply, he knelt at the altar. He had been reminded of an ancient Aztec myth which reveals that the Sun God may choose a female sacrifice to be a Sun Goddess. The two signs of the Sun God's choice of Amuna were her unblemished natural death before her heart could be removed and the transformation of the clay medallion into gold. According to legend, these signs revealed a direct summons from the Sun God. Amuna had been chosen to be a Sun Goddess. After solemn rituals of prayer and worship, led by Thepka, she was entombed in a sacred space deep

within the Temple to be honored for eternity while under the constant gaze and protection of the imposing gold image of the Sun God.”

The old man ended the story, but I remained lost in its mystery. Finally I said, “So it seems Amuna was indeed pre-ordained to be a Sun Goddess. Is it possible for me to go into the Temple where she is entombed?” His emphatic response was, “No! Only priests may enter that sacred space.” I paused; then asked, “How is it you know so much detail about this ancient legend?” “I am a Temple priest,” he replied. Though I was surprised at his revelation, I persisted, “But you were not there at the time Amuna became a Sun Goddess, so again I ask, how is it possible for you to give such a detailed account?” With a knowing smile, he handed a small package to me, “Here is a gift for you,” and said goodbye. I took the gift, and as I walked away, I thanked him for the fascinating story of Amuna and for the gift.

Suddenly, I became aware that not one of the many tourists milling about had approached the old man and his wares as he told me his story. How strange, puzzling indeed! My attention returned to the gift. I eagerly opened it. Incredulously, I stared at the gift with unbelieving eyes. It was a replica of the transformed golden Sun God medallion with a hand written note of blessing, signed Thepka. Thepka ? Impossible! That old man could not be the Thepka of the legend. I spun around, looking toward the place I had stood so engrossed in his story. He was gone! The table and its artifacts were gone! Frantically, I scanned the area. He had vanished! All I could see were tourists strolling among the pyramids. My state of confused wonderment demanded resolution. Holding the golden medallion tightly in my hand, pressing it to my breast, I moved with calm determination and sure steps toward the Pyramid of the Sun, to the Temple of the Sun God.

Lois M. Atnip is a retired teacher from Incarnate Word Academy where she taught written composition and British literature. She also served as adjunct faculty at UMSL for several years. She has three children and seven grandchildren. Currently, she is enrolled in two writing classes at Lifelong Learning Institute and thoroughly enjoying the entire experience.



Inheritance

Liza Barish

I held the smooth clay amulet in my hands. The same one that had been held in my grandmother's hands for years, hands that were weathered and worn with spots of age that were charming and comforting and that made a sprinkling pattern, like a constellation spreading across her skin. She liked to run her wrinkled fingers in circles around the face; she said it was for luck, a trick her mother had used with great success. Her mother told her daughters, four increasingly smaller versions of their mother like Russian nesting dolls, that she felt the most wise when she closed her eyes and followed the circle of the face with her long delicate finger. But her mother was tall and dark and her straight nose and clear complexion attracted the kind of luck that beautiful people often enjoy. They also attracted the kind of attention that wraps people in jealousy like a blanket that's too hot, that smothers the mouth and blinds the eyes. The night before she made her decision to leave her husband and put a sea between her daughters and his angry fists, her fingers traced the circle of the face and she answered to the face "yes I will go." The amulet stayed stitched in a pocket in the folds of her long skirt, but she could clutch it through the rough fabric and know that it was there.

Out of the four daughters she chose my grandmother to receive the amulet next. The other daughters wanted what jewels and dresses she had carried with her but my grandmother knew the power of the amulet. She wrapped it in the softest fabric she could find and carried it in a purse, a pocket, a pouch, wherever she went. She had the amulet with her when she

met and married the silent man that would be taken from her merely five years later and she placed it on her newborn daughter's doughy stomach to ward off any evil that may try to follow her. In her home she hung it on the wall in the kitchen and the steam from my favorite boiling soup on the stove curled around its pointed rays and the face appeared relaxed. When she was weary her mind slipped back into words that sounded sing song and almost irresponsible in their rhythmic rising. But slowly she started to lose control of her hands and they trembled while she made the soup and sliced the onions and her mind wanted more and more to reminisce on half forgotten memories and her tongue wanted to use the language I didn't understand.

I was scared when my grandmother's fluttering hands, skin thin and gracefully translucent, clasped mine and lowered the amulet onto my plump palms. It felt heavier than it should in my palm, heavier than anything I had ever been asked to care for before and I asked her why my mother didn't have it and would she miss it? My grandmother closed her eyes and said my mother wasn't ready to take care for it just yet and that I should keep it safe and cool and dry for her so one day she could reclaim it.

"And then she'll give it to me again?"

I imagined her handing me back the amulet with a ceremonial flourish. There would be a velvet lined box and her eyes would well with tears, saying how proud she was of me, what a good girl I was for keeping this treasure so perfectly intact, for guarding it for her so diligently. I was eight and prone to dramatic fantasies that swirled behind my eyes while I kept quiet and shy in the company of taller people with more authority. I replayed this moment behind my eyelids at night, in contemplative trances and in sweetly spiced daydreams, counting the pointed sun rays that encircled the face in perfect uniformed order. Soon, I believed, she would come home and I would run to my room, where it lay on the whicker table beside my bed, where it was safe in a shiny box made of wood with wise knots and secured shut with important clasps. I would hold the amulet delicately with two hands, and place it in front of her and she would smile and call me her angel.

But my mother never became ready to hold the amulet. I suspected she was scared she would puncture the smooth faultless face of clay with her sharp manicured hands. They were bright and glittery and attracted the curious stares of strangers. I sat on her lap once while a woman with a mask and tools that made whirling noises sculpted her fingers and made them pointed and glossy, all while I recited the names of vivid colors in clear vials. My mother nodded her head saying, "Good girl, look how smart you are" and, looking around, I felt sorry for the other children in the salon. No one else had a mother with sound fascinating fingers.

But her hands were dangerous. They came to help me celebrate my fifth birthday and when I sat on her lap she spoke rapidly of cake and balloons and beautifully bright colored bits of paper to hang on the walls. She scratched my back and kissed me atop the head but the plastic nails felt unfamiliar and rough and pierced my skin. Droplets of blood seeped through

my white cotton dress and my grandmother whisked me away at once, my mother crying “I didn’t mean to, I didn’t mean to, she’s so fragile,” and rocking herself back and forth. Concerns for decorations ceased and my grandmother placed printed bandaids on my back with trembling fingers, soft and delicate, while whispering words I didn’t understand. I thought of my mother’s glossy nails. I was scared what her fingers would do to the amulet and if the face, like my back, could heal itself.

The next time I saw her there was a hospital bracelet around her wrist and the polish on her nails was chipped and the small jewels and flourishes had disappeared, or been peeled off violently, I couldn’t be sure. I held her broken manicured hand in mine and asked her why she couldn’t come home. She didn’t look sick and there were people down the hall who shivered and shrieked and let strange words fall from their mouths and hit the floor like coins and nails and other clanking things. She looked away from me and didn’t answer and I didn’t ask again.

When I got home I held the amulet in my hand and traced the silent face, the serene lips, the lazily closed eyes. I smelled the earthy smell of the clay, faint remnants of my grandmother’s perfume, hints of spices from when the face had looked down upon us from the wall in the kitchen. I knew then I was going to have to keep it safe for a long time. My grandmother was gone two years later and the amulet and I moved in with more distant relatives who were formal and didn’t like soup and round clay things.

In college I hung the amulet above my bed. Before I went to sleep each night I pressed my fingers to my lips and transferred the kiss and when I hazily woke up in the morning I did the same, before I even sharpened the world with thick-rimmed glasses or had fully shaken sleep from my head. It was a natural, unthinking action, and on nights when I tossed and turned and sleep evaded me tauntingly I realized it was because I had forgotten to properly kiss the amulet and I begged for forgiveness and then finally slipped into dreams.

Halfway through the semester my assigned roommate, long legged and lean, decided to celebrate a birthday or another day of presumed significance with a theme that allowed her to wear little clothing and avoid ridicule. I was not consulted on the matter and when mysteriously muscular boys lugged beer and glass and plastic bottles into our room in preparation I stood dumbfounded and embarrassed in my most tattered sweater. One of them saw my amulet on the otherwise barren wall and asked what it was and I looked down, playing with a loose thread on the cuff of my sweater and replied it was just something my grandmother had given me.

My roommate laughed sharply. “Oh she’s obsessed with it,” she said and untangled her legs and tilted her head to the side so that her dark glossy hair would curl around her face and down her shoulder in a way that boys then found alluring. She told me to stop pretending and that she had seen me kiss it like some weird shrine, words that invaded my mind and felt vulgar. The boys laughed in awkward disjointed ways and followed her and her

swaying hips out of the room. I apologized to the amulet, to my mother and grandmother, for letting her say these things and traced the face with my finger.

That night, someone, drunk and disorderly, removed it from its rightful place above my bed. I stumbled into my room after three glasses of wine to find it vanished from my wall, the vision of its sudden absence searing my eyes and causing the room to spin. And I screamed at the guests of the party and told them something terrible would happen because they destroyed my amulet, and then I sank into a ball and cried and rocked back and forth and they called me crazy and my roommate tiptoed around me for weeks. The next morning my head pounded but I searched and searched until it was dark outside again and I was supposed to sleep but couldn't because my amulet wasn't watching me.

I visited my mother and told her I had lost the amulet and then no, that those words were a lie, and it hadn't been carelessly lost it had been purposefully, maliciously, defiantly taken from us. Our amulet had been stolen, didn't she care? Didn't she want to yell and throw satisfyingly breakable things against walls and protest that something so precious had been ripped out of our hands and was somewhere else? The flawless face might be crumbling and broken, the sun rays chipped and no longer perfect. But her eyes were vacant and the nurses interrupted and I was shooed from the room by people who know better and care nothing for amulets.

It came back to me, as I secretly thought it always would. In my dream its return was mystical, it would reappear suddenly, unexpectedly, waiting for me, smiling at me in a way that let me know I was forgiven. But instead it came back to me in the damp hands of a boy in my building who had found it in a forsaken corner of a dusty common area. He had wrapped it up in piece of cotton t-shirt to protect it and tied it with a dirty shoelace. I looked at his hand cradling the package while he explained he heard it was important to me and he wanted to make sure it wouldn't break.

Later I married those hands and I brought the amulet with us miles away to a large city that suddenly became smaller and more familiar. I hung it on the wall in the kitchen so that the steam could once against brush shyly across its face as it rose from simmering dishes. I took it down one day so that it could come with me while a stranger in cartoon-patterned scrubs placed her hands on my stomach and told me the small fuzzy picture on the screen was a girl. I thought I had never heard words so beautiful and when I got home I kissed the cool face of the amulet.

Liza Barish is a senior from Baltimore, Maryland, studying psychology, French, and writing.



Higher Power Glasses

Ruth Edwards

Jim locked the door of his unkempt room at the Midwood. In its day, it had been a charming, quaint, forty-room inn. Now, it housed veterans. Windows were covered with faded curtains and a few air-conditioning units hung from the windows, protesting the Texas heat.

For three years, Jim had occupied a room on the fourth floor, ever since he was discharged from the army. It hadn't been easy to find a job, but he finally for an interview with Pentax, a manufacturer of binoculars. He had learned a lot about making eyeglasses when he was in the army, so they hired him.

Jim wore the Pentax uniform: tan pants and tan shirt with the Pentax logo on the pocket – binoculars set inside a triangle. He adjusted his headphones and started down the street. He usually could make it to work by the end of the fourth tune, but today it was raining and his limp was worse. Elvis was singing “Love Me Tender,” the fifth song, as he walked up the steps behind Pete from the shipping department.

Pete said, “Hi, Ears. Hotter'n hell, ain't it?”

How Jim hated to be called “Ears.” His ears were large and extended, just like his Dad's. Jim could remember how the kids in school teased him. “Ears can't walk through a door.”

Above his station, there was a poster:

Pentax binoculars are built with the highest of standards, using some of the toughest material available. Pentax binoculars are encased in highly durable rubber-armored housings, which are designed to protect the optical mechanisms inside from chock and damage while making them easier to hold. They are purged with laboratory-grade nitrogen to provide a fog-proof view in the harshest weather conditions and extreme temperatures. Pentax requires attention to the type and quality of glass, design and construction. Glass imported from Europe.

Jim aligned his tools and chose glass for today's assignment. A few hours passed before Mr. Hanks, his supervisor, came by and said, "Ears, this is going to be your last day. You don't keep up with the other guys and you've made some costly mistakes."

Jim hated to lose his jobs, but he wasn't going to grovel before an obese, smelly, arrogant man and only said, "I would appreciate another chance."

Hanks said, "Nope. You're through."

He was stunned, but he knew that Hanks didn't like him. He either ignored or criticized him. Jim knew that he didn't have to worry about having something to eat as long as his godmother, Aunt Freda, was around. Every Friday she lumbered up the stairs with a basket of food – fried chicken, stews, fruit, cheese and chocolate cookies. Jim made his bed every Friday. He looked at his checkbook and hoped he could find work in a few weeks. That's when an idea he had had for months triggered in his brain.

Jim chose three chips of imported glass and ground them into a vertical lens. Next, he selected a small plain chip and laid it on top, holding it in place with a drop of special glue that they seldom used. He put a tiny fragment of ruby glass in the next layer. He duplicated the process and was ready to install them in the test binoculars that he kept in the drawer. But not before he turned the lens upside down.

When his project was complete, he held the binoculars to his eyes and almost dropped them. What he saw scared the shit out of him.

He could see himself, but he had gray hair. His own hair was sandy-colored. He didn't recognize the clothing. He was walking with crutches and he was not in a familiar neighborhood. He was leaning against the bus-stop sign, but he never rode the Chippewa bus. Why was he walking across the street on a red light when a semi was charging him? The semi hit him and the crutches flew up in the air and he went spinning headfirst into a concrete light standard.

The binoculars dropped to the padded shelf. This can't be. What had he done? He had only been having fun. Maybe making some vertical stripes, colors or wavy lines. He wished he could listen to some music, but that was not allowed. But he didn't work here anymore. Loretta Lynn with her nasal

tone sang his favorite song. He picked up the glasses again. The scene was the same. A group of people had gathered around his body. "Move over, folks, so I can see." Red lights were flashing and a siren whined.

The people stood aside, as two ambulance attendants loaded the lifeless body onto a stretcher.

This is silly, Jim thought, just a freakin' accident. Nobody can predict the future. Certainly not a pair of binoculars. Wonder if someone else looked through the glasses, could he see his future?

It was almost quitting time. Jim picked up the binoculars and headed down to Hanks' office.

"Mr. Hanks, I am going now. I've had some trouble with these glasses. You may want to take a look."

Hanks grabbed the glasses and gave Jim a disgusted look.

Jim walked down the long corridor to get his headphones and lunch bucket, and he turned the corner, he heard a heavy thud.

He was almost to the front door when he heard Pete yelling, "Call 911. Call 911. Hanks ain't got no pulse."

Jim walked out the door.

Ruth Hanks Edwards grew up on a fifth-generation farm in Southern Illinois. She attended Washington University and spent her career in the legal field. She has one son, Wesley Hanks Edwards, and a grandson, Hanks Joseph Edwards. She has attended many writing classes at LLI and is presently writing life stories for hospice patients through the Lumina program of BJC.



Seeing Things

Beth Basow

I sent you the binoculars for what would have been our 22nd anniversary – did they get there on time? I hope they did. When I went to the post office last week the woman asked me how I wanted them mailed, express postage or standard shipping, and I told her that I wasn't sure but that I'd probably need extra stamps. I didn't know how many. When she asked me for an address I did not know what to tell her, I wasn't sure where to send them, so I left it blank and gave the woman twenty dollars and told her to put as many stamps on there that the twenty could buy.

Now that I think about it, the package probably never got to you, so I'll just tell you about it. Only those binoculars were inside. (You, of course, would have thought it a waste, and filled the rest of the space with something, because you never liked emptiness.) I bought the binoculars two months ago at this lonely little beachside shop when I went on vacation – did you know I went on vacation? Well I did. I went to the beach. You never thought I liked the beach and I never thought I did either so that's why we never went together, but I went there two months ago and it wasn't so bad. It only rained twice. The hotel I stayed at had a free continental breakfast, and each morning I ate eggs. You never thought I liked eggs. Well you're right. I still don't.

I got the binoculars when I went to this shop, on one of the days it rained. It was the kind of place that sells shells and bright umbrellas and Tiki

bathmats that say *Hi! I'm Mat!* (You would have rolled your eyes if you'd seen it. You claimed puns caught you off guard. But I know that one day I would have found that mat, inexplicably, outside our front door like it had been there forever and if I asked you about it, you'd pretend not to hear.) I went into the shop because it was raining and there were these two women inside. One was fat like a fish and the other looked as old as sand, papery and thin, spotted and slumped, all the things we pity in others and never see in ourselves. I told them I wanted a present for my wife and the fish woman told me to buy you a necklace.

"Beautiful stones!" she said, pushing plastic beads in my hands. I told them you never wore jewelry, which wasn't true. You always wore that tacky, silver ring you claimed your late mother had given you, but your sister told me was really a gift from Tommy Jones. I never told you that I knew. But don't worry – I am not mad. I was once, but I know now that it was wrong. Any reminder of love is a reminder worth keeping, even if it's a metal ring, or a gravestone, or a Tiki bathmat...

"A conch shell!" the fish woman said next. "She'll think of the ocean!" I told her that the ocean made you sad. This isn't true, either. It's me who thinks it sad, those black waves, rolling like thunder, immense and weeping. I was thinking about leaving the shop. But it was then that the old woman pulled out the binoculars.

"Take these," she said. She handed them to me "With them, you can see everything." The old woman pushed them into my hands and stared at me with her sunken face, eyes the color of ash, and I didn't really understand but I thought that you would want me to take them, you would poke me in the side and whisper, *just buy them, George*, because you were always much better with people than I am. I thought the whole thing was hokey – you would agree if you ever get the binoculars, they are such little things – but I bought them and left and when I got back to the hotel, I put them to my face. I focused the lens...

And there you were, in that brilliant spotted prom dress. I had forgotten about that dress until now, red and yellow and buckled at the waist. I focused the binoculars even more and I could even see the stitching – it must have taken you ages to sew it. But there you are, twenty-two years ago, and you're dancing with Tommy Jones. He had such good cheekbones, Tommy Jones, and you looked so happy I couldn't watch for very long. I had to put the binoculars down. It was still raining outside the hotel, the rain washing everything gray, but all I could see were the yellow spots and red cotton, the white of Tommy's teeth.

When I held up the binoculars again, it was that day in June, not so long after prom. It was such a beautiful day it seemed indecent for a funeral. That aching blue sky – it was dazzling, magnified like that – and your tears, they looked blue, though it was really just the light. I could see them so clearly with the binoculars, each drop, and I remembered wishing it was me who was dead, not Tommy Jones, and that your tears were for me buried

alone in the dirt. I knew it was terrible but I thought it anyways. You cried and cried with the whole world watching and you looked so shameless and beautiful that I stared a long time. I stared so long I could feel the binoculars on my face, pointing at your face, pointing at years and years and years ago.

And then suddenly there was Sally Ann's, that corner bakery you loved so much. It must have been just before our wedding because we were still drinking cherry coke from the old, painted bottles, and Sally Ann herself was counting change behind the counter. Everyone had been talking about it, our wedding that is, and I was almost as surprised as they were. You remember that, don't you? You remember how I asked you why you had picked me. And you didn't have an answer but as I watched us there, scanning our faces with the binoculars, I saw your face flush every time I kissed your cheek. I kissed you every time someone new walked though the door so that the whole world could know that you were mine, that after years of patience you were finally my girl. I still don't know if you ever knew what I was doing. I looked so stupid sitting beside you, grinning and red. With each kiss I was certain you were blushing and I was certain it was love, but holding the binoculars in my hands, I was not so sure. Love and shame, of course, look very much the same.

I saw our son next. I focused the binoculars on his left cheek because he has those freckles there, the four, diamond freckles, and if I stayed there it was like I was looking at the cheek of any ordinary, freckled boy. It was hard, you know. You tried everything. You put paintbrushes in his hands and chess pieces and trumpets – you were sure there was something, some reason he was the way he was, some genius lurking behind the boy who never learned to talk. But all I wanted was for him to look me in the eyes and see something. His eyes are brown, dark brown like your own. I watched him with the binoculars in that weakly lit hotel. There was that the one night when he was twelve – do you remember? I couldn't stand it anymore. I just shook our son, shaking him and shaking him, and you were begging me to stop but all I wanted was some sort of recognition. We both wanted so badly to be a part of his world. To see what he sees in his dark, deformed brain. It's been seven years since we placed him permanently in the facility. He is doing well; I still visit every Thursday.

Through the binoculars I saw our magnified life, our work, our son, Saturday mornings at the kitchen table. Those last few years you looked so thin. The blue veins on your legs seemed to belong to something else. They were like stockings, or a dress, something you could take off at will, and underneath would be a fresh start and shiny, shiny youth. I watched you watching everything, sitting at that table, your hands around your coffee. *This is not my life.* You thought it but never said it. *This is not my life.* The sickness that took you so slowly from this world – you resigned yourself to it all. And as close as you seemed in the binoculars, it was as if I had suddenly flipped them around. You were so quiet and so isolated, suddenly, so suddenly, and

I did not know when it happened, when everything seemed so small, when everything I loved in my life were mere ghosts in yours.

Through the binoculars, I watched it then as I watched it years ago. I found myself standing in the hotel, wanting to stretch out my hand to reach you, as I always had, and always wanted to. It was then I decided to send you the binoculars. With them, you can see Tommy Jones smiling; you can watch our distant, darling boy. And if you'd like you could watch me, on this quiet, trembling earth, as close to you through those lenses as I could ever hope to be.

Beth Basow is a sophomore studying PNP and French. She is from Southborough, Massachusetts, and is planning on studying abroad in Toulouse, France, next spring.



I Am Dark

Robin Greenberg

My mom said we were going to have an adventure. She knew I didn't like changes. I like it at home. My dad was out of town on business. I don't like it when he's out of town. He wakes me up every morning at seven minutes after seven and takes me to school at 7:49. The square root of forty-nine is seven, so it's a good time to leave. I like the number seven.

Mom kept saying we'd have fun. And, because grandma and grandpa love and miss me, we needed to go see them at their farm. I didn't need to go because it's not a necessity of survival. She said I should keep an open mind. But I don't know how to open my mind. They know I don't like being hugged, but sometimes they forget. I try not to yell, but I usually do. I guess that's because my mind doesn't open.

She told me to pack enough things for two days. I got my backpack off the hook that's exactly seven steps from my bedroom door. I put in two red sweatshirts with hoods (I like hoods because they cover my ears), one pair of jeans, two t-shirts and two pairs of underwear, so that's seven things altogether. My flashlight was already in my front right pocket. My dad gave it to me. It's real smooth, black, makes a clicking noise, and lights up at night under my covers to help me fall asleep. My mom says it helps calm me so I can think clearly, and I agree. I take it everywhere. So, of course it didn't count in packing because it's always in my pocket.

It was a three hour car ride to my grandparent's farm and no matter what I did I couldn't make it into a seven. I kept telling her the adventure

was a bad idea. I counted every car we passed and clicked my flashlight that was safe in my pocket. My mom asked me to stop clicking it but she knew I couldn't. I even saw a red 2010 Porsche 911turbo cabriolet with a 500 horse-power turbo charged engine that was real neat. I counted 2,821 cars by the time we pulled up in their driveway, which is a perfect because seven goes into it 403 times and four plus three is seven. So I thought the week-end would be ok.

My grandma and grandpa walked fast towards me with their arms stretched out yelling, "Chris, we're so glad you're here."

I knew they wanted to hug me, so I ducked and said, "nice to see you," because I'm polite. My grandpa (his name is Ed) wanted to take me to the barn to feed the horses before we went to the pasture. I never go into the barn because it's too loud. The chickens make lots of noise when their feet scratch in the hay looking for food and the horses make a high pitched whinny noise that reminds me of an ambulance siren that hurts my ears even when my hood is pulled up. So, I waited outside.

When Grandpa came out of the barn we got in his truck and went to the pasture where the cows are. He knows they're my favorite. I can watch cows for hours. They can't see you when you're right in front of them. That's why they like to walk in circles so everything is always on their sides. I like to walk in circles too. I especially like it when they moo. It's a low soothing sound. When they moo I always close my eyes and smile when I hear them talking to each other. They're never in a hurry and do everything slowly, with a certain rhythm that makes me sway back and forth. My grandpa has seven cows, he says just for me, but I think it's a coincidence. When I got out of the truck I walked right up to the cow that's named Greta because she's my favorite. I went to her side, and her eyes followed me. They're big, have really long lashes like a fan, and they sparkle. Greta stared at me like she knew what I was thinking, so I didn't have to talk. I laid my hand on Greta's neck and felt her pulse. I like to do that because a cow's heart beats seventy times per minute just like mine. I clicked my flashlight each time I felt her heart beat. I thought, so far so good on my adventure.

It was starting to get dark, so we went back to the house. It was six o'clock so I couldn't eat yet, even though my grandma said it was ready. Everybody finally agreed with me that seven was a better time to eat. So we waited an hour, and I read my *Popular Science Magazine*. My grandma made fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, and peach cobbler with ice cream for dessert. When she put my dinner in front of me all the food was on one plate getting ready to touch. I tried not to, but I started yelling and clicking my flashlight really fast. My mom jumped up and took my plate away so she could put everything in separate bowls. Good thing she's quick because my grandma started crying and I couldn't stop clicking my flashlight and yelling. I didn't say I was sorry, because I wasn't. I just had plain ice cream for dessert without the peach stuff underneath. I like things the same and

separate, kind of like hugging. Just because you love someone or something doesn't mean it has to touch.

After dinner I told my grandpa all about the lawn mower engine I was taking apart and rebuilding back home. I don't think he cared because he kept getting up to go in the kitchen. I had to follow him to tell him about the Tacumseh carburetor's flooding problems that I fixed by removing the float bowl, but I was careful not to move the float needle valve. When I got the carburetor out I shook it to see if I heard gas sloshing. Luckily I didn't hear anything, so I could fix it by adjusting the needle valve instead of having to get a new engine.

My mom said it was late and I should go to bed, but it was only nine o'clock so I waited seven minutes. When I got into bed with my pillow and blanket from home I couldn't sleep. The bed was too big and the sheets weren't the same. They didn't have cars on them and they were ironed with creases. I don't like creases. My mom told me to pull the sheet over my head and to click the flashlight on and off until I got tired. So I did.

Next thing I knew it was seven minutes after seven and it was time to get up. My grandma remembered how I like my food separate and we even ate breakfast at 7:49! I smiled at my grandma and she blew me a kiss. That's much better than hugging. After breakfast my mom said it was time to go home. I wanted to go home because my dad would be back from his trip and I could go to sleep in my own bed and go to school the next morning; just like always. As soon as we got on the highway I felt in my pocket so I could count the cars. I felt the screams building inside. I pulled my right front pocket inside out and started ripping it. My flashlight was gone! I couldn't breathe. My mom started crying and she tried to help me remember everything I did before we left the farm: going to the pasture, feeding the ducks, the tractor ride. I knew I had it all of those places. We even went back to the gas station and looked in the bathroom. My mom kept telling me my dad would give me another one as soon as we got home and to try to hold on. I quit screaming but I couldn't keep my hands still. They moved as fast as a hummingbird's wings 53 times per second. My eyes were closed so tightly that my head was starting to pound. I could feel it pulsating as fast as I use to click my flashlight.

When she said we were on our street I was able to open my eyes. I frantically searched for my dad's car. It wasn't in the driveway. I ran to the garage and it wasn't in there either. He wasn't there. My flashlight wasn't there. There was no light.

Robin Greenberg resides in St. Louis. Her life had a purpose caring for her husband of 28 years, even more so when he was stricken with dementia and later Alzheimer's. With his last breath, she became one; not knowing what to do or where to go. Now she is learning to live separately searching for her light.



Seize the Day! And other related activities

Joanna Milner

Driving across plains and plains, the stretch of road bleeds into a brown horizon. The sun is hovering over the approaching band of newly-sprouted mountains. To him, the plains smell like car heat and fast food wax paper—anywhere he drives smells the same. Familiarity and vacuum dust. A metal-sided cocoon of temperature and body scent carries him across well-worn asphalt. The radio fuzzes and talks and sings and fuzzes more violently. Kansas sets into Colorado and he unfolds printed directions and a conference brochure from underneath the detritus of hours on the highway. Sky is purpling and the headlights are materializing.

The event won't be held in the convention center, but in the ballroom of a hotel within walking distance. There is a back-up space for the daily activities—it wouldn't be a true insurance-company-sponsored affair if worst-case scenarios weren't indulged. He hasn't been to one of these before, nothing this big, and he considered himself thorough when packing his duffel bag. At the numbered exit, he wonders how late the hotel pool will be open and wonders if he can remember the last time his body was completely underwater. He still sits in the guilty fog of saying goodbye to his son. It wasn't the leaving that was hard to do, but rationalizing and excusing the immediate tide of relief and hope that rushed in once he was alone on the road. He can't hug his son, so only spoke to him and patted a shoulder as gently as possible and hoped that it was enough to keep the boy from crying out when he

moved to open the front door. He is glad that his nights will be quiet and alone until he is back in the small, too-small house.

A number of confusing, artificial streets and lanes snake him through the conference center's wide spread. He is tired of driving and the tiny print on the paper and how bright the interior light of his car had to be when he turned it on in total frustration to read the little letters. The car ride was long, and his vision goes dark for a moment when he finally stands in the echoing garage beneath the hotel. Concrete stairs lead him to a yellow-lit lobby, the glow thrown from a number of the same hanging light fixtures. He thinks that the theme is The West, going by the framed prints and rough-cut timber accents, but it may be more specific than that.

"May I help you, sir?" She is young and behind a wood counter.

"Yes, here for the conference, can I check in?" He did not mean to plead, but he has not spoken in hours and his voice is still in the petulant stages of quick awakening. "I mean, I'd like to get my room key."

"Certainly. Last name?"

He hands her a folded paper from the inside pocket of the suit jacket that reclined in the backseat for the entire trip. There is music coming from a bar across the sunken lobby, the sounds of live piano and a sickly sound system spill into the relative silence of the foyer.

A stapled packet is slid in his direction, as well as a pair of toy-credit-card room keys. He pockets both and feels obligated to never separate the pair. After asking for a wake-up call, he passes the bar and waits by a bank of elevators. The ride up is crowded and hotel-tipsy but his hall is empty, and he lets the duffel bump the wall as he walks closer to the right side. A few swipes and he is inside.

The room cradles a bed, an empty-drawer dresser, a binder of relevant numbers and instant coffee packets. It smells lived-in but clean, the previous occupants sterilized away, now tucked away at home at night. Polyester begat polyester. A genealogy of synthetic fabrics rubs against his dress pants with delicate scratching as he lowers to meet the edge of the double bed. He decides that the surface of the mattress is moderately sized, appropriate for a single traveler or a pair who came prepared for an intimate stay. Had his wife pushed harder for a honeymoon, he suspects that the room would have looked something like this. A line of tiny glass bottles, cuppable in the palms of hands, sings from the door of the minibar and he listens by putting the miniscule necks into his waiting mouth. They are too cute to do violent damage until he is watching television, bleary-eyed and confused by how drunk he has become. An accidental intoxication. He is inspired to indulge in hotel porn, but realizes that there is a charge and instead struggles to turn off the brass lamp mounted at the side of the headboard. His fingers feel too big and too numb and it takes work to make the room dark.

The ring of a pre-recorded call from the circular reception desk jangles him from sleep too-few hours later. He sheds his clothes on the walk to the bathroom, coated in goose bumps and morning breath by the time his feet

rest on chilled tile. The tiny soap's wrapper gets soggy on a small ledge in the shower. After outfit selection, hair combing and double checking for thin plastic keys, he finds himself on the elevator. It's quiet and empty this time, and the hallways echo until he reaches the in-house restaurant. Modest portions of a hotel breakfast are placed before him. The white of the plate is still visible and a Marriott logo eventually materializes between the meat and eggs. He thinks that it is nice to put off the payment, putting down his room number instead of a ten and some ones. Eating was meditation but he is now told by the paper itinerary that it's time to Seize The Day! in the Rocky Mountain Ballroom C and set up his numbered station.

The cardboard boxes of promotional giveaways are packed too tightly to rattle as he piles them next to his collapsible wedding-reception table. Upon opening, the brown flaps reveal a pool of black plastic—flat flashlights, stamped and shiny. He lines them up neatly, making the ends touch across the expanse of a white tablecloth. Everything at the conference is in shrink-wrap, packaged, sealed tight, and easily stackable. Folders, binders, logo water bottles and pens and luggage tags and blocks of notepads. Other men and some women are doing the same, emptying cardboard boxes and taking too long to arrange and organize the cheap promotions. His son covets this kind of stuff, he's sure that he'll get a printed tote bag to fill with trinkets and win affection and less-wary glances. Triangle highlighters and company coffee cups ensure smiles from a distant child.

It's only the first day, it's only eleven in the morning, he's finished with setup too early, they are ahead of schedule. He's beginning to recognize the array of suited figures that orbit the tables nearby, rating the women and pitying the men. The room is cold, being pumped full of chilled air, and he wishes he could get in the hot tub in his slacks. His table shakes slightly when he leans against it to stand, but none of the items take themselves out of line, so he heads straight for the door. The lobby is the same, maybe the carpets had been cleaned overnight, and he reclines in an armchair with his head draped over the top, letting it roll to one side.

It's the glitter that catches his eye. A tiny girl in sequins skip-jumps across the length of the lobby, scattering fluorescent light across the beige walls. She is pursued by a weighed-down mother, who is burdened with garment bags and a hairpiece and an infant son who can't wear eventual hand-me-down dresses. A few more children swaddled in spandex and day-glo meander through the uniform couches and end tables in the sitting area. He approaches the tightly-chignoned receptionist, a different girl this time.

"What's with the kids? Aren't they too young to be dealing in insurance?" The woman doesn't laugh but stops typing at the loose keys.

"Oh, it's a pageant; we're a big stop on the pageant circuit. March is Miss Colorado Galaxy." Her teeth are dull against the unforgiving white of an ironed shirt. He nods and thanks her.

A line of pastels and neons puff out of the double doors to the East Ballroom, pushing and scratching tulle against stiff satin and shiny skin. He

regards the Technicolor cloud of texture and alcohol-smelling hair spray. Along the wall rest small lumps of painted toddlers, pouting and fussing with the pressure of bobby pins and smiling on command. Amidst the tantrums lean no-longer-girls, supported by long limbs and high heels. Gangly angles are still present in their stances, but the sharpness is melting into something more fluid. They are oblivious, a pack of strange beasts in a terrarium. They sit with their legs spread, dresses hiked to reveal bedroom slippers and flip flops, oversized bathrobes thrown onto shoulders as they chew fruit gum and laugh.

She is on the small stage, facing a sea of identical cloth-and-metal chairs. Her dress is yellow and too tight, not in an overtly sexy way, but in a way where the sweetheart neckline forces a slab of weight up and under her arms. Slightly too old to be lined up with the anxious competitors, she ushers the shaking girls up and down the set of three steps as they begin and end their routines. The only thing that changes with each performance is the dress and the height of the hair pinned to the little heads above little faces. She is wearing a sash already, screened with a year that is not this year. She's graduated from child beauty queen but not quite pretty enough to be an adult one, caught in a purgatory of pageantry. He stands at the back of the identical ballroom, this time with trophies instead of insurance agents, and folds his arms because he doesn't know what else to do with them while feeling so masculine and overdressed. She sees him, and smiles. He knows she's smiling at him and he wants to meet her now right now but waits until the five-to-six-year-old segment is finished and she walks toward him in unshaking high heels. He straightens the front of his jacket.

"Your suit seems too nice for you to be a pageant dad, huh?" She rests a hand in the notch of her waist and smiles at him with plenty of teeth. The powdered skin of her face, offstage, looks older than her body.

"Nope, just passing through, I'm with the regional conference in the other ballroom. Just taking a break." He hopes that he is speaking with words cool and collected and just right—his lungs have clenched themselves in panic and thrill. She runs a thumb under a skinny strap of sequins along her shoulder and looks up through lashes. More small talk is made, he learns her name and she hears his. Her hands are too eager to touch his slacks and he feels sick and horny and hopes that it will work out, and it's confirmed when she grabs his hand with hers and reaches in his pocket for the room key with the other.

Minutes and dozens of minutes more leave them alone in his room upstairs. The space has been touched by hotel housekeeping, the sheets now pulled and smooth and tight. She plants a hand on the bed and presses down as if to test its strength, smiles, and sits on a corner to unhook her heels.

"Can we turn on the TV? It's too quiet in here. Did you already use the minibar? I heard that they charge you every time you even just open it. I wonder how they do that?" The remote is already in her hand and he floats

to the small cabinet for search for numbing material. He hopes that the charge-per-peek theory isn't true, because the shelves are how he left them last night. She's kneeling on the bed to get a look into the white interior.

"Dang, all the good stuff's gone." Sliding onto her stomach, she wriggles in the glow of the television. He can tell that she must be local because she hums along to the tune of the auto lot commercial jingle. It's good that she likes to talk and that he is willing to listen, and he feels better that she seems so willing to unzip the side of her dress and reveal the pinched skin underneath. His memory is blurred with nausea and anticipation until they are naked and underneath the covers. She swallows her pride and him.

Sharing a new bed with a new girl is a new feeling. He knows that she is fresh to the world, and knows little of mortgages and risk assessment and the process of coming to terms with a son who goes rigid and shrieks when you try to get him to look his father in the eye. The girl is asleep and breathing richly, he can see the marks left in shoulders by the straps of the heavy dress. It's only early afternoon and he should wake her, but he takes the opportunity to make her an offer. He insures her happiness, smile, a possibly absent diploma, and a pair of unbroken heels, and closes the deal by promising to give her armfuls of glittering babies, tiny girls to be corseted and coddled.

He doesn't shake her hand firmly and give her a business card but instead remains on his side of the mattress and waits for the red of the radio-clock to glow brighter and this to be over. He will seal his bag quietly, and leave the plastic promotional pieces on the armchair, because they will make too much noise when carried. He will use the elevator again. He will check out or maybe not and go to his car and inhale the smell and then affirm what must come after.

Joanna Milner is originally from Palo Alto, California. She is a sophomore at Washington University in St. Louis, pursuing a degree in art history and archaeology while taking as many creative writing classes as possible.



Talisman

Margaret Johnson

Her feet slapped the desert, their rhythmic thuds mingled with her labored breathing. Rodents and lizards froze in their burrows. A cactus wren song cut off in mid trill. A red tailed hawk, perched high on a cactus, watched the small figure weave between sage brush and cactus. Her dust trail hung in the air until the desert breeze broke it apart. Particles separated and drifted back to earth. All evidence of her passing disappeared.

Her name is Violet, and she is running from a voice. She doesn't like the voice. It talks too fast. When she first heard it she'd stood really, really still. She was in the basement, piling clothes into the washing machine. She'd looked around the basement, hoping she wasn't alone, but she was.

So, she decided to be brave. She started learning to be brave when she was seven. It all started when her Mom asked her to get something from the basement when it was already dark. She had to go all the way down the stairs to flip the light switch. As she carefully descended into the dark she ran her right hand along the wall. When she reached the bottom she saw a black rectangle opening into an endless, lightless space. She gasped, shrunk back, and stood motionless, holding her breath. The blackness vibrated with menace.

She took a deep breath, leaped across the opening, fumbled her shaking hand around on the wall, found the switch, and flipped it. The light flared and revealed the room holding the ping pong table. Many, many times she crept down, step by step, holding her breath, until she crossed in front of the black opening and again extinguished the darkness. Now she was almost nonchalant, with only a small frisson of fear. So, she knew she could learn to be brave. But the voice was different. It followed her out of the basement.

She'd always loved to run - muscles straining, feet pounding, arms pumping, lungs expanding. Her Mom called her "little cheetah." The second time she'd heard the voice she'd been outside. She'd tilted her head to listen, but instead of getting clearer the voice had speeded up and gotten shriller and angry. She'd started to run. The voice had faded and then disappeared. Now, whenever she heard the voice, she didn't wait. She took off running immediately. She didn't hear it very often now; she thought it was giving up. She hoped so, school started soon, and if she bolted into a run in the middle of class, people would think she was crazy. Maybe she was.

She'd reached the rocks now - the big, red ones that threw shade. She stopped running and leaned against her favorite. Panting a little she pushed her wet hair off her forehead. She looked to be sure no rattler or scorpion lurked in the deep shadow, and moved under the overhang into a welcome coolness. Her breathing calmed. She listened to the silence, smiling.

Violet's Mom wore long skirts with lots of clashing colors and brightly colored t-shirts. She didn't wear a bra, which Violet found both embarrassing and fascinating. She smiled and laughed a lot. When the smiles reached her eyes they turned into small slits surrounded by wrinkles. Sometimes Violet and her Mom would bubble up into laughter and laugh together until they doubled up and tears ran down their cheeks. Then they'd start snorting and gasping until they regained control. April never understood what caused the outbursts. Her Mom called it a laughter release. Whatever it was, Violet loved it.

A few times a month Violets' Mom would stand still and quiet. She'd be looking out a window, or standing in the shade of the Mimosa tree in the front yard. Her eyes would be empty, and it frightened Violet. She thought of it as her Mom being here and not being here at the same time. The only movement was in her left hand, where her thumb caressed a circle of glass. Mom said she was communing with nature and asked Violet not to interrupt. When Violet said it scared her, Mom said, "Think of it as praying. Don't worry. I'm fine."

Violet wondered about the piece of glass. She'd never seen it outside her Mom's pocket or hand. She wondered what happened to it at night when Mom was in bed. She wanted to hold it and study it, but didn't have the courage to ask.

School started, and the days sped by and Violet began to forget about the voice. Every once in a while she'd think about it, and wonder where it

was, and what it wanted, but mostly she forgot it. She liked her new teacher who was funny and not strict.

Violet was quietly working on a spelling worksheet when she felt the nibble at her brain. The voice was back. She tensed up - afraid to breathe. The voice got closer. The voice got louder. She was brave. She listened. It still talked too fast. Her body got rigid. She felt afraid. Then Ms. Toledo was kneeling by her desk, her head even with Violet's. "What's wrong dear, are you alright?"

Violet looked up. Ms. Toledo's eyes were right there, looking at her, looking into her, but the insistent voice kept up. Violet shook her head and began to tremble. Ms. Toledo took her hand and led her out of the room. Violet wanted to run, but her hand was engulfed in a strong grip. She swallowed as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. "What's wrong, Violet. Do you hurt somewhere?"

Violet shook her head hard, trying to dislodge the voice. "I have to run," she said. The teacher took her outside and released her hand. Violet bolted. She ran around the play ground, again and again. The voice receded. Violet stopped her panicked run and saw Ms. Toledo watching her. She walked slowly up to her teacher and stood in front of her with her head down. Her teacher asked "What are you running away from, Violet?"

Violet looked up. The voice was gone and she could think again. She said, in a low monotone, "the voice."

Ms. Toledo squatted down until her eyes were level with Violet's and said, "The voice. You hear a voice in your head?"

Violet looked up, surprised. Ms. Toledo wasn't laughing at her. She looked quite serious. "Yes, a voice. I hear a voice," said Violet.

"And if you run it goes away." said Ms. Toledo.

Violet stared at Ms. Toledo, who held her gaze, looking curious, and not at all alarmed. Slick with sweat and thirsty, she felt relieved by the telling. She licked salty moisture off her lips and said, "Yes, if I run it goes away."

After class, Ms. Toledo called Violets' Mom and drove her home. Violet felt sick with fear. She sat rigid. The car pulled into their drive and her Mom came out on the porch. Violet ran to her and was encircled her in her arms. They went inside and sat in the living room. Violet sat by her Mom, who kept her arm around her. Ms. Toledo sat in the rocking chair.

Violet squirmed. Her Mom looked suspiciously across the room at Ms. Toledo, who was watching Violet. Finally, Ms. Toledo said, "Violet, I think you have something to tell your mother."

Her Mom turned her attention to Violet, who'd turned red.

Violet looked at Ms. Toledo, who nodded and smiled encouragement.

"I hear a voice. I hear a voice all the time. I hate it."

Violet stopped, surprised. She'd just blurted it out. She looked over her shoulder at Mom, who still had her arm around her. She squeezed Violet

tighter, then moved her arm, and stood up. She asked, “How long have you been hearing this voice?”

Violet swallowed, and said, in her small voice, “since late summer, a few weeks before school started.”

Mom turned toward Ms. Toledo, her eyes glinting with anger. “And, Ms. Toledo, what do you know about this?”

“Violet told me about it when she panicked in class today. When she runs, the voice goes away.”

“Mom turned back to Violet. “You’ve been running a lot.”

Violet nodded.

“What does the voice say?”

Ms. Toledo cleared her throat and stood up. She glanced at Violet, who was looking scared again. She turned her attention to Violet’s mother and said, “I think it’s time for me to leave Mrs. Alvarez. Please feel free to call me at any time.” She walked over to Violet, smiled, and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Violet,” and left.

“What does the voice say?” her Mom repeated.

Violet felt like she was strangling. She said, in a squeaky voice, “I don’t know. I can’t understand it. It talks too fast.”

Mom sat back down again. She looked hard at Violet, and then stared out the window for a moment and began to speak. “I have a story to tell you, Violet. I also hear a voice, and it passes from daughter to daughter. Your voice has appeared earlier than I expected. I’m sorry I didn’t warn you.”

Violet’s defeated posture disappeared as she jerked upright and stared at her Mom. “You,” she shouted, “you hear voice too!”

“Well,” said Mom with a smile, “maybe not your voice, but I hear a voice. I understand it now, but didn’t until after puberty. It gives me advice and feels like a lifelong friend.”

“But, mine is scary. It talks too fast and yells at me and gets mad when I don’t understand,” said Violet.

“You need the family talisman,” said Mom. She reached in her pocket and withdrew the piece of glass. “Here, rub this.”

Violet took the glass in her hand. It was intricate with alternating pie shapes of clear glass and white glass. The clear glass contained twisted blue spirals. It was warm. She rubbed it between her fingers. It was rough on one side and smooth on the other. She looked up and to see both women watching her. Her mother was smiling.

“When I was a few years older than you,” Mom said, “my mother handed me that piece of glass. She said that it was mine now, and when I had a daughter, I would hand it down. I am the fifth generation. You are the sixth.”

“Will it make voice go away?”

Her Mom hesitated, and said, “No, the voice you hear is your voice. You need to learn to understand it.”

Violet jumped up and confronted her Mom. “But, what good is this then, if it doesn’t stop voice.”

Her mother stepped toward Violet and reached out for the glass. She rubbed it between her fingers and then handed it back to Violet. “This family talisman belongs to you, from mother to daughter. When you hear the voice, rub it - feel it. The generations of women before you will know you, and the voice will recognize the talisman and wait for you to understand.

Violet caressed the glass with her thumb. Now, she thought, I can be brave.

Margaret Johnson is retired from St Louis Community College after years of teaching mathematics. She is an avid bicyclist, walker, and birder who enjoys the varied classes at Life Long Learning. She continues her life long love of community activism by serving as an advisor to local LGBT organizations and by co-chairing the U City Mayor's Task Force on Biking/Walking. She's 70 years old and proud of it.



Craft

Judith Ohikuare

Henry down by the Mega Winners booth says I specialize in consolation prizes.

The kids that come to you are the rejects, he declares whenever he drops by during one of his 15-minute breaks, usually making his way through a bag of BBQ chips or a concession stand pretzel. *The ones whose parents won't help them cheat, or who don't get picked for dodgeball.*

Henry forgets that kids these days don't live their lives by dodgeball drafts anymore and that back in the day, no one would've picked him out from a hole in the wall. *Two left feet and four blind eyes*, he once told us, explaining why he'd had it so bad in middle school. His mom often packed him a lunch of leftovers to help him get through the day and maybe make some friends, but there were never any takers.

A few slices of meatloaf, a puff of mashed potatoes and some carrots, Henry had bragged, almost sounding happy about eating alone. *None of that Wonderbread and lunchmeat crap—Mom wasn't one for baloney.*

Neither is Henry. His is prime real estate: the booth right in the center of the gaming area where everyone with 250 tickets or more cashes in

their winnings for small electronics or big stuffed animals. Henry doles out digital alarm clocks, AM/FM shower radios and Doberman-sized giraffes as if they were Olympic gold medals. Sometimes a confused but hopeful soul will make his way toward the Mega Winners booth with a pitiful fist of tickets and fire in his eyes, but Henry just shakes his head and points them in my direction.

See that lean-to over by the hot dog stand? he'll ask, shaming them more than me. *Go on over there and get a nice sheet of stickers or one of those pencils that glows in the dark.* He even rejects any crumpled bills the kids might offer, reminding them that this is a place of principles and merit.

Since he likes to think of the fairgrounds as a kind of old boys' club with Boy Scout values, Henry gives me credit for having worked here for the past four seasons—only two seasons less than his reigning six—but he refuses to acknowledge that my prizes are at all desirable. It doesn't even matter that I make the glasswork from scratch, while he finds all of his items in his wife's wholesale magazines or the catalogues that come from headquarters. Even April, one of the only women that works here, gets more respect for manning the face-painting booth than I do for blowing glass.

We have what the kids want, Henry says. *You can't beat that.*

Even so, just this morning a girl with fourteen tickets and a curious smile came right up to the front of my stand without sparing a glance at the life-sized Bengal tiger lounging on Henry's counter. She spied my favorite piece, one that I was almost happy no one had ever requested, and asked me if she had enough winnings to take it home with her.

Of course, I assured her, picking up the small, round slab and placing it in the middle of a square of wrapping paper. *Wait just a minute.*

It shouldn't have taken long to prepare the piece and hand it over, but I wanted to showcase what my visitor was getting instead of just tossing it at her. The glass she'd won was smooth and transparent, and was the size and shape of those peppermint candies you sometimes see in waiting areas. I pointed out the cerulean-blue spirals that I had managed to tuck delicately inside each of the glass striations, and asked the girl if they reminded her of double-helices. She said that they did—she knew because they'd just studied the tiny, twisted ladders in her 8th grade biology class—but she asked me why I'd left out the rungs.

I didn't want to be so literal, I told her before complimenting her on her discerning eye. I handed over the piece and reminded her to take good care of it. She nodded, smiling, before scampering off. I hadn't had such a good morning in weeks.

Henry thought it was hilarious. He came over laughing, looking exactly like the 350-ticket googly-eyed panda that sits atop one of his shelves. *You're a cheapskate, Joe!* he accused. *The least you could've done was throw in a ping-pong paddle.* I shrugged and cleaned up my counter, not paying Henry any mind. Sherry at inventory once said something similar, though she was a whole lot nicer about it, overall.

Everyone loves your paperweights, Joe, she assured me, holding a blood red piece with jade green layering that I'd conceived of as a holiday item. But sometimes I think the prize winners might want more than just a piece of glass they might lose the next day. Maybe they'd enjoy getting something more communal? You know... Something that they could share or show off?

I did know. I went to Quality Arts & Crafts near my house and picked up all the materials I'd need to make a few pendants. I even got started on the very one that I gave away earlier today. The glass had solidified and it was too late to work a hole into the back without breaking it apart, so I hot-glued a small metal plate with an oval eye into one of the piece's sides. Then I played a round of Eenie Meenie Miney Mo to choose between a black, faux-leather rope and a silver chain. When the leather won, I played again so that the silver necklace came out on top, looped it through the metal hole, and placed the finished product on my workshop table to admire it. It didn't sit well so I propped it up against my glue gun to view it from a different angle. That wasn't right, either, so I took off the chain, carefully removed the glue so that there were only a few superficial scratches on the glass surface, and placed the piece back in my booth the next day.

Now and then, just to satisfy everyone, I create a few *communal* pieces that can hang around people's necks or off their wrists. Rigging up my glasswork with rope and ribbons is like apologizing for unsatisfactory work, but it's not my job to teach people the value of things. The folks at HQ, like Sherry, give us ticket labels and price tags for that. They hold conventions twice a year to figure out what motivates people, what'll make someone feel like a winner whether he's spent the day losing at Whack a Mole or dominating the bumper car arena. I've never gone to one of those get-togethers—I don't know who'd look after my house if I went—but I'd probably tell them that I'd want something intimate, even if it didn't stick to my shower walls or have a lifelike kangaroo pouch. I prefer crafts that can stand alone, just as they are, without some kind of accessory to remind you that they're there. I like to make things that you'll be mindful of. Something you'll have to check for, or hold in your hand.

Judith Ohikuare is a 4th year student from Brooklyn, New York, studying English, Spanish and creative writing at Washington University. She is currently the editor-in-chief of *Spires*, the intercollegiate literary magazine on campus, and plans on returning to New York after graduation to pursue a career in magazine journalism.



Lotus Ponderings

Nina Kaplan

Rueth the Erudite cooled her heels in the ripening declivity of the lotus pod, her back against its opulent green wall and her feet dangling over the ledge. The little ones were swarming, whining and nosying around the pond in the humid August afternoon. Her more mature co-ponders were high on lotus seeds and flower nectar, flitting like gaga moths, while the elders glowing with iridescent majesty, like dragonflies and darning needles, lighted on the pink and white frilled flowers and meditated on their watery world.

Though a fairy, Rueth traced her lineage to the goddess of wisdom, Minerva, sprung from the head of Zeus, instead of Queen Mab, creator of mischief and destroyer of dreams. She was proud and believed that for a fairy she had true gravitas. Though some would say that in earlier era she had been immensely less heavy.

The teen-agers with their mosquito like sounds were buzzing at the top of their lungs.

“Rueth the Erudite rarely takes flight,
She sits on her fat ass and tries to write.
The pod is her reading throne
but like a bookworm, she is often prone.”

She wished that the swarm would leave her alone to think. She was usually sustained by her studies and her own thoughts. Still for eons there had been no one, no one and alone at times she felt as empty as a desiccated lotus pod.

She felt guilty for this thought. She admired the pod's sculptural grandeur. Rueth was sure that the architect Gaudi had been inspired by its shape as he had been inspired by the palm leaf. She could see it now, a glass rotunda and light filtering through the holes left by the ripened seeds or maybe a sacred container for aromatic spices wafting cinnamon into the air. He loved the honeycomb, the convoluted snail shell and other organic shapes - surely her lotus pod.

Filled with all these imaginings, still, her yearning for a friend was growing in intensity. She was tired of being the listener, the problem solver and the keeper of memories that the lotus-eaters had forgotten. It was time to move, she was getting pudgy like a green bespectacled bookworm. She had consumed too much literature

She had been married to the pod all summer. By this pod she meant the F-pod or Fey Flair the newest in a fairy- powered "Kindle." This summer, her miniscule flights had been limited to the pond visiting the soup bowl like leaves, the dense aromatic flowers and an occasional toad. Tonight she would give herself a good workout. She would stray outside the pond and bring her light to the purplish haze of dusk and the woad blue of night. For Rueth, in addition to her erudition, is a firefly, a being who lends pulsing glitter to a summer's evening. It is soft and balmy as the Big Ones take to the parks pathways. They are walking, talking and looking up at the Milky Way. Rueth is reveling in the crevices of the tree bark. It is a Maple. She anticipates the surge of the sap.

Suddenly! The voices of the Big Ones grow quite loud and shrill. They are ranting about the condition of the lotus pond; muddy waters, crowding of plants, and eutrophication due to the density of roots, leaves and flowers. All they see is ugliness, dirt, and mosquito-breeding water, malaria maybe even West Nile fever. Rueth couldn't believe what she was hearing about her beautiful opulent green emerald city, her pink and white pond shimmering like a Monet in the afternoon sun. The terrible words "dredge and concrete over" pierce her small being and she emits a high-pitched plaint of distress. A tiny bat like elf, named Sebastian, who knows the unlit night and hears the contour of flowers and the overt concert of the crickets, receives her dire call. He's not heard this voice before. It is compelling and he flies to the firefly's wobbly side. Though tiny for an elf, Sebastian masters both spheres of elfhood, the dark of the caves and the light of the treetops. He and his kind are dedicated to the preservation of the environment. The Park is his special concern and he vows to protect it forever.

She seems to be a robust fairy while he appears to be the densest butterfly she has ever seen. Once Rueth steadies herself she tries to explain what she has overheard, but is not able to catch her breath. Sebastian suggests that they retire to her lotus pod. Once there Rueth is able to take in Sebastian's elfin beauty, his eyes large and dark as the crystalline black of anthracite, his ears green and pointed and the great spread of his wonderful bat like wings. If they were only their natural selves, Sebastian might have been tempted to gobble up the glowing morsel that was Rueth the Erudite, but he is a seeker, an explorer and a lonely being. He is beguiled by the tumble of her words, so many, so long and sometimes in rhyme.

“Eutrophication, park renewal,
fairy removal,
concrete over, fairy life over-over.
Concretization, eutrophication,
Dredge, dredge life on the edge.”

Sebastian senses that Rueth needs to be calmed.” You’ve been overwhelmed by the Real.” he says staring into her fire opal eyes. “The lotus pond is bound on one side by a five lane congested highway with roller coaster exit and entrance,” he explains trying to be helpful. This sets Rueth aquiver, her light flicking on and off, in an aggrieved staccato. He realizes that he has not soothed her. More facts wouldn’t accomplish anything. He begins to gently croon and murmur about the magic places in the park: the fountains’ dancing waters, the groves, the prairie flowers, tiger lilies and the water lily pond. She slowly unwobbles, hearing about the park’s beautiful places that she had read of, but never visited.

Sebastian tenderly suggests, "Ruethie join me in my evening journeys. Together we can address the problems of life and how to live.”

Together! His offer resonates, tintinabulates, evokes and provokes.” Hell, it was great!” She could anticipate the new possibilities for her poetry, her story telling and she knew that her contributions would enrich the trove of Fairy Land Literature. Maybe she should write a good social justice essay, or maybe not. Afterall she is overfilled with the Real. It is time for the lyrical, the symbolic, simile, metaphor and shaping her work with Magic, that was the true artistry.

All through the fall and into the early winter Sebastian and Rueth explore the park, the stables, the archery course, the Jewel Box, handball courts, Spanish Hill and most especially the water lily pond. She is struck by the horizontality of the water lily pads, while the lotus pond with its pods is vertical, a virtual high rise. True, the lotus pond has less watery reflection. She joyously shares her thoughts and impressions with Sebastian. He listens deeply. He provides the quiet and the empathy that is transforming Ruethie. Filled with energy, she moves through her world and with Sebastian creates an eddy that draws the denizens of her pond and awakens their interest. Now

her story telling, her adventures through the park are energizing the others. They are beginning to think. For Sebastian she is becoming a true friend, companion, an experienced explorer and a co-protector of their Park.

As the winter draws nearer, the magnificent pods, drying and emptying beckon to Rueth and Sebastian. A number of them could be clustered and used as an office/domicile where they can settle and dream the possible dream. They move in and name their place “The Office of the Magic and the Real.”

Nina Kaplan, a retired psychotherapist, has been writing poetry since childhood. She facilitates a writing course at LLI and happily participates in other stimulating courses. She has two granddaughters and is often overwhelmed by the REAL.



Chinatown, 7 AM

Taryn Sirias

Around the boy's sixth birthday, his mother had started walking into Chinatown early Saturday mornings to kill time. Her too skinny frame and pale face drifted from stall to stall in the weekly market, circumspectly navigating the purposeful shoppers, as her mind, longing for respite from its unceasing activity, thought of the day ahead – thought of the days past. The issues her mind grappled with were common, her son's teacher problems, her pugnacious boss, and friend's cattiness. This was precisely why she resented the unrelenting nature with which they plagued her. She did not leave because she wanted to be alone or because she did not want to be with her son, but simply because when her mind was working out her problems, she would rather watch old women teeter with groceries than a wall outside the kitchen window, rather hear the foreign staccato of Chinese than the gurgling of her son's aquarium, and rather smell oranges being juiced than her Febreze air freshener. Chinatown seemed the best option to escape what she perceived as droning triviality.

After some time, she acquired notoriety among the residents who lived along the route she walked habitually. In at least three different language translations, she was known as "Shadow Cat," and she did, in many ways, resemble the cats that haunted Chinatown's streets. She was always alone, her eyes seemed to look through someone rather than at them, and she sidled away from other pedestrians, choosing to glide through the fringes. In other ways though, she was nothing like the cats. Unlike Chinatown's cats,

her body did not lurk low to the ground but seemed to be pulled upwards through the spine as if elevated by her unrelenting stream of thoughts. A marionette slipping through the streets. Perhaps a cat has better perspective from its low vantage. A cat would have seen the car.

Around the boy's eight birthday, he began coming along on his mother's Saturday morning walks. One morning he was sitting at the kitchen table with his longing, his longtime companion. The desire to accompany his mother on her walks was almost as old as the tradition itself, yet there was always something that made him stay at home. First, a genuine love of sleep outweighed this desire, and second, the fear of imposing on something that was not his. Yet this morning found him awake before dawn and unable to go back to sleep, an unheard of occurrence. He dressed, made himself a bowl of Cocoa Puffs, and decided to risk intruding upon his mother's ritual.

That morning, the residents of Chinatown did not recognize "Shadow Cat" as she walked past them, on the same route that she had taken every Saturday, save three – for Christmas at her brother's house in Texas, a wedding, and when her son had the flu – for the past two years. They did not see "Shadow Cat" the following week either, or for that matter, for a long time. They did not see her transform from a lonely frail being to one half of an animated, inquisitive pair. Instead, the inhabitants saw a woman with eyes flashing like a Times Square Billboard lit up for the first time. The boy's hand within hers transferred something special to all the objects she had merely glanced at for the two years prior, for as he saw each novelty for the first time, it was as if she did too.

The former "Shadow Cat" and her son became known as "The Lotus Eaters" for the habit that became the epicenter of their morning market meandering. Located three-quarters of the way home, there was a small store no larger than the boy's apartment bathroom, but brimming with enough exotic curiosities that he dreamed its contents would fill an ocean. From this ocean, his mother would pull 1/4lb. crystallized lotus seeds, and they would savor them on the walk home. The sticky sugar coated balls were unlike anything that either of them had, and without prior connotations, the sweets became the objects into which they poured the love, attraction, and wonder of morning. But as the final seed was savored on the doorstep to the apartment lobby, the pair crossed back into reality and out of the fantastical fancy of Chinatown. The seeds were gone, and the son disappeared to a play date while his mother enveloped herself in the tedium of apartment upkeep. The rest of Saturday melted away, gently tugging Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday with it. Friday came a little less gently, forcefully shoving its presence upon both mother and son and, seemingly, never ending. Anticipation flicked in and out of their minds at unexpected moments, as she rode up the congested elevator to her ninth story office, forced face to face with her reflection in the mirrored doors, as he stared at the ruled lines on his spelling test. Sometime between eight and ten that night, the boy would pass out, an eyelid pulled upward by the downward motion of his face slipping down the

page of the *Goosebumps* book he fell asleep reading. His mother would fall asleep a few hours later but with her book safely aside on the bedside table.

It was a rare sunny morning in June that the boy died, anticipated more for its clear forecast. It was already in the eighties by the time that “the lotus eaters” reached Chinatown. They each bought a glass of grapefruit juice off an alley vendor and delighted in the thrill of the water droplets sliding down their fingertips from the sweating cup. The boy attributed the fact that the liquid gathering outside the cup was clear while the liquid inside the cup was pink to the warm light flooding the market from the awakening sun. “The world can’t all be one color,” the boy said, explaining the discrepancy in color. His mother thought of the highlighter colored pants she wore in high school and laughed.

By the time they reached the store that sold the lotus seeds, the two had imagined their world entirely in highlighter orange, pink, sea foam green, and white. Walking through the door, a tsunami of smell, toasting nuts, sweet boiling sugar, hit them and immediately, the thought entered both of their minds. Candied lotus seeds could not be the same without their translucent canary color. “It’s got to be yellow,” the boy declared as he poured a scoop of the sweets into a small bag. Outside, the world agreed with his statement, as it shoved a clown, in an iridescent yellow suit, out the door of a building across the street. His glow reflected upon the objects nearby.

It was this glow that caught the boy’s eye, causing him to drop the bag of lotus seeds and dart out of the store. His mother saw the bag fall but did not seem to register her son’s abrupt exit until a shrill squeal escaped from slamming brakes out in the street. Less than an hour later her fingers were not playing with the memory of round seeds rolling and laughing in her palm. Instead, they were running over and over the dull plastic arms of the hospital chairs. The Saturday he died passed more slowly than she imagined any Friday ever could have.

The residents and vendors of Chinatown noticed “Shadow Cat” return some time after the accident. Skinny and shying away from the other people, her pale face had developed the darkness that defined the cats who were starving, the cats who existed not as pests or lost pets, but as hunger turned to animal form. As she walked the market, she still stopped in the shop with the candied lotus seeds but only ever to look and stare at their plump swollen shapes. It was the shopkeeper here who knew how she differed from the hungry cats, for while the cats had never known nourishment, she had. She had been full, swollen with sweetness like the seeds. Now he developed another name for her, “The Lotus Pod.”

Taryn Sirias is a freshman studying studio art and English. She is from Northern California where she plans to return to work in the summer.



There Is a Season

Randi Klasskin

The day after the doctor confirmed my pregnancy, I began the walking regimen that he had prescribed. I was tentative at first because of my history of miscarriages, but he had assured me that walking would not be the cause of another disappointment, and so I stepped out to explore the neighborhoods around our house. It was a hilly area, and I was sweating by the time I had climbed up the first steep rise. I stopped to enjoy the breeze that carried a hint of autumn crispness and sat down on the curb to rest. The sun shone through the branches of the oak tree next to me, creating a pattern of dancing light on the leaves that had already fallen to the ground. I placed my hand on the pattern and was surprised to feel something solid beneath my fingers. Carefully, I brushed the leaves aside to reveal a stone statue of a deer about two inches high and two inches long. Its coat was a shiny mix of mossy green and copper tones that reflected the light. The figure was stocky with ears and antlers of identical length. Around its middle was a double strand of copper wire secured by a small black disk and a smaller white one. I thought it was an odd place to find such an object and cleared a few more leaves to see what else might be there. Arranged around the deer were three small seashells, a wooden elephant, a plastic cow, and a deep blue marble with sparkly bits embedded in it. They all stood on a circle of dirt that had been meticulously smoothed and leveled and then edged with stones of a similar size and shape. I sat back on my heels, surveying the well-ordered scene and wondered who had created it.

The next day, and each day after that, I arranged my walks to include a visit to the oak tree. The scene was different every time. Sometimes the other objects formed a circle around the deer. Sometimes they were lined up behind it, but, whatever the arrangement, I noticed that the deer was always at the center of the story. One day I found a penny as I trudged up the hill, and left it by the tree. The next afternoon I saw that it had been placed beneath the deer's front feet. I began to scan for interesting objects and unusual rocks as I rambled, always eager to find something to add to the small world that was growing under the oak tree.

As I collected colorful pieces of broken toys, silver foil gum wrappers, and other bits that I would never have noticed before, I formed a picture in my mind of the creator of the new world that I had discovered. I imagined a small boy kneeling in the dirt, his grubby fingers moving the objects around, his green eyes intent on the scene before him. I saw the sun pick out hints of red in his sandy hair and a patch of skin appear between the tail of his plaid shirt and the top of his jeans as he leaned forward in his play. He would be about four or maybe five, I thought, old enough to be outside on his own but not yet permitted to roam the neighborhood alone. His name was Robbie.

I decided to take my walks at different times of the day, hoping that I would catch Robbie at his play. I'd close my eyes just as I reached the top of the hill, willing him to be there when I opened them. Some days, I approached the oak tree from the other end of the block, as though my actions could determine his presence. Despite all my efforts, Robbie continued to elude me. I kept coming with my small offerings, though, certain that we would meet one day. As the weather grew colder, I wondered if Robbie would move his treasures indoors and make a warmer world for them there, but nothing changed in the circle beneath the tree except the positions of its inhabitants.

Then one day in November, I found the scene unaltered from the day before. I felt a flicker of concern at this lack of movement, but thought perhaps Robbie had a cold or was away with his family. Several more days passed and still the scene remained the same. I was increasingly worried at the sight of those stationary little figures. The weather turned stormy, and cold rains kept me at home for almost a week. When the clouds at last receded, I resumed my walks, grateful to be out again and anxious to check on Robbie's little world. The wind picked up as I approached the tree, and I was shivering by the time I reached the top of the hill. Down below, I saw a black limousine pull up in front of Robbie's oak tree. The driver got out and opened the doors as a group of people in dark clothes moved slowly down the steps from the house beyond the tree. The man and woman leading the short procession clung to each other as they stumbled to the waiting car. They made no sound, but a steady stream of tears splashed onto the darkening wool of their coats. I watched the driver gently close the doors and take his place behind the steering wheel. As the big black car pulled away, I felt my baby move inside me for the first time. With my hand on my belly, I

walked over to the oak and saw that the little deer was lying on its side, all spattered with mud. I placed an oak leaf on top of him, mourning the loss of the little boy I would never meet. I walked home slowly, keeping step with the funeral music that was droning in my head.

That night, Robbie came to me in my dreams. He had on his plaid shirt, and the sun brought out the red in his hair. He smiled at me and held out his hand. I enclosed it with my own, and when he pulled his away, I was holding the little deer, its copper skin shining in the sun.

The next morning, I went to get Robbie's deer. I placed him on a bed of cotton in the small box I had brought with me in my pocket. When I got home, I found a large pie tin at the back of a cupboard and filled it with dirt from my garden. I gathered stones that I had collected over the years and made an edging around the dirt. I ran warm water in a small bowl and gently bathed the little deer and patted him dry with a soft cloth. I placed him in the center of the pan with a seashell on each side of him. I put the pan on the windowsill over the kitchen sink where the morning sun burnished the copper of his coat.

My child leapt within me.

Randi Klasskin is a retired community volunteer and substitute teacher. She has taken a memoir writing class and a poetry writing class at LLI. This is her first real attempt at fiction.



Lake in the Clouds

Olivia Cook

The colors migrated north from the city, the crisp wind stitching them into the blanketing trees of the Upper Peninsula. The humidity of August was fading, and the cooler nights promised relief from the sweat-soaked afternoons. I was two hours outside Ontonagon County, and crossing the Bridge I felt farther forgotten than the couple hundred miles that had passed. The smear of an unborn sky settled obliquely against a collage of northern pines. Its glow gripped the mountains' edge, holding tightly to the innumerable layers in the horizon. Distance became my accomplice when I could no longer taste anything but lake effect, as it flooded my throat with moisture from its windward fetch.

I took a piece of him with me. I glanced, compulsively, at the three inch long figurine tilting on its side in the car's middle compartment, wet with specks of condensation that had splattered from the water bottle that towered over it. I finally reached for it and caught the drops my jeans. Clutching the small deer-like object in my fist, I squeezed until I was sure I was suffocating the stone, lifeless animal. Its cast-copper coating had faded to an ugly-blackish green, and with its combined primitive design gave it an otherworldly appearance. The feet were extensively worn, their bottoms revealing a stone quality. It was all I had left of where I had been and where I was never going back to.

My father was a collector. The richness of a history made him feel alive. Old guns, watches, war weaponry, they were the only things that ever

brought him any peace. The oldest memories I have of us together are those in which we were driving home from dinner or church, and my father, spotting a tattered, homemade sign, would veer off the road to stop at an antique barn or yard sale. The musty smell clinging to rusted metal and rotting wood was overwhelming. Sometimes he walked away empty handed, staring blankly out the truck window the rest of the way home. When he was fortunate enough to stumble upon a unique item, in mint condition, his eyes would beam and his hard, chiseled face relaxed, revealing rare contentment. Those were the nights that we stopped for ice cream, or for a candy bar from the corner store. He tossed his Baby Ruth wrapper in the bed of his truck, and unloaded his prized possessions, preparing them for shelf-life in the basement.

I was seven; still young enough to be kicked around. I ventured down the wooden stairs, where dirt was caked on from years of pounding boots and neglect. His collections, hid the numerous tables, and engulfed the edges of the cluttered room like vines. Other people's junk, chunks of unknown chronology were strewn along the walls, a countless accumulation I removed a polished rifle from the wall-rack, the weight of the wrought iron barrel loaded in my small left hand. I created battle scenes in the dusty, dim-lit fortress of the basement, transforming it into an open field or a thick forest wilderness, perfect sites for shoot-outs and sneak attacks. Everything has its place—precisely where I found it, and I made sure that everything made it back to its home among the chaos. The bruises and beatings of above were the constant reminders of how dead I wanted to be, and how painfully alive I still was. I ventured down, only when I was positive I had heard the screen door slam, and the loud, stumbling thuds of work boots on the kitchen floor. I waited again for the silence, assuring me that I would find him passed out face down on the couch, fully clothed, his shirt reeking of the stale beer that permeated through his pores and into his blue button down shirt.

I got a little older, and had a few less friends. I could never let another into this house, this life. It wasn't normal, the narrow paths between piles of worthless trash that he called treasures. His unpredictable outrages were a risk that I was never willing to take. He owned a portion of a construction company, where he over-saw, and often worked on-site of cement jobs or house remodeling projects. At six foot four, with a stocky, bulging torso, I flinched at the sound of him clearing his throat. I went through a phase where I fixed things. I figured if I made myself useful by refurbishing the items he bought, then I would have some purpose in his life, or if nothing else, the beatings might come a little less often. It was late May, and summer vacation was right around the corner, I had a countdown on the white board in my room. I was working on fixing an old Schwinn bike, instead of the three page essay that was due the next day. The school called to tell him that I was frequently late for my classes, when I showed up to them at all. He tore through the garage where I had been working for the past few hours, flinging tools off of tables as he ripped his way through the clutter. The gap between

his fist and my face was closing rapidly, and with the garage door shut there was no possible way of running. I wore long sleeve shirts for the next three weeks. I limped, through the hallways of my school, where I attended every class on time for the rest of the year. I became really good at lying. Where was my protector? Where was the person who was supposed to step in and save me? She left a long time ago, and I didn't stand a chance. When my mother decided she had had enough, he was just beginning. His had turned to the belt which turned to anything he could find.

I tossed the figurine on the passenger seat next to me. Seeing it out of place and disoriented against the tan cloth made me feel uneasy. I was accustomed to seeing the small statue meticulously placed on the oak night stand beside my father's bed, between his bible and leather watch. The statue had been a gift from my grandpa, given to my father as a souvenir from his time serving in the military over-seas in Japan. He died shortly after my father's fifteenth birthday, leaving him with few memories of their time spent together. It was the most important object among the many adorned items in our house. Everything had a story, a past, but this tiny figurine had *his* past, real depth and importance in his life.

It was mid-morning and I was late for work. Most likely, the manager of the restaurant would be calling the house wondering why I couldn't make it on time to a minimum wage job, where my only responsibility was cleaning up after the picture perfect families that came to enjoy Sunday brunch after church. I graduated high school three weeks earlier, and my life was going nowhere. With no career, no future, it was hard to see how things would ever change. I was sweating, and my shirt stuck to the small of my back as I hovered over the nightstand, my heavy breathing echoing in the sunlit bedroom. The car was packed, all of my belongings, my necessities to survive. I didn't have a plan, at least not one that promised something better, but I knew that the only hope I had of carving out a life for myself would be to run, run and never look back. In the eerie silence of his bedroom I closed my eyes, feeling bruised ribs crushing under heavy fists, and the shouting of slurred words behind tainted breath. I grabbed the tarnished animal and saw the empty wooden space it created as I shoved the figure into my pants pocket. I whispered "don't look back" as I drove away from everything I've ever known.

This was the sort of place you came to, not all at once, but to imagine. Drifting into some road side commune, the rest of your life waving at you from below. I saw a sign ahead that read "*Lake in the Clouds*" with an arrow, pointing towards all that waited to be touched, discovered—altered, destroyed. I liked the way it made me think of heaven under water, as something I could dive into, feeling myself completely submerged. The grinding gravel beneath the tires shook the silence, and as the car wound its way up the mountainside I wondered if the faint daylight would remain enough to make trip worth-while.

The road ended abruptly, at a small open lot, where wooden stairs replaced it. I grabbed the deer statue from the seat, and I followed the stairs because it seemed the only way to reach the water. I made it to the top, not of the entire mountain, but to where I knew my flesh could fall for miles, suspended in a web of wind. I flinched at the sight of the man before me. I hadn't seen another car since the Bridge, and here he stood, a man twice as real as any inherent truth of my imagination. He wavered atop an archaic concrete wall that wrapped around the ledge, and faced the freedom of the vast expanse. I half expected him to jump, and contemplated how watching him let go of life would change mine. He reached his arm out into the abyss, like he was touching God, teetering in a controposto pose. My gut launched forward and a film of nausea coated my insides. He was pointing, to what seemed like endless emptiness.

I approached the wall, leaning against the cool concrete, with the weight of anticipation surging through me. It took several elongated seconds for him to acknowledge my presence, and when he did, he seemed agitated that I had interrupted his personal moment of solitude. "How long do you think I'll get to fly before I reach the bottom?" he asked, in a calm yet confident voice, one that I had not expected from him given the situation. If I wasn't shaking enough before hearing him speak, his question threw me into an almost seizure-like state. I begged him not to make any irrational decisions, and to think about everything he would be throwing away if he ended his life right now. He paused for a brief moment, and simply replied "my family will never forgive me for the things I have done in my life. I have caused such hurt and suffering, and I don't deserve to live." The man's feet were filthy, his hair streaked with grease from days in the wilderness, he couldn't have been older than forty. His eyes were blood shot, from what I assumed to be lack of sleep, or worse. He mumbled incessantly under his breath as he looked out on the mountains.

"Do you see the lake down there?" he asked me, as if we had been tied travelers. I had to squint by this time, and could only make out the quivering orange glow of sparse campfires, like a circular constellation. "No road can carry you there" he said, awing at its serenity, "that's where I'm going". I struggled to make sense in my head of what was happening on this secluded over-hang, in the middle of the Upper Peninsula. Why did I have to stop? Was I really going to be responsible for letting this man take his own life? I scrambled to come up with any possible reason that would convince him to change his mind, but all I could think about was that stupid statue I've been carrying around all day. I pulled it from my pocket and ran my finger along the bottom of its feet. "My father beat me from the time my mother left us. Nothing I did was ever good enough, and I could never make her come back. I have permanent scars from cigarette burns that I will carry with me forever. I woke up this morning, walked out the door, and decided I was never looking back." I confessed this to the man who was far from any state of lucidity. He looked at me with such intense concentration that I thought he might

grab me and take me with him over the edge. I reached out, offering the stone figurine in my hand “everyone has the capacity for forgiveness” I said, I didn’t realize I had started crying, but my vision blurred and I could feel the cool wetness of breeze mixing with tears on my face. He took the statue from me with hesitation, and brought it close to his weathered face. We stood there, under the stars, with the glowing constellation now well defined in the distance below. I turned and said to him, as if we had been tied travelers “Do see that lake down there? That’s where I want to go.”

Olivia Cook is a junior from Detroit, Michigan. She is majoring in biology with a minor in writing, and she plays softball for Washington University. After graduation she plans on attending graduate school to become a Physician Assistant.



Superstar

Ruby Lapin

“Dad has never told me about this block of wood with a metal word on it. He keeps it on his desk all the time. It’s cool but I don’t know what it’s for. Any ideas?” Pierre passed it around to his classmates, who looked at it curiously and offered possible uses for it. “It says ‘Brahms,’” said one. “Wasn’t Brahms a composer of music?” said another. “It’s heavy. He could use it for a paperweight,” offered Floyd with a giggle.

It was Pierre’s turn to write a paragraph, to read it aloud, and show the object he wrote about to the class. His paragraph contained only a few sentences, but it was acceptable for an eighth grader in my lowest level class. Pierre DuBois had come to our school that semester when African-American city pupils voluntarily were bussed to county schools.

I listened to him as he performed. I was not expecting much; he was from the north side where schools were not very successful with language arts studies. He looked younger than his age, soft and vulnerable, but he spoke clearly and without the speech patterns of many black students. His smile was genuine; his eyes sparkled with mischief. He related to class members with interest instead of reluctance, even to Floyd, our resident bully, who boasted a black belt in karate.

Pierre DuBois was one of only fifteen class members. As always, for the first week, these pupils were on good behavior. Then after this brief honeymoon period, they exhibited their discipline and academic problems.

The Monday morning of the second week, I stopped in the office to prepare for coming problems by reading the folders on each of them, learning of their issues and behavior during seventh grade, including suggestions from former instructors on handling them. Even though he had only been to class for one week, Pierre's folder already had a red "flag" indicating that two teachers had found him unruly, difficult to control.

Since I was new to the school, naturally I was assigned the pupils with the most problems in addition to my average students. I was ready. With thirty years in public schools, I was experienced in handling behavior problems and sometimes helping some of my kids succeed. I should have retired last year, but I chose to move to the county school to fill a vacancy for the year. Then I would load up my RV and drive off into the sunset!

When I entered my classroom, I was not surprised to find the small dark boy with curly hair humming and dancing about the room, pushing books off tables, and pulling a girl's hair. When she yelled "Ow," I took his hand and led him into the hall for a private conversation.

"How can I help you get more control over your actions?" I asked. "You cannot learn if you are busy messing up the room and poking your classmates."

"I need a window and you don't have one." was his answer. I hesitated. What had a window to do with his restlessness?

"There is a window at the back of the classroom. Shall we move your desk there so you can look out?"

He nodded yes shifting from foot to foot.

"O.K. but on these conditions. When I call on you, you respond. When you know an answer you raise your hand. When I give an assignment, you do it. And you don't bother anybody. Agreed?" He nodded yes. We moved his seat.

Pierre spent time staring out that window daydreaming. Since there were so few students, he had no one back there to bother even when he was not in his seat. I allowed him some freedom to move around as long as he was not disrupting the class.

But he did as I asked. His homework was handed in on time and neatly done. He raised his hand, often before any of the others. I had to be careful to call on pupils besides Pierre, to let his classmates have their turns. I realized that he was misplaced in my remedial class.

When I was in the cafeteria, I noticed something else about Pierre. He started out by sitting with his tray of food at the table occupied by all African-American youngsters. After he was finished, he visited other tables, pushing his way between classmates so that he could talk to the white kids at that table. He was small for his age, but insistent, and slowly persuaded these teens to be his friends. His smile lit up the area.

He made friends with Mary Lou at a "white" table, a broad shouldered tough girl with long brown hair and blue eyes. I suppose she acted as his body guard. When Pierre pushed a white kid, she was there to stop any

angry responses. I observed that she often walked with him to my class before continuing down the hall.

While I graded papers one day, he slipped into the classroom. “I skipped gym, teach,” he said. “Can I stay here until the bell rings?”

I groaned. “Pierre, what made you skip gym?”

“They had rope climbing. I can’t stand high places.” “I won’t skip any more,” he said, “but anyway I wanted to sign up to be manager of the football team, and the time ran out. So here I am, without a hall pass, too early for my Social Studies class. I don’t want to get into trouble again. Please, can I just sit by the window until the bell rings.”

He was too small to play football. He might not be telling me the truth. But I said ‘yes’. I knew he had trouble with his teachers and couldn’t afford to get punished for this. And I knew Coach didn’t give hall passes.

Pierre waltzed around the room. He obviously wanted someone to talk to, so I stopped grading papers. “That block of wood I brought to school was from a print shop where my granddaddy worked years ago preparing sheet music. My dad says he likes to have it around to remember his Pop. You put the block into an old fashioned printing press and it prints the word.” He pulled the block out of his backpack zipper pocket and demonstrated how it printed by tapping the sharp metal edges against my desktop. (The ‘B’ in Brahms is still etched in the finish.)

Instead of taking his gym class, Pierre told me he had accompanied Mary Lou to the coach’s office. There she found out that she couldn’t be manager of the football team because she was a girl. Even though she had toughened up by practicing football with her older brothers and she really wanted to play football, the coach persuaded her to sign up for water ballet. She was a good swimmer. I wondered how Coach could be so uncaring!

So at last in her frustration, she persuaded Pierre to apply in her place, telling him that her big brother would get him votes from the football players.

Later, when I visited with other teachers over my cup of coffee, I learned that there really was an eighth grade student manager of the ninth grade football team. Usually it was someone too small to qualify for the team next year, but who had an interest in the game. The football team voted Pierre their new manager for Fall practice.

After the year-end holidays Pierre announced just before class started that he was running for student council president. He told all fifteen students they had to vote for him. He had an artist friend in his social studies class who would prepare his campaign. He wanted to take part in whatever our school offered and he wanted their help. Each one offered his help.

It was my pleasure to watch him blossom into a self-assured person who wanted very badly to take charge, wherever he was. But he still looked out the window during class. What was it that caused his daydreaming and required a window?

That Spring there were the usual campaign happenings -- a parade in the gym, speeches, posters -- and Pierre enjoyed them all. His campaign posters said, "Pierre is There" which seemed to catch on with all students, although I wondered what it meant. His speech in the gym had to compete with the several other students who were running. They all made speeches in other parts of the gym at the same time. The noise was deafening to me, but I noticed that Pierre had more people in his audience than the others. I was proud that he was in my class. He had become a real superstar.

The day after the vote took place, I went to get my usual coffee and found two teachers busily counting votes in the lounge. I overheard their conversation and froze.

"I have counted these votes many times now and it is still the same. That black boy has almost fifty votes more than Lucy, the next candidate. We are going to have a black student council president for the first time in our history unless we do something about it."

"What can we do? He did win."

"We could drop fifty votes in the waste basket and have a nice white girl instead. It might be unusual to have a girl, but it is better than a black boy if you ask me."

My hands shook and I spilled my coffee. I took a paper towel to wipe up. I was enraged! I had to tell them how I felt. "I couldn't help but hear what you plan to do, and I am appalled. If the student body is ready to accept Pierre, why aren't you? Actually Pierre is a superstar of a kid, black or white. You ought to be proud to see him succeed." We are going to have to deal with many more inner city blacks that won't begin to measure up to him.

I burst into the principal's office with my news. All he said was, "Well, I'll look into this." He always had a southern drawl when he spoke. I worried how he might react to what I said, since he was from Little Rock, Arkansas.

It was a relief when the morning announcements included the fact that Pierre DuBois would be the new president of the student council next year. My class roared and clapped. They surrounded Pierre in his back of the room sanctuary. Even Floyd was so pleased he locked his arms around Pierre's neck. It may have been uncomfortable to be restrained that way, but Pierre only smiled and punched his elbow into Floyd's ribs.

Ruby Lapin is a graduate of Washington University with a BS in Business and an MA in Education. She has taught in the Ladue school district. She has prepared newsletters for cities in St. Louis County and acted as PR assistant for the City of Maryland Heights. Currently she helps her class members write their memoirs for Washington University's Lifelong Learning Institute and is a retired chairman of the Steering (Executive) Committee.



By the Canal

Alana Ferguson

Alexander sat in his usual spot, on a stack of newspapers by the general store door, watching customers come in and out: an obese woman with red and white dread locks that looked like a pile of spaghetti on top of her head, two loud girls in matching purple bellbottoms, a young man without a shirt and large birth mark over his belly button. He had been hanging out at the general store since he and his mother moved into the apartment above a few years ago; his father didn't come with them and he didn't say goodbye to Alexander. The regulars recognized Alexander, and acknowledged him with a small wave, but he went unnoticed by most. Customers were usually in a hurry when they came by the general store: it was just a stop for cigarettes and a breath from the putrid smell of the Gowanus canal on their way to their destination. Each time the door swung open, Alexander held his breath, preferring neither to suffer smelling the stench through his nose nor eat the scent by breathing through his mouth. This morning it had rained, and the sewage of the Gowanus smelled overwhelmingly. Alexander got down from his perch and skipped to the counter at the back of the store. He saw Bill: brow furrowed in concentration, teeth bared as though he were about to eat the cigarette in his mouth as he read the daily newspaper. Bill didn't notice Alexander until the boy was standing beside him, opening and closing the cash register.

The register made a bang upon each open and close, as the money tray flew along the rudders, the change clinking against the metal side of the

wooden Brahms stamp. Alexander noticed this stamp each time Bill opened the cash register. The few times he had picked it up the metal edges scraped his palms.

Bill put his wide hand over Alexander's skinny fingers and shut the cash register, "What you doin' that for, boy?" Bill grunted. Alexander shrugged his shoulders, but his eyes were on the stamp.

"I see what you lookin' at," Bill smiled knowingly, "you so transfixed by that dirty old stamp and I don't even know why I keep that in there."

Bill was lying, but not greatly. He had found the stamp in his backyard as a boy and had since felt a bizarre affinity with the object. He had always felt as though it had been left behind for him.

Bill looked down at Alexander—his duck-footed stature, his scabbed elbows and bruised knees, his dark skin that was nearly black— and he felt a surge of sympathy. Bill knew Alexander had difficulty at school. He was called a mama's boy, made fun of because his mother worked at the school as an assistant for the principle. Bill had never seen Alexander play with children his own age, or speak of any friends; he spent all of his free time with Bill.

"Why don't you take the stamp Alexander, figure out what you want to do with it."

Alexander eagerly grabbed the stamp, rubbing the smooth surface and fingering the sharp corners. He played with the stamp like it was a race-car, making the noises of an engine as he slid it over the stack of newspapers, bags of potato chips, the doorframe. He brought the stamp to bed with him that night, hiding it under his pillow like a tooth.

Alexander was mesmerized by the mystery of the stamp—the weird word on the side of it, where Bill had gotten it—and it felt as though he were carrying a part of Bill when he held it. It was rough on one side and smooth on the other, like Bill's old-man hands. Alexander didn't know anything of Bill's past, but when he held the stamp he felt like he was in on one of Bill's secrets. Alexander wanted to know about Bill. He didn't know where his own father was, and he wanted to see part of himself in Bill—in his grumbling voice, his long arms, his slightly downturned mouth that contrasted his bright eyes. Alexander began to bring the stamp to his elementary school. It comforted him to feel the sharp corners puncturing his pant pocket, like a reminder that he had a friend to spend time with after three o'clock.

Alexander was having trouble entertaining his wandering mind with doodles during math class one Monday. He didn't understand Mrs. Thumple's teaching, and she never watched him anyway. He brought the stamp out and put it on his desk. Just as he was reaching for it again to look at, the boy next to him snatched the toy.

"This thing is stupid," Richard muttered mockingly. He was a fat, light skinned boy with freckles. He lived on the same block as Alexander, but Richard had always refused to play together because he thought Alexander smelled like the canal. Richard tapped the stamp on the desk like a monkey

and pocketed the small toy, feeling bored by it. Alexander shrunk into his seat. He didn't hear his teacher's words during the rest of class, or the popping of chewing gum from the girl behind him, as he fixated on the bulge in Richard's pocket, where his stamp lay hidden.

Yet Mrs. Thumple noticed that Alexander was upset— she saw the boy's face redden, and his body sink into his chair. But she had other students to worry about. Suzy, who always tried to sneak gum into class although it was unpermitted, Richard who liked to bully students when she turned her back, Lisa, who was eager to be in class because she was rarely able to make it. Alexander's troubles would have to wait.

At the end of class Richard took it out and scribbled on the wood with his pen. "How does that feel, stupid?" he teased, shoving the stamp in Alexander's face as Alexander packed up his backpack. Alexander reached out to grab it, but Richard was too quick and he put it in his pocket before Alexander could touch it. Alexander felt tears swelling in his eyes and his breathing became shallow. He ran out of the classroom before he began to cry, afraid of what might happen to him if he did.

Mrs. Thumple watched Richard as he clutched his fat stomach in loud, forced laughter and before she left for lunch, she made sure to ask him what was so funny.

"Nothing," Richard muttered.

"I saw you talking to Alexander in class and you were very distracting. This is the third time that I have had to confront you about your behavior, and I am considering calling your parents. Can you tell me what happened?"

Richard passed Mrs. Thumple the stamp in hopes that she wouldn't call his parents. His back still burned from his father's heavy hand the night before.

At lunch, Alexander bought a bowl of macaroni and cheese and sat alone at a table by a window. He ate the food as quickly as he could and he could barely breath as he shoved spoonfuls of slippery noodles into his small mouth. As he stared out the window into the crowded playground of students, he began to cry silently, blotting his cheeks with a napkin. He felt insecure without the stamp, which he had become accustomed to carrying, and he felt guilty for having lost something of Bill's.

He cut the rest of the school day, and spent the remaining hours punishing himself by sitting along the Gowanus Canal in the foggy stench. He walked lazily home and he didn't stop at the general store on the way upstairs. He lay in his bed thinking about another day passed, another fight ended in loss, another day to come.

Around four o'clock Bill began to wonder when Alexander would stop by. He was surprised by his sudden loneliness: he missed the tugs at his shirt, and having to yell at Alexander when he trampled over newspapers and bothered costumers. Bill tried not to dwell on his desire to see Alexander; he had learned from the past and he knew that it was dangerous to be attached

to someone. It was safer to be alone. Bill looked back down at his newspaper, but he couldn't focus.

When Alexander returned to school the next day, and entered his math classroom at third period, Mrs. Thumple stopped him on his way to his chair. She reached inside her desk and nonchalantly took out the stamp. She offered it to Alexander by opening her palm and he snatched it in his small fist.

“Richard had this, but I know it belongs to you,” she said.

Alana Ferguson is a junior studying painting and art history. She is from Brooklyn, New York, where the story takes place. She is eager to return this summer to paint and write.



The Weight of It

Valerie Levi

We went to clean out Dad's apartment the day after we got him into the nursing home, following his big stroke. The previous day had been hideous. Exhausting, depressing, an avalanche of forms.

Name: Douglas Leaping
Address: 3 Magnolia Lane
Phone: 929 456 7777
SS #: 1239.....

On and on, the questions to be answered, ("I just told you that on the last page!") were endless, while my father was hustled off in 4 point restraints on a gurney down a dim hallway with a few bare bulbs dangling from the ceiling. Sam went with Dad. I, the older and therefore more responsible one, stayed at the nurses station to do the paperwork. I hate numbers and writing inside the boxes, it makes me grumpy and anxious.

There is no way to make a Nursing Home seem pretty. Kind of like putting a bow on a turd.

The aids and nurses were talking like I wasn't there.

"...that motherfucker in #237, whats his name, mr Zippowitz or something, he just wants me to jerk him off. I said "shut up and go to sleep you dirty old man." So now he's down there pressing his call button. His light's on all the time!"

Dad deserved better than this, he had been a man who carried himself with dignity. Now, he was flailing and thrashing, making primal moans more like the rumblings of elephants, the sound just out of human perception. The tile hallway was vibrating with his fury and indignation.

Something about his desperate struggle made a memory of a childhood cat resurface. Zelda came home one day howling with a voice of agony I had never heard before. She had been attacked by a dog, her hind leg was dragging and dripping blood. The vet put the injured leg in an aluminum stabilizer and hoped it would heal, but it didn't. Months later she still dragged it when the brace was removed. The vet said, "I should have amputated when you first brought her in" For months she had been in so much pain and frustration, falling down in epileptic fits screaming and attacking the aluminum contraption which tormented her. Finally I decided to end her misery. Dad drove me down to the Humane Society. I was holding Zelda in my arms when I got out of the car. Like a rocket she bolted down the street and climbed up under the wheels of a parked 18 wheeler. She knew this was the end for her and she was not ready. With difficulty, I dragged her from her hiding place and took her inside.

"You'll need to fill out these forms." Said the woman behind the counter.

They took her away through a heavy metal door which slammed shut with a ring of finality. There would be no changing my mind and rushing to her rescue. When we got back in the car I was crying. Dad leaned over, gave me a kiss and said, "you did the right thing honey, she was suffering. Now he was suffering and I couldn't help him.

Dad had always believed that he was a gentleman, but when I got older I questioned this. What kind of gentleman calls people coons and kikes, whaps and fags? He did it in public too. At the restaurant, when the waiter had just left to get our order, but was still close enough to hear, he would say "Get a load of that fag." Or at the grocery store going through the check out, he might say, "Why do they hire these stupid niggers to do this job?"

"Dad stop that! You know how much that embarrasses me, and it's just hateful and wrong!"

"Oh honey they didn't hear me say that" And he would grin like a mischievous boy.

After the stroke, I wondered if it was God punishing my father for all the mean words he had used. So God took away his voice. The doctors said the stroke was centered in the area of the brain which deals with speech. They doubted it would come back. The damage was extensive.

Shortly before his stroke, Sam and I began staying at Dad's place to help him with little chores and make sure he didn't get into trouble. He said he was fine but we knew he wasn't. He had told us that sometimes when he got up to go to the bathroom at night he got dizzy. We begged him to let us help. Poor Dad, he didn't want to be dependent on anyone to help him pee. I told him, "Becoming humble is part of aging gracefully. Let us help you."

But Dad wasn't going for it. He just looked at me with that half dreamy smile which said, I have no idea what you are saying, but I love you anyway.

During the night we woke up to a crash in the bathroom. Dad had fallen and hit his head. He was bleeding and incoherent. Before they got him to the hospital he had lost his ability to speak at all. It took some time for the doctors to diagnose the stroke from the concussion.

My little sister Samantha and I were born twelve years apart. Mom died of lung cancer a month after Sam was born. My mother had desperately wanted another child: a boy for my father. Even after she was diagnosed with the cancer, she begged the doctors to let her continue the pregnancy, refusing to do chemo and radiation. She delivered another girl, who Dad now had to raise alone, along with me. Obviously, I was less needy than a newborn, so I was yanked from my childhood at twelve. I thought it was way too early.

I had always been his princess. His first child. In those years, he was the perfect Dad, and we formed a bond which was never broken in over fifty years. He was my teacher, my cheerleader, my most trusted friend, and keeper of our secrets.

Now he went into Sam's room at night and cuddled with her because she was a crybaby. Dad was torn between me and Sam, but her crying was like a taser. He jumped up from whatever he was doing, and ran to her. I had to go to school and do the housework and cooking that Mom had done. When she was a baby, Dad found a woman to care for Sam during the day when he was at work. When she started school, I had to walk home with her. My friends would go on without me because Sam was too slow. She was a cute kid and really pretty well behaved, but I still resented her. I tried to be a good big sister, but sometimes I just wished she would get kidnapped or catch flu and die.

When Sam was a baby I came to know that fine line that parents walk when they care for an infant. Many of the tasks of care taking demanded skin to skin contact: bathing, diapering and soothing. Sam, like many toddlers, loved to be naked. She would run, doing giddy dances around the house trying to evade us while we tried to get her dressed. Nudity at that age is just what babies do, and no one really thinks about it. Sometimes she would even go visit her friend Daisy who lived next door in just her panties. We all thought it was cute.

My romance with my father ended with my mothers death. It broke the spell we had been in. I think for many years I pretended it never happened, and Dad never spoke of those times.

But finally images began to surface: I remembered being about 3 and walking in on Dad taking a shower. I was already naked and I jumped right in with him. At first he seemed not to want me there, but then he looked down at me all smiles and dripping joy, and he couldn't say "Get out". How did I know that Mom would not like us doing that? I just knew it was something a little naughty, but Daddy was letting me get away with it. It was only spoken once: "I won't tell Mommy about this." He nodded and smiled and

gave me a hug. I felt so happy, and it was fun to have a secret. Dad would wink at me and I would know what he was thinking.

In the beginning we were innocent. I would help him soap his back and tend to his feet. Later we progressed to shampooing his hair, and from there I moved lower till one time I found that place which made him moan and turn away. This feeling was one I had never seen him show before. I loved making Daddy feel like that. After our shower he would help towel me dry and whisper "I love you so much!"

My father never hurt me. There was no intromission, not coercion. I was the leader of our romantic duo. Dad just never said, "no". Our relationship grew from a perfect love between parent and child into a perversion. How very natural for a child of exactly crotch height to be fascinated by that appendage hanging right at eye level. It took only childish curiosity to go poking at it. Once, he said "be gentle" as if I was petting a strange kitty. I asked him "what would feel good to you?" and he said, "your mouth." I went down on him at first to please him, eventually to please me. And so we were lovers, but ever so gentle with each other.

It was in fourth grade that my friend Judy told me, "I saw you walking to school holding hands with your Dad..." By that time my classmates had started asking their parents to leave them a block away so they could walk in looking independent and cool. I quickly changed the subject, "Where did you get those shoes, they are so cute?" After that I was careful to be less close to him in public. Sometimes we would go to the movies in another town. We would sit in the back and kiss. Sometimes he would touch my tiny breasts. His hands never went lower. My little sister never knew. To Sam, Dad was a kind but distant father who worked hard at a job which earned him little respect: a janitor at Woolworth's. Dad didn't repeat our sin with Sam, she was forever "the baby" and he kept her at arms length. She never got to feel the closeness I had with him.

We had been going through drawers, throwing big garbage bags of stuff away, putting the "save" things in boxes. What do you do with a whole set of outdated encyclopedias that Woolworths gave him one year for being such a good member of the team, and mostly for almost never calling in sick? Or old pipes he no longer could use, and ashtrays everywhere. Everything smelled of stale smoke.

"I'll start on his clothes" I said to Sam, pushing open the sliding door to his closet. Seven pairs of pants all dark blue. Ten white work shirts and several sweaters. I had begged him not to put his sweaters on hangers but he would never listen to me. I dragged everything off the hanging bar and threw the clothes on the bed.

"I guess all of this will go to the thrift shop eh?"

"I sure don't want any of it."

With the clothes out of the way I could step into the closet and reach the upper shelf where his shoes and boxes of stuff were stored away. I worked my way along the row: 5 pairs of sneakers, his beat up old slippers,

dress shoes still perfectly shined, several belts and a crumpled up old tie with years of dust. I had to get a chair to reach the far end of the closet. Back where the light fell off into shadow, I saw a familiar wooden box.

I would come into his bedroom to bring him cleaned and ironed shirts for work. There he would be, hunched over his shoe box, polishing his old shoes. The box had spaces for several tins of shoe polish, rags of various texture for applying the smelly polish, and a brush to bring his “darlings” to a high shine. Dad called those shoes his darlings, and he took great care of them. He used to tell me, when I would tease him about being in love with his shoes, that his boss frequently noticed how perfectly polished his shoes always were. Dad was sure he held his job for as long as he did because of the shine on those shoes. They were 15 years old when he was laid off.

I pulled the box down from the shelf and looked inside. All that was left was one can of black shoe polish. Woolworth \$1.49, said the price sticker. I remembered the little opener on the side which he had showed me as a child, it twisted to push the lid up. I opened it, and that familiar petroleum smell hit me. The pent up secret love I had kept hidden for all those years, came flooding over me, and I found myself weeping. Sam saw me and came quickly to the bed, sat down and put her arms around me.

“Oh Honey, Whats wrong?”

Part of me really wanted to open up completely. Tell her about the sadness, the loneliness, and the anger I had felt after Mom died. Tell her how my father was not her father. Tell her that some love doesn’t conquer all. But mostly I wanted someone to absolve me of the crushing burden of the guilt. My endless hatred for that little girl who led Daddy into a garden of shame. But another part of me knew that this would just be dumping my pain onto her, and to what end?

“Oh Sam, I guess I’m just overwhelmed by how quickly Dad went down hill. It’s so sad to see him in that place. Remember how Daddy would say so often in the last few years, “Where is Dr. Kevorkian when I need him?” We smiled at each other thinking of his gallows humor.

Valerie Levi is a homemaker and gardener. She is a graduate of Lindenwood University. She worked at the Missouri Botanical Garden and then ran a landscape design business. She has a daughter Rachel and is married to Hans Levi.



Inkling

Stephanie Spence

Before my Mom tried to eat my father she would spend her afternoons on her hands and knees, planting flowers in the backyard. As a child I liked to walk through her small garden, sticking my fingers into the cupped bulbs of tulips. I liked the way their petals splayed open, hungry for light. I liked the way the sunflowers swiveled their faces to drink up the summer warmth. It was in the garden that I found my first butterfly, luminescent yellow and dainty as it perched among the azaleas and reached its nose down for a sip of nectar.

I soon grew obsessed with butterflies. It wasn't their frail symmetry that made me love them, or their delicately inquiring proboscis. It was their color! That riot of orange and black on the back of the monarch, the electric blue scales of Morphos. As my next door neighbor Phil chased grasshoppers in our shared yard and smashed them with his toy hammer I lay on my stomach in the grass with a long overdue book from the library (stolen at this point; it still sits in my bookshelf) of winged insects, with pages and pages of butterflies.

And then I began to dream about colors, those iridescent wings. I wanted to lavish my own skin in silken patterns, like a permanent kimono of rainbow. Like Joseph's technicolor dreamcoat, but inside my flesh.

Of the two daughters in our family I was the shining one. My sister Nora, 13 years older than me, was a nurse. But not the good-looking kind with the sharp white uniforms and the wavy blonde curls. Nora was a prude and a bore. Her hair was always slicked back into a knot and she wore plain pants and sweaters even to church. My sister, always eyeing the length of my skirts or frowning at my painted nails, seemed too ashamed to speak to me. Our relationship was one of mutual pity and a tenuous sense of discomfort in the knowledge that we were supposed to like each other.

On the other hand, I was sly and contrary. I learned to make my hips swagger like the model J.J. Fowler when I walked between the locker at school. Boys liked me and I didn't care. I stole pots of rouge from my Mom's bureau and smeared them on my mouth, down my neck, shoulders, chest. I stood in the white light of the bathroom mirror and laughed with the painted woman laughing back at me. When my mother asked what had happened to them I blamed the lost makeup on our setter Belle.

My father continued on his orbit between work and home, unaware of me or my mother, who had picked up the habit of brewing and drinking six cups a tea a day. My father didn't appear to notice this, but then again, was not like other fathers that I knew. He was not like my schoolfriend Melanie's father, a banker who seemed to decant brandy directly into his veins, nor was he like Phil's father, a deep man who liked European beers, speaking loudly about philosophy, and in my mind was a Communist. My father was spare in word and movement. He walked at an old man's speed but with a soldier's posture. I don't remember seeing him laugh, except for one time when our Belle got her foot stuck in a pothole and went mad trying to get it out.

My father had his favorite chair that he would sit in to polish his one pair of good shoes that he wore to work at Woolworth's as the assistant manager. His job didn't require slick black shoes but every Sunday evening he was in his chair, readying for the ritual. He would crack open a tin of Kiwi shoe polish and slowly work his way over each shoe, smoothing the dints with a rag. Sometimes I would just watch from the carpet as his hands circled the leather, his face still. I remember thinking that polishing was how my father prayed.

When the needle pressed into my skin a cherry of blood emerged. Mark, who was in high school, was drawing his lip into his mouth as he poked at my skin to draw the butterfly I had asked for. When I saw the blood I laughed. I felt like my father when Belle was in that mud pit, foaming at the mouth. After the tattoo was done I felt masochistic, serene, powerful. I glided into my neighborhood on my bike without holding onto the handlebars and held my arms apart like wings.

When I got back to the yard I pulled Phil behind the azaleas.
I showed him the little butterfly on my belly.

“Can I touch it?” he asked. I nodded.

Phil leaned over until his nose was almost against my skin. Then he stuck out his tongue, and gently touched the tip of it to the tip of the butterfly's wing.

I didn't accept this invitation at romance. Soon after, Phil would hide presents for me under the pink mottled roses in the corner of the yard. It took him a while to realize it but he could tell that I was pleased when he brought me ink, the kind that you can use to write calligraphy if you've got a quill. I would smear this on my palms and paint pictures down his arms. He was in love with me but I was still in love with myself.

With every tattoo Mark drew on me under the bleachers at the park I felt my real nature was being revealed, as though I was breaking out of my pale chrysalis and find brilliance underneath. It felt good to shrug off that skin, like underneath my sheep's clothing I was a wolf. From that first mark my own galaxy of tattoos grew, like the Big Bang, expanding outwards from the epicenter. My skin was disappearing under a spring's cover of flowers, butterflies, a roan horse, a dragon's wing, anything I liked. I sat under the bleachers with Mark as he smoked weed and tatted me, then I would return home to eat my mother's roast beef and hash and watch my father polish his shoes.

I was 15 when I walked into the kitchen and saw my mother smiling up at me from her three-legged stool.

“Look, Lindsay,” she said.

Every mug we owned, even the yellow mug with the chipped lip that no one liked to use, she had placed down in a grid on our kitchen table. She had brewed every kind of tea we had. The kitchen stank with the combined odor of earl grey, chai, chamomile, lemon, and the odd Chinese herbal tea that smelled like feet to begin with.

“Look, Lindsay,” she repeated. “It's beautiful, isn't it?”

She opened her arms wide like the statue of Jesus in the St. Anthony's Church and I knew in that moment that my mother and I no longer spoke the same language and that she was going crazy. I knew what crazy looked like because I had seen a few homeless people, their bones rattling as they passed by, their carts rattling, their teeth rattling. One old lady who was always on the corner of South Bend and 14th would scold the sky with her head thrown all the way back, her mouth open like a rainwater barrel.

I knew this was going to happen and so I didn't go to the bleachers with Mark or hunt for Phil's gifts in the flower patch. Nora was coming home for a visit that night so it was normal that my mother wear her nice paisley dress and paint her lips and cheeks with pink. I alone knew that this was the paint of war and felt a deep satisfaction from this.

She slipped a pork loin into the oven like it was a perfectly normal dinner time. She fixed up an apple pie, which was my father's favorite. She fetched him a beer. She even kissed his cheek. No one else saw the danger signs, but I understood.

Mom waited until we were all eating. One second before her attack she was at the stove, wiping grease from the countertop. The next second she swooped down on him with her hands open like a falcon's claws and ripped at his hair, shrieking. I've never thought that human teeth and nails could be weapons but here was Mom, proving me wrong. Then she bit him, right in the shoulder. Blood was pouring out, all down his arm.

She ripped out a good bit of him before my Nora pulled her off and wrestled Mom into a chair. I sat there waiting for my father and Mom to be friends again. I waited as my father ran a hand over his wound and just looked at his blood with a faint interest, like he was reading the paper. I waited as Nora hustled Mom off into the living room. I waited.

Even in what must have been agony my father remained aloof. He retrieved a freshly pressed shirt from his closet. He pulled on his shined shoes, and ran a wet comb through his hair. Nora bandaged up his arm. Her face was pale as oatmeal and her hands shook. My father opened the door to go outside. I waited for that moment of apology and good will. I waited, but it didn't happen. My father drove himself, one-handed I imagine, to the hospital while Nora made my mother tea. But that was it for Mom. She went trembling and covered in my father's blood up the stairs. She stayed in the bathroom for a long time, and I could hear through the walls of my room the sound of her weeping. I lay in bed and stroked the patterns on my stomach and thought of nothing in particular.

At about 4 that morning when I couldn't endure the silence one second longer I went downstairs to the living room. I opened the battered wooden chest that lay at the side of my father's chair. I took out the Kiwi polish. I turned the tin can over and over in my hands, felt its weight. I cracked it open with the little twisting key on the side.

Then I painted war lines underneath my eyes with my father's shoe polish. The acrid smell teared up my eyes and burned the inside of my nostrils.

I painted tiger stripes on the TV set and rubbed the polish into Belle's fur until she looked more Dalmatian than setter. I walked around the kitchen and I rubbed the polish over bananas, on the eggs; I plopped a bit into the jug of milk in the fridge and into my father's coffee creamer. Then I sat in my father's chair. I put my feet on the wooden table. Here it was! I wouldn't budge.

This was my stand.

In my fantasy world my father would come down from the bedroom in the morning with his arm all patched up. He would bite into his morning toast his tongue would taste a rumor of wax. He would, of course, blame my

mother and I'd watch with delight as they turned on each other like wolves. In joy and rage they would wrestle on the linoleum, tumbling and nipping at each other while I cheered from my chair and Nora would fret away in the corner but secretly like it. In their final fury both would bite off the others' head simultaneously and blood would spray all over the lace curtains, all into my eyes and onto Belle's fur. But after that, headless as Ichabod, they would shake hands and be friends again as they must have been once before. Phil would come over and then I'd lift my shirt and show them my tattoos, Nora and Mom and my father leaning in close to admire the map of ink that was crawling its way across my stomach, the soft atlas of my desire that had no need for words and spoke only in mosaic color.

Stephanie Spence is a senior studying environmental sciences, public health, and writing. After graduation, she hopes to work as an environmental advocate and to continue penning fiction on the side.



Grandpa's Fantasy

John A. Pierce

My granddaughter and I were downtown not far from the river when we noted brilliant colors highlighted by sunshine in the front window of a shop. She is six years old and her formal name is Rindercella, although family and friends all call her Rin.

"Look at that red, orange, green, and brown affair," I commented. The colorful item had two marshmallows for trunk and head. Bright colors were positioned as tail feathers, but large in size and few in number. A long narrow wattle hung from the face. There was only one leg. "Where do you suppose her other leg is?"

"How does she get around with just one leg?" Rin responded, "and what is a wattle?"

"She must hop but the left leg is small and skinny. A wattle is just normal red skin hanging off her face," I replied.

"I know what it is Granpa, either a mousaturk, or turkamouse. It is cute and I want to take it home. Can we buy it?" she inquired.

We entered the shop and bought the artifact. The clerk put the trinket in a bag. Excitement peaked when Rin received the bag and asked, "What do you call this toy?"

"We call it Louise, the candy turkey," the lady replied.

"I love it as another kind of doll. I plan to name her Lucinda," Rin said.

We continued looking at shops and trinkets but Rin's interest focused on her new prize as she repeatedly peeked in the bag. After she learned about

princesses at age 3, she decided to become one. And she started dancing not long after she could walk. Barbie dolls subsequently became a major attraction. They were first on her 'want list' for two years. She had nine Barbie dolls when she was four years old. She changed the doll dresses incessantly. By the time of her fifth birthday, she had six additional Barbies.

One day shopping, her mother happened onto a rack of shiny, long princess dresses in little girl's sizes. She bought them all. Rin was overwhelmed when she counted fifteen, realizing she could change dresses whenever she wanted. She had no special preference among the dresses but often, changed six or eight times a day. When American Girl dolls came into prominence, she amassed four of these in one year. Her favorite is the Native American with tan skin and authentic American Indian dresses. She tends to play with groups of either Barbie or American Girl dolls at different times.

One afternoon in October Rin asked, "Mother, may I plan my own birthday party?"

"I think probably that will be alright, what do you want to do?" Mother replied.

Rin had started real school kindergarten in September and tried not to like it, but she loved her teacher so much, she changed her mind. "I want to have a Lucinda Party and play with my dresses and dolls. I hope we can sing and dance and have cake and ice cream. I want to invite all thirteen girls in my class, and give each one a Lucinda favor."

Mother called the shop where Lucinda was purchased and learned they had no more Lucinda dolls and thought they would not get more. Rin never gives up easily on her plans. She seemed discouraged talking about the problem at dinner one night. Rin's dad spoke up and said, "Rin, you and Granpa started this whole thing, why don't you ask him what you ought to do?"

On her next visit to our house, Rin explained thirteen girls were invited to her birthday party and she wanted a Lucinda favor for each one. She was not able to buy the favors and wondered what she could do? I volunteered to go to Michael's with Rin and get the supplies to make our own Lucinda dolls. Her mother said for our shop, we could use their basement table. Rin, her mother, my wife, and I assembled the Lucindas. As the final touches were applied to the thirteenth Lucinda copy, we all felt an unexpected, but pleasantly welcome sense of accomplishment. Rin was very happy and gave both her grandmother and me big hugs, and said, "Granpa, you are wonderful!" Three days later the birthday party was a huge success on November the ninth.

John A. (Jack) Pierce, at Washington University of St. Louis since 1967, now retired as Professor of Pulmonary Medicine, has eleven grandchildren. He believes grandparents are greatly under-utilized as sources of advice, energy, conversation, and love.



Reginald

Adam Segal

It was arts and crafts hour, and this time Ethan wasn't crying. His almost-entirely dry eyes were focused unblinking on the meticulously organized supplies on his desk. Neat rows of glue sticks and markers separated by avenues of immaculate plastic pretending to be wood, a box of crayons, a pair of scissors. Mrs. Dowling was walking around the room, stepping on long legs over backpacks and lunch boxes, handing out the extra supplies for the project.

Somewhere, a crayon hit a wall. As Ethan began to feel his attention drawn toward the sound, he gripped the front of his desk tight with his fingertips. He shut his eyes and kept his head unturned. He didn't need to look over his shoulder to know that Nathan was there, leaning back in his chair, chewing on whatever half of the crayon he had not just thrown. Nathan was always there. Mrs. Dowling didn't seem to notice anything. She never did.

Just then she reached Ethan's desk. She placed two marshmallows made of Styrofoam, five sheets of foam paper, and a yellow pipe cleaner. Ideas about what he could create with these items automatically began to run through his head, but Ethan kept focused on his glue stick and chased them away. He had learned by now that it was best not to overthink these things.

“Today, we are making foamie snowmen,” Mrs. Dowling crooned as she gave him the supplies. “But you can make anything that you want. I give you full artistic license.” This was always the policy. As she evaporated away from his desk, Ethan sighed and looked down at the foam marshmallows. Keep it simple. Get it done. Don’t get attached. Ethan apathetically grabbed a marshmallow and covered one end of it with a liberal quantity of glue. And arts and crafts used to be his favorite part of the day.

He had always felt strange among his peers. Ethan was always one to think about the long-game. When other children got their allowances, they would spend it all on candy, pop, and arcade tokens. Ethan imagined that after ten minutes, all of them would find themselves empty-handed, and looking bleakly towards the next distant weekend.

Ethan, rather than spend his allowance on fleeting pleasures, would invest. All of his finance decisions revolved around permanence. He focused his spending on stuffed animals, model cars, and comic books. Objects that he could keep. On the rare occasions when Ethan allowed himself to purchase candy, he would pick the longest-lasting candy possible. Certainly a jawbreaker that he would taste for hours on end was a much more intelligent buy than a chocolate bar that would be gone in minutes!

With this materialist philosophy, Ethan was overjoyed with the prospect that he could return home from a day of school every week with a brand new object to add to his growing hoard of material possessions. Admittedly, however, this was not the only reason for Ethan’s initial enamorment with arts and crafts.

The boy was quite creative. His artistic ability really probably began as a desire to figure out how to utilize the most materials possible in the creation of his projects, but it had always felt natural. Every time Mrs. Dowling would lay the supplies for any given week on his desk, Ethan’s mind would swarm with the possibilities at his hands. And every week, Mrs. Dowling would give him commendations on whatever invention he had produced. And every week, Ethan would return home smiling with a new toy, tool, or decoration. Free of charge. At least, that’s how arts and crafts hour used to be.

Ethan frowned as he skewered pipe-cleaner arms into the sides of the two marshmallows which comprised his snowman’s torso. It was a simple project. Boring. Maybe if he used some of the extra foam paper... but no, he couldn’t think of such things. If he put too much thought into a project, he would put too much heart into it. Best to keep it plain.

A couple months ago, Ethan had made one of his favorite projects of all time. The assignment had been to make a pretty basic flower, but Ethan had managed to construct a fully functional pinwheel. He had left the classroom that day spinning it experimentally, and walked straight into Nathan.

Nathan was a nightmare to any elementary schooler. He was substantially taller than his peers, and pudgy to the point where his weight was at least double that of Ethan’s, which admittedly wasn’t saying that much.

Nathan was a big boy with dirty red hair and freckles. And he hated everything. And he broke things. Like girls' dolls, and Billy Harkin's femur the week previous when he shoved him off the top of the slide. Today, Nathan was breaking Ethan's pinwheel. And as a result, his spirit.

The pinwheel only took a second. Nathan snatched it from the smaller boy, crumpled it in his hands even as he ripped a petal off with his teeth, and then all in one fluid motion deposited the mangled construction into the front of his pants. He spat the petal out to the side and grinned at Ethan. Ethan was frozen, horrified. Nathan laughed, he never said much.

Every week after that, when Ethan left the room cradling a new creation, Nathan would be waiting for him. Once, Ethan waited in the classroom for more than twenty minutes after the last bell had rung, hoping against hope that Nathan would have gotten bored and left. Unfortunately, it seemed that when there was an opportunity to make somebody miserable, Nathan rarely got bored.

In the end, Ethan couldn't stand the pain of losing the fruits of his labors over and over again. He stopped caring because it was the only way to stop the unbearable sense of grief. Nathan continued to destroy whatever Ethan left the room with, but as Ethan saw it, Nathan was breaking Mrs. Dowling's supplies, not Ethan's art. Because Ethan had only done the bare minimum amount of work. He had spent no time or mental effort in planning or designing, or worse, fantasizing the use of his project. He stopped creating. Mrs. Dowling stopped complimenting him. Nathan didn't stop waiting for him outside of class.

Ethan had finished his foamie snowman. If he spent any time looking at it, perhaps he would have noticed the character in the beady, inked-in eyes. The crayoned hint of blush on its cheeks. Perhaps he would have named it Reginald. That would have only been possible in earlier times. Ethan frowned again and scanned the materials left on his desk. There were a lot. All going to waste. Pity.

Ethan leaned back a little and pushed at one of his teeth with his tongue. Definitely loose. Maybe if Nathan was the only problem in Ethan's life, he would have been able to survive the loss of arts and crafts hour. He could still be comforted by his weekend purchases and things could return to how they were before Ethan even knew about arts *or* crafts. But Nathan wasn't the only one that could destroy the things Ethan had taken as permanent.

Last week, the macaroni mural Ethan had donated to his parents had been removed from the refrigerator. When he asked his mother where it was, she shrugged and bluntly told him she had thrown it away. Several weeks ago Ethan himself had accidentally left an armyman too close to the space-heater, and had returned to find the side of his face had melted off. Wheels came off of his model cars, stuffed animals lost their fluff.

Ethan was opening his eyes to the reality that everything was ephemeral, even pinwheels and foamie snowmen. But worst of all was Ethan's guilt. Because even when his objects didn't physically deteriorate, he had to admit to himself that his love for them gradually did. There were model cars he hadn't even unpacked since he had bought them, his artworks never seemed to shine as bright as they had the day he had made them, and one of his proudest creations, a fully functional marionette made primarily of popsicle sticks and socks, had never been used in any of the scenarios Ethan had planned for it. Ethan had to face some serious and fundamental flaws in his philosophy.

He nudged at his tooth thoughtfully. Perhaps he had undervalued the taste of chocolate. When it turned out that all of his permanent solutions were not in fact permanent, how should that affect his decisions? He leaned forward and surveyed his remaining supplies, and at long last he allowed one vivid and potentially dangerous design to appear behind his eyes. He considered it for a moment. And then he reached for the scissors.

The world, Ethan thought as he worked, was clearly in a constant state of decay. Someday, his glue stick would dry out. His crayons would be all used up or else melted from neglect. He would buy another pair of scissors someday. His parents would get new cars, maybe even a new house. The very chair he was sitting in would someday fall into disuse. Every stuffed animal and action figure in his room would gather dust. Many already had. Everybody loses their teeth eventually.

But the taste of chocolate. The thrill of a run for a high score at the arcade. At worst, those were no more temporary than all of his objects. At best, they were experiences to be remembered for a lifetime. And then there were still other experiences that could last beyond a lifetime. A story he could pass on. Something big, Ethan glued the last piece of foam paper onto Reginald (he had decided it was in fact the best name for his creation) and inserted the final pipe cleaner. It was perfect.

Ethan lifted his creation in both hands and stood up. Much evidence of Reginald's previous life as a snowman remained, although he had been substantially altered: brown wings had been pinned to his sides beneath his arms, and a wide tail with feathers of all colors fanned out behind him. His orange nose had been converted into a beak, complete with a red wattle hanging from it.

"It's a turkey!" Ethan proclaimed as he set Reginald down on Nathan's desk. Nathan looked up. He had taped several marshmallows together in the shape of a gun and was whacking as many of his nearby classmates with it as he could without attracting notice from Mrs. Dowling. His desk's surface was covered in stains, pencil doodles, and the attempted spellings of profanities.

"I made it for you," Ethan continued, without hesitating. "Because you are a turkey, also." Nathan looked dumbfounded. Ethan knew it wasn't the cleverest insult, but he knew it didn't have to be. Ethan turned and

walked slowly back toward his own desk. Nathan knew where to find him after class. Ethan massaged his knuckles and tongued the loose tooth in his mouth. *This* would be an interesting experience. And he knew he would certainly remember it longer than he ever would have remembered any foamie snowman.

Adam Segal is a sophomore studying English and Arabic. He spends most of his time working on slam poetry and "spreading the spoken word" on campus through various tedious logistics. Adam is originally from Denver, Colorado, which also happens to be the best place ever. No, he doesn't ski.



Chickens and Eggs

Ann Rynearson

The old lady struggled to breathe around her respirator and feeding tube. Her mouth felt dry and nasty as though lonely, neglected by her usually busy tongue. Even her eyes were sandy—from staring so long at blank walls. How alien it looked now—her own living room, so carefully decorated over the years. Now transformed by her distant children.

At considerable cost, her children had turned her living room to an in-home health care facility, complete with hospital bed and much of the gear, as well as round-the-clock LPNs. Now the space was at home but not homey, its smooth empty white walls as sterile and bare as the inside of an egg. Bed rails cooped her up like a chicken scheduled for the axe. Mysterious medical gear hummed and clicked behind her.

Suddenly her roving eyes were caught by speckles of color in the fluorescent-lit room that had become her world. On her hospital tray stood a small figure of a chicken, black with bright spots and a striking red comb. Though the carving looked old and even crude, its paint seemed much newer—almost shiny. Three rusty little wheels held the bird upright. It offered a cheerful touch of life in the otherwise dreary space. Somehow the chicken helped her realize that she was in fact at home, in the house her husband had built for his wife and soon-to-be family.

With a shaking hand, Maggie reached out and clutched the little hen in her age-twisted fingers. She could remember the night her father finished making the little toy for her, long, long ago. How long? Seventy years?

Eighty? Who knew, who cared? Just thinking about it took her back to the tiny cottage, where books mixed incongruously with well-used farm gear. That evening the room also held her father's simple woodworking tools and fresh paint. A bright dot of yellow still clung to the tip of the tiny paintbrush, still fresh from the chicken's pert beak.

The flickering glow of the peat fire lit her father's cheek and shone on her mother's red hair, so like her own, though slightly faded by growing threads of gray. "There you have it, Maggie Girl," said her father Daniel, handing her the newly dried chicken, its gay comb and bright beak catching the firelight. "What shall we call her?"

"Chooster!" she cried enthusiastically, naming her favorite member of the flock.

"No, no," he chuckled. "This bird may have a bit of a comb, but I meant her to be a hen, not a rooster.

"Remember, hens give us eggs. Just like your mother there. See how round she's getting? I think maybe she's got a great big egg inside her. Pretty soon you'll be having a little sister or brother," he laughed.

"I know, let's call the chicken Molly, like your mother. Molly Egg, so we can tell them apart."

Maggie nodded somewhat doubtfully. She liked the name, though she didn't understand the joke, at least not that day. But a month later she understood the baby part at least.

Whatever its name, the toy soon became her favorite. Maggie and Molly Egg were inseparable. In fact they always had been—even now—so far away from her parents in time and space. Wherever Maggie was, there was Molly Egg. Some things at least never change.

During those years Daniel was often away on mysterious errands, having nothing to do with the farmwork. Perhaps it had something to do with his education—a first in Irish literature at Dublin University. Seldom even mentioned, the degree meant nothing in his everyday life on the farm outside Belfast. Despite the time spent on his secret business, the neighbors seemed to stop by every day or so to cover his absences. The family certainly didn't get rich, but they didn't seem to lack for anything needed.

Maggie was nearly seven and the baby was just beginning to crawl when The Change came. Her mother was putting dinner on the table when Daniel and a neighbor hurried in. "Well, it's finally happened," he told her mother. "Get the child ready as we planned. There's nothing more to be done."

Maggie's mother smothered an exclamation of dismay. "Now? So soon? But what ha..."

For once Daniel's tone was brusque. "There's no time for talk, Molly Lass," he said. "It's this or we'll all be lost. I wish there was a way to send you and the baby, but the wee one is just too young to leave you. And you'd never make it out—they're looking for you, too. So it's Maggie's lot to go and ours to stay."

Weeping, Molly hugged her daughter to her one last time. “Good-bye, my little heart,” she said, her voice breaking.

“What’s going on? Where are you taking me?” Maggie cried tearfully. She sensed the adults’ hurry and caught their tension. “I want Molly! Molly Egg. I always want my egg.”

Daniel handed her the toy and bundled her into his friend’s arms. “Good-bye, lass,” he choked. “May we meet again someday, somehow.” He put his arm around his wife and gathered the baby in his arms as the neighbor hurried Maggie out the door, still clutching her treasure.

That was all Maggie could ever remember of that last night and the weeks to come. After that was just an unending swirl of confusion. Lots of being carried or rushed around. Often she thought her arm would come loose at the shoulder from all the tugging. Surrounded by strangers, the child was passed from one place to another, papers handed over her head. Someone explained that her parents had been killed in the German bombing of London. London? What was that? She was shoved into a line and led onto a big ship, lined up along with hundreds of other young children as confused as she was.

Overcome by the welter of experiences, the child walled herself away from everything, herself and Molly Egg. “That’s it,” she thought, “we’re going inside a giant egg, just like the one the baby came out of. Then nothing can hurt us till Ma calls us out for a hug and kiss.” And somehow she survived, still clutching her beloved keepsake.

Exhausted by tumultuous memories, the old lady slipped into a short doze. But all too soon she awakened with a start. Relentlessly she felt herself being swept back into those horrible days. For alone Maggie was, and alone she remained her whole life long. Even in the mysterious New York. Even in school and in the home of the people who told her she was their long lost niece newly escaped from bombed-out London.

Though he was a stranger to Maggie, the man said he was her mother’s brother Fred. And he informed her that she would be living with them from now on. “In fact,” said Uncle Fred, “as soon as we move to New Jersey next week you should just call us Mommy and Daddy like the other kids do. Fewer questions that way.”

Fred was a tall red-head, who did indeed resemble her mother Molly, though his hair still burned bright as the autumn leaves. When he spoke, he didn’t sound quite like her father or their Northern Irish neighbors, but his voice had a touch of what Maggie had recently learned was an English accent.

“I doubt your mother will have told you much about me,” Uncle Fred said to her that first day. “You’re much too young to absorb the story now, but I promise I’ll tell you all about it when you’re—let’s say, fourteen years old.”

Ever impatient, Maggie cried, “No, that’s way too much to wait—I’ll be almost old by then. And where are my parents? When are they coming to get me? Soon?”

“Well, all right, perhaps that’s a bit too long to wait. Let’s settle for twelve. Then I’ll tell you everything you want to know. But for now, just remember one thing. Your parents and your baby sister have gone to heaven ahead of you. They’ll all be waiting for you up there. They were shot because they got involved in something they shouldn’t have been. All you need to know for now is that you’ll never see them again. But you’ll be safe enough in America.”

And not a word more would he say, not until the morning of her twelfth birthday. Despite her many efforts to sneak in a question, he’d just smile and remind her to wait for her birthday present. Until then, she settled in with Fred and his wife and their two small children. As far as her little cousins knew, she was just their big sister Maggie. The girl seemed to love them all very much, though there was always something a little distant about her.

To Maggie it seemed to take forever, but finally the big day came—her twelfth birthday and the secret of her parents’ life—and death. The bright red sun had barely peeked over the horizon on that June morning before Maggie was tugging at Fred’s pajama sleeve.

“Daddy, Daddy, wake up,” she whispered, careful not to startle her sleeping aunt. “It’s time. It’s my twelfth birthday! You promised, remember? Long ago? The day for my story.”

Though usually a slow riser, today Fred seemed almost to have been waiting for her. Pausing only to pour himself a cup of coffee and a glass of milk for Maggie, he followed the eager girl out the door to his workshop retreat, where he gestured her into a chair and rummaged in a file he had sitting on his desk just for this morning.

“First of all, here’s a photo I’ve been saving for you—my last picture of you and your family on the farm in Northern Ireland. You probably don’t remember, but it was near Belfast.”

Maggie took the old black and white from him, savoring the dimly remembered images of her mother, father and sister—just a tiny baby—in her mother’s arms. There was her own self by her father’s knee—could she ever have been so small? And there by her foot stood a magnificent bird. She knew him—it was *R- R-* no! *Chooster!* The lord of their little kingdom. Look! Clutched in Maggie’s tiny hand was an even tinier chunk of speckled black—could it be? Yes! It was Molly Egg, her own beloved toy, still perched on her bedside tray. There, in that picture—that was Home.

“We got this photo about a year before we got the news you were coming,” her uncle said. “That’s your mother, my sister Mary—or Molly as she later asked us to call her. She always was a hot head. Insisted on leaving England to study in Ireland—Dublin University. She said it was the best

place to study Irish literature, and she was head over heels in love with all things Irish.

“And not just all *things* Irish. Pretty soon her letters were full of Daniel this and Daniel that. Seems he was another student in the program, a year or so ahead of her. He was the best scholar around. Like your mother, he was specializing in the poetry of the Irish revolution. Overall, it seemed like a good match and we were all pretty happy for our Mary. Or Molly, as she was by then.”

The girl stirred a little in her seat. This was all very well, but she had always known her parents went to school together. She just had to break in, “What had happened to them. How did I come to be in America?”

“Oh, right, my girl. You sit so still I forget you’re not already a grown up. I’ll get on with my story. They wanted a quiet little ceremony, so Daniel came to our country house for the wedding. He was a fine fellow and we all liked him, except for one thing.

“Turned out he was an Irish Nationalist, a real patriot. Much as he liked us—Molly’s family—as people, he really wanted our English soldiers out of his country. Northern Ireland. At that time it was a British colony.

“You’re a bit young to understand all this back-and-forth but let me tell you that his political sentiments didn’t please my folks at all. Far as they were concerned, Northern Ireland belonged to Great Britain and that was that. There was a bit of a row, and by the end of the wedding party weekend, things were pretty frosty. The newly-weds went back to Ireland—to his family farm outside Belfast, and I never saw my lovely Molly again. Not in this life.

“About that time, I decided to come here to study engineering at MIT. One thing led to another, and here I still am. Being a bit of a free-thinker myself, I was the only one of the family that kept in touch with Molly. She sent me this picture of you all, with a letter bringing me up to date on what was going on. She told me more than I’d ever guessed about how involved Daniel was getting in the IRA. You know about the I.R.A., don’t you? They’ve always been opposed to the British occupation of Ireland. Do anything they can for freedom, as they call it.

“Your father would work with almost anyone whose politics or interests aligned with his. He was going back and forth across Ireland carrying messages between the IRA and other groups trying to push out the British. I even got the feeling he’d go so far as to support the God—umm—gosh darned Nazis. Guess he believed in that old saying, ‘My enemy’s enemy is my friend.’ I don’t really think Molly was too crazy about that part, but she had given her heart and soul to that man.

“In the package with her letter and the picture, Molly enclosed a short note from Daniel. He said if anything happened to him, he wanted to be sure his family was safe. Someday someone might come to me here in America and tell me to expect some visitors. He begged me to do what I could to help them, for Molly’s sake if not for his.

‘If those strangers come to you,’ he wrote, ‘you’ll know it’s the end for me, and maybe even Molly and the baby. If that happens, please take care of our treasure for us. I’m sure you’ll love the treasure as much as we do.’”

Her uncle paused and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. After a moment he took a big gulp of his coffee and gestured to Maggie to drink more of her milk. She wasn’t interested in that—she just wanted to hear the rest of the story. What was his treasure? Did he ever get it?

Finally he continued. “Things were really getting bad in England and all of Europe, and I was pretty worried about everyone, especially your mother. Then one day there was a knock on my door. Somehow, I just knew. My treasure was coming. And I didn’t really want to learn any more. But when the men explained what needed to be done, I did it for Molly’s sake. And then for yours.

“They told me your family had been killed by British agents, and you were on your way. You were my treasure.”

Remembering her uncle’s sobs on that long-ago birthday, Maggie felt a wet tickle on her cheek. Reaching across the hospital tray, the old woman picked up the beloved figure of Molly Egg and stroked the toy’s colorful wings and bright eyes. Just holding it gave her a link to her feelings that day. She had always known her family was gone. But she hadn’t known how or why. At fully twelve years old, she thought herself quite the grown up young lady, but that day, she had crawled into his pajama-clad arms and cried against his chest. In years to come, Uncle Fred would tell her more of the story which he had learned over time.

But even that first day, he took a few minutes to explain to her the importance of keeping all this a secret. For what her parents had been doing was technically illegal in England and Northern Ireland then and now. If the truth came out, she could be taken away as an illegal alien. Her entry papers were false and her parents had been criminals—but at the same time Daniel and Molly were heroes in the eyes of many of their Irish countrymen. Young as she was, the child might well be sent to an orphanage in England somewhere. Now crying even harder, Maggie promised her adopted father she would keep the secret they shared forever. And she didn’t tell anyone for years and years.

Maggie had lived out the rest of her childhood and youth hidden safe within the shell of her false identity. Finally in college she fell in love and married Tom, a tall, rangy architecture student from Montana. His family were very conservative, especially when it came to outsiders. But they were far away and Maggie didn’t really have much to do with them.

The couple married and began building a happy life in a New Jersey suburb, not too far from Maggie’s childhood home. In the fresh flood of love, Maggie dared to break out of her shell and share her full story with Tom. He seemed thoughtful and not really happy about it. But he didn’t say anything more.

Then a few years later came the day that changed everything:

“What do you mean you don’t want to name the baby Denise?” Tom asked through clenched teeth. “You know that’s my grandmother’s name. And I’ve always thought it’s beautiful.”

“Yes, yes, it’s very nice, dear. But it’s French. And what kind of name is Denise for an Irish lass?” she asked unthinkingly.

“I’d say it’s a good enough name for the daughter of an American man like me. At least I’m not the child of a traitor! You said it yourself. Your father was a Nazi spy.” His furious, spit-flecked words startled her. Clearly, he had bottled this up for a long time.

“No, he wasn’t! He was an Irish hero—he only ran a few errands to help drive the English overlords out of Ireland.”

Tom grabbed her shoulders. More to keep himself in than to drive her away. “What does it matter? He was working with the IRA and they were allied with the Nazis in World War II. You told me so yourself!”

“In war, you can’t choose your comrades,” she tried to explain. “You have to take what the political cards deal you. My parents gave their lives for what they believed in.”

He almost shoved her away, though he remained careful of her precious burden. “Maybe, but the British and Americans would call them traitors. And not only them. What about all the Jewish friends you’re so crazy about? A lot of them lost family members to the Nazis. How do you think they’d like being close to a German spy’s daughter!”

That’s when it happened, Maggie realized now, so many years later. His bitter attack had taught her the hardest lesson of all. Sometimes a wall doesn’t just keep *people* out. When you trust someone enough to take down all your shields, you leave yourself naked not just to love but also to hurt. And the love, however sweet, is the more painful for the hateful company it keeps. She learned that lesson late but she learned it well. Maybe too well.

That day Maggie had turned away from her husband in silence. She let him go ahead with naming their daughter Denise. Maggie wouldn’t let herself care anymore—about him or Denise or any one. Clutching Molly Egg, Maggie went back inside herself, where it was quiet and safe and she could live in peace with cherished memories of her homeland and family—and love.

After that one explosive confrontation, Maggie rebuilt the wall, two times stronger than before. Safe within its shield, she met Tom and the rest of the world with a smile and a friendly shift in attention away from herself. Maggie was a competent wife and mother, playing a quiet but effective role in the community. So she wasn’t very friendly or outgoing—there was never anything to complain about in her words or deeds. But any personal interchange, even with her children, was turned away from her smooth, hard shell.

Now here she was, old, safe—but alone. Alone in the deepest way of all. When her husband died and her children moved away, she had cried a few appropriate tears on the outside. But it didn’t really matter to her very

much. She stayed on at home, with her furniture and pictures—and Molly Egg.

Finally there had come the sudden bout of pneumonia and this tearing inability to breathe or move on her own. Not a stroke or anything like that. Just a quiet—withdrawal. Far, far away. “We don’t really understand it,” all the doctors said as time went on. “It shouldn’t have hit her so hard. She should be getting better, but she just keeps drifting farther and farther away.”

Dr. Stanson, Maggie’s family physician, even asked Denise, “Have you or one of the others tried to break through to her? We just don’t understand what’s the matter. It’s as if she doesn’t care.”

“That’s just it,” said Denise. “None of us have ever really been close to her. Oh, there’s nothing to put your finger on. She always took good care of us and everything. But there’s just something—distant about her. When I was a teenager I used to try to tell her my troubles. But she’d just smile and say, ‘Don’t worry, dear. Things will always work out OK in the end.’ Or something like that—just kept me away.”

“Well, you’ve got to get her to fight for herself this time or she’ll just drift on off,” he said. “Try to find something she really cares about. Something she’s willing to open up and fight for. Otherwise—well, I don’t know how much longer she can hang on.”

After almost two months, Denise finally called Dr. Stanson again. “I’ve been talking about this situation with my sister and brother,” she said reluctantly. “We’ve tried our best, but it’s just costing us too much to keep her here at home with round-the-clock care. We think it’s time to talk about putting her in some kind of long-term care facility. She has Medicare, of course, and plenty of insurance. Do you have any suggestions for a good place?”

With his advice, they made arrangements to move their mother into the nearby St. Agnes Home. Though they tried to discuss it with her, Maggie hadn’t really paid much attention. She was much too occupied with struggling to breathe, fending off the nurse’s attentions and, as always, luxuriating in memories of the past. One day drifted by much like another, just as they had been for years, really. Right now she had all these other people in the house, turning her, feeding her, changing her tubes. But in fact, she was alone, just as she had been ever since she was that little girl bundled out of her Irish cottage.

Suddenly one day, there she was—Denise. Had she told her mother she was coming? It seemed like there had been some discussion over the speaker phone, but Maggie hadn’t really paid much attention. Now her daughter swept into the room, her russet hair almost blue under the lights. Once her hair had been an auburn matching Maggie’s own, but as it grayed, Denise had begun to color it darker and deeper—almost like a cold, hard armor of her own.

What was her daughter doing here? What did she want? Maggie struggled to ask, but her words were distorted by the respirator, muffled as if through a mask. Talking firmly, Denise got out some garbage bags and started sweeping away Maggie's possessions, sometimes into one bag, sometimes another. Denise seemed to be asking her something—questions about the stuff? Everything was happening so fast.

As always, Denise was brusque and impatient. Those curtains Maggie had sewed on her first machine—stuffed into one bag. Pictures into another. All at once Denise swept her hand over the treasures on the hospital table and bedside cabinet. With a clatter, Molly and the other little keepsakes fell to the floor, rolling around haphazardly.

Molly Egg! Where was Molly Egg? Had she rolled under the bed? Maggie fought with the stiff tube of the respirator, trying to force out the words. She was getting more and more upset, and so was Denise. Her daughter grabbed Maggie's assorted treasures and began shoving them into the bag by the handful. Molly Egg! What was she doing with Molly? There! Denise had the toy in her hand. Was she moving toward the garba— NO! NOOoo!

It was too much to bear. Weak though she was, Maggie grabbed the respirator by its plastic carapace, tearing it from her mouth.

"No!" she cried. "Not her!!! Not Molly—not my heart!"

Or at least, that's what she tried to say. But after weeks on the respirator, her mouth was too dry, her tongue too weak to form the words. And after years of wall-building, her soul was too tired to break through her shell. All that came out were a few grunts and a wet gurgle.

With a shrug and a few more muttered words, Denise pitched Molly and the other keepsakes into the garbage bag and hauled it out of the room. Maggie could hear her daughter outside the room, saying something to the nurse. Then the two of them hauled the bags down the hall and away.

Alone again—as she had been for so many years—Maggie felt herself sinking down into the darkness. Cold, safe, private—alone.....

Ann Rynearson, a Florida native, holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Washington University. For 30 years she worked at St. Louis' International Institute, the state's leading agency for refugees and immigrants. There she directed Festival of Nations and many other projects featuring traditional arts. In retirement, she maintains ties to local immigrant communities while glorying in the chance to learn, and learn, and learn.



A Dusty House

Carol Stoll

Everything is grey and moving. My eyes are fixed out the window yet jerk back and forth trying to make sense of the shapes of buildings, people, and street signs obscured by the misty air and the speed of the train.

I am not a product of my mother. Throughout my childhood she was terse and cold and unapproachable. She would watch my afterschool soccer games from the window of the car, and never come into the stands to cheer me on with the other mothers.

And yet she raised me. I guess I turned out fine. And I have the obligation like most other woman of my age to deal with an aging, needy mother.

On the train the businessmen are all seated, resting their eyes. They look satisfied from a hard day's work. Their commute means going home to their pretty little white houses with their pretty little house wives cooking them a pretty little dinner. My eyes are tired and tearing, not from emotion but from exhaustion. I'm going to my once pretty little white childhood home, now a horrifying little white hospital.

The sound of my mother irks me. The respirator chokes her words; all that comes out are wheezing and groaning sounds. My memories of my siblings running through the hallways of our home is obscured by the now brisk walking nurse staff to and from my immobile, mute, yet sound-making mother.

The train comes to a slowly screeching halt. Everyone files down the aisle; I have to nudge the sleeping businessman in the seat blocking my escape. I prepare my mind for the upcoming weekend in New Jersey suburbia with my mother. The kids will be fine – I hired our nanny overtime. They don't need to see their grandma like this, either.

The nurse picks me up from the station and we drive home, silently except:

“How is she?”

“The same.”

We walk in. “Ma?” I sigh out loudly. She usually sits in the living room right up the small staircase to the right of the entrance. I joke in my head that the living room is now the dying room. It's not really funny. The room is sterilized and white and there are medical supplies everywhere. Where my mother would usually sit silently reading a book, she now sits wheezing and groaning and doing nothing. Her eyes roll back and forth. I don't even know if she's thinking. The doctors say she still has clear thoughts; I don't believe it completely.

Finally the decision has been made to transport her to an old age home, and sell the house. She gets too fussy with the staff, so I had to come out here to help her pack her things- decide what should go, what should stay, what should be sold, what I could take.

“Alright Ma, I'm going to pick up things one by one, and put them into piles. We'll start with the small things. I'll guess where you want them, just groan or something if you want something else.”

“-----aa.” She jerkily nods her head; the tubes coming out of her mouth shuffle.

“The pictures in picture frames go with you. The pictures in the drawers go with me – I'll store them in my basement. We'll sell the fake plants and flowers. I'm throwing out these musty cigarette-stained curtains. You want these books?”

“----ehhh.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“-----aah.” A tear drops from one of her eyes.

“Sorry. Make noise if you want them”

Silence.

The silence was familiar. We never had that tell-all, ‘Mom, you're my best friend’ kind of relationship.

“Alright I guess I'll just throw them out. Okay and I'll throw out these ripped pillows. And I'll take these candles. I'll give you this mirror. And we'll sell all the furniture.”

Silence.

I go over to the side-table. There are all these little knick-knacks. I never understood the point of living-room-knick-knacks. It's just a bunch of crap that crowds surfaces. These little statues are old and about a half an inch of dust covers them. How depressing.

“These are garbage. Yuck.”

My mother starts hacking and seizing. The nurses run over and fix the medical devices. When she was my age she was so put together. Scarily put together. We rarely talked about anything; our conversations were so contrived. And now she’s crazy and my chance is over. I never have and never will know my own mother. I will have to watch her hack and seize and eventually die.

The nurse calms her down. I grab the big black half-filled garbage bag, hold it with my left hand, and extend my right arm all the way to the right side, sweeping everything on the table into the bag in one smooth motion. All the dusty figures and coins fall in the bag, but this little thing on wheels goes flying off the table, missing the bag.

“God damn it.” I throw the bag down and have to walk and bend over to pick up the wheeled-figure. “Seriously, Mom why do you keep shit like this? It’s a rusty rooster on wheels, it doesn’t even make sense.”

Silence. Her eyes roll back into her head. I get up and leave, back on the train home to my kids. They need me more. They won’t have to clean up my dusty old chickens.

Carol Stoll is a sophomore studying biology with a minor in psychology. She is from Wyckoff, New Jersey, and plans on pursuing a teaching career in high school biology after college.



Anniversary Waltz

Jo Schnellmann

Sebastiana walked across Jackson Square in New Orleans toward the Cafe du Monde as the bells of St. Louis Cathedral pealed letting her know that it was already nine thirty. The sun hurt her eyes, and the bells aggravated the her headache. After dinner and against her wishes they had gone to one of those overcrowded, loud bars on Bourbon Street. Once there James kept ordering a whiskey this and a whiskey that, cocktails that Sebastiana had never heard of. She kept wanting to go back to the hotel but he would not budge. “Just one more” became his mantra. She told him that he could stay but she was leaving. He called her a “tight-ass bitch” and other similar names loud enough that patrons turned and stared at them. As she stood the bouncer came and suggested that they both go to their hotel, escorted them out the door and into a cab. Once at the hotel it took the cab driver, Sebastiana and the doorman to get James out of the cab. Two bell-boys helped her get James to their room. Thus ended the first day of their anniversary trip.

When she woke the next morning she went over the events of the previous night. It was not the first time James had insulted her in public. When they were first married he had been kind and solicitous. During their first two years of marriage they had gotten together frequently with friends. In the last two years they had lost most of their friends because he had managed to insult them all under the guise of “friendly teasing.” Even when they went out by themselves he managed to embarrass her as he had done last

night. The worst was the time they had gone to a newly opened French restaurant in St. Louis, their hometown, with another couple. He had opened his menu and saw that it was written in French. He had shouted, "You know I don't like restaurants with foreign language menus."

"Honey, it's written in both English and French."

"You bitch, you try to embarrass me with your 'superior' attitude. You are just like your adored Aunt Edith, the bitch from hell."

The other couple decided to eat somewhere else and left. Sebastiana and James followed them out and went home.

She showered and dressed and James did not wake up. She looked at him and decided that instead of calling room service for coffee she would go out on her own. She would go where she pleased and do things that she enjoyed, all the tourist things she could not do with James. Coffee at the Cafe du Monde with the other tourists. She might even poke in the souvenir shops and the antique shops. Later a trolley ride or even a mule-carriage ride might be fun. She knew that James would go with her if she pressed him but she wanted to enjoy herself without having to listen to his insults and complaints. She left him still asleep. He would probably stay that way until the afternoon.

She walked up to the cafe and stood in line waiting for a table. Within minutes a handsome middle-aged man motioned to her that he was leaving and she could take his table. She had no sooner sat down when a waitress approached, picked up the man's dishes, tossed back her very blond ponytail and looked at her expectantly. Feeling very cosmopolitan she placed her order in French. "Café au lait et des beignets, s'il vous plaît."

"You wan coffee 'n doughnuts?" asked the waitress. "You wan two or tree?"

"I will have three."

"Sorry, you cn 'ave two or four but not tree."

"Why not three?"

"They come in twos only."

"OK give me four."

"But you say you wan tree."

"Bring me beignets I don't care how many."

"OK I bring beignets. You wan coffee too?"

"Yes," answered Sebastiana wishing she had gone to Starbucks instead.

After what seemed like an interminable wait the waitress returned, placed a plate heaped with beignets on the table and a pot of black coffee.

"I asked for coffee with milk."

"Lemme see, you asked for coffee. You no say nothin' 'bout milk. Now you wan milk too?"

"Never mind, just the check."

“OK, OK I give you check.” She threw the check on the table and went away muttering something about ‘dumb turtists’.

Sebastiana resolve that her day would not be ruined by this insolent waitress. She munched on the beignet, sipped the coffee and decided not leave a tip. After the coffee and beignets were gone, Sebastiana left the cafe and strolled down Decatur Street stopping at tourists traps that displayed cheap trinkets along with buccaneer hats, rubber swords and Mardi Gras masks and beads. She was aghast when she saw a row of cookie jars fashioned after Aunt Jemima and “pickaninny” salt and pepper shakers. How politically incorrect could you get?

Eventually she reached the area where the antique shops were situated. These were not the antique shops that sold beautiful chandeliers, pier mirrors and Napoleonic furniture but were more like the junk shops that were found in St. Louis on Cherokee Street and South Broadway. On an impulse she entered one of the shops. The place was dimly lit and smelled of mold and dust. Sebastiana looked over tables full of cute figurines, cut glass ashtrays and bowls. Nothing appealed. Suddenly she noticed a small silver bell. It was an elegant little bell that looked out of place among the more mundane objects on the table.

Sebastiana reached and picked it up. She held it close to her ear and shook it gently. The bell emitted a sound that reminded Sebastiana of Poe’s poem. “...the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.” Her aunt Edith had had a bell much like this one. Oh yes, she must have this bell.

“What is the price of this bell?” she asked the heavy set, unkempt looking woman sitting behind the table. The woman stirred in her chair, put down the Sudoku book she was working on, looked at the bell, yawned and said, “That’s one of a kind. It’s sixty-five dollars. You won’t find ‘nother one like it.”

“That’s very pricey.”

“Well, Darlin, take it or leave it,” and went back to her Sudoku.

Sebastiana rang the little bell once more and reached out to put it back on the table. As she did so she noticed a small sticker inside the bell. Looking closely she read \$25.

“Miss, it has a sticker that says twenty-five dollars.”

The woman gave an exasperated sigh, stood up, reached for the bell and examined the inside. “Well, that’s a mistake.”

“I’ll take it for twenty-five. That’s the price on it.”

The woman gave Sebastiana a dirty look and yelled, “Oliver, get out here. Oliver, did you hear me?”

Out of the back came an old man, or rather an ancient man. His greasy white hair reached his shoulders. He was missing teeth and his complexion and his stink indicated that he was a heavy smoker. He was dressed in wrinkled corduroys belted high up on his chest, a grimy white shirt and an old cardigan with holes in the sleeves. A wool scarf tied snugly around his

neck completed his outfit. He looked at Sebastiana then turned to look at the woman, coughed and said, "Is there a problem Melanie?"

"This woman wants the silver bell for twenty-five dollars. I told her it was sixty-five and...."

"But it has a sticker that says twenty-five." Interrupted Sebastiana.

"Well, now, Suga, let's not get excited. Where you from Darlin'?"

"St. Louis,"

"Why you want the bell? We got better looking bells. Melanie show our girl some of the cut glass bells."

"I don't want a glass bell. I want this bell. It reminds me of my childhood."

"Zat so? I's like to make it twenty-five but I gots to keep my Melanie happy. How 'bout I lets you hav' it for thirty-five?"

Sebastiana debated for a minute. Reason told her that she was being ripped off and should walk out of the shop. Her heart told her to pay the extra ten, for the bell simply because she wanted it. Her heart won. She looked at Oliver and said. "OK, I know it's overpriced but I'll take it."

Melanie pushed herself out of the chair, got a piece of newspaper, wrapped the bell in it and put it in a plastic bag. Oliver took her money, put it in his pocket and wandered over to the figurines on the table. He picked up something, wrapped it in newspaper and put it in the bag Melanie was still holding and said, "Let's give the pretty lady a lagniappe to 'member us by" and went back to wherever he had come from.

Once on the street Sebastiana pondered as to why she had been so set on getting the bell. Sure, her aunt Edith had had such a bell. She kept it next to her easy chair and used it to call Maude, her Irish servant. Aunt Edith had lived in a huge house that faced Forest Park on Lindell Boulevard. She had married a very wealthy childless widower who had died in an auto accident and had left Edith a very wealthy widow. Sebastiana's parents were not poor but neither were they rich. When Sebastiana was born they asked Edith to be her godmother and she obliged. She had insisted that Sebastiana not attend public school with her brothers, instead Edith paid her tuition to one of the most renown (and expensive) all girl school in the city. It was there that Sebastiana learned French, learned to curtsy and made friends with what Edith referred to as the "creme de la creme".

When Sebastiana entered sixth grade Edith had seen to it that she was invited to join the prestigious *Fortnightly Dance School* on Wydown, a dance school where the children of the privileged were sent to learn ballroom dancing as well as the proper etiquette for balls. When she graduated from high-school Edith sent her on a three month trip to Europe (well chaperoned, of course) and in September she entered an all-women college in New York.

All Edith expected in return for this largesse was that Sebastiana visit her every Wednesday afternoon. Gregory the chauffeur picked her up at school and drove her to Edith's. Maude served tea, Edith quizzed her about her activities and then Gregory drove her home. While in New York, Sebastiana had to call Edith every Wednesday.

It was in her second year in college that Sebastiana made her debut at the Veiled Prophet ball, again courtesy of Edith. It was here that she renewed her friendship with James whom she had met at the Fortnightly when she was in sixth grade. On the Wednesday after the ball Sebastiana introduced James to Edith. When Edith learned that James had attended private school and was the son of a well-known businessman she approved.

The following summer Sebastiana and James dated, became engaged and married in October. By then James had finished his degree in Business Administration at Washington University and Sebastiana decided that an MRS was enough for her.

After the marriage James and Sebastiana visited Edith every week. They invited her to attend the Symphony with them. They frequently took her to plays at the Repertory Theatre and toured the Botanical Garden exhibits with her. Two years after the wedding, Edith died suddenly of a heart attack. She left Sebastiana a nice inheritance but the bulk of her wealth went to the Botanical Garden, the Art Museum and the Symphony. She was happy with her inheritance but James frequently told her that Edith had cheated her and there seemed to be no way that she could change his mind. It was then that James had begun to change. He became ill-tempered, insulting and began to drink too much. Three years after Aunt Edith died, James decided that they had to celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary in New Orleans.

She had not paid much attention to where she was walking until she found herself in front of her hotel. She sat in the lobby pondering about why she let so many people bully her; James, the waitress, the shop-keeper and perhaps even her beloved Aunt Edith. After some time she went up to their room and found James reading the Wall Street Journal and drinking coffee.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"You were still asleep so I decided to poke around in the stores."

"Boring, glad I wasn't there. Buy anything?"

"Yes."

She pulled out the bell and the newspaper wrapped lagniappe. "Why did you buy a bell?"

"It reminded me of Aunt Edith."

"You don't have a maid to come do your bidding when you ring. Did you think it was a magic bell? That's stupid. It's just like you to spend my money on junk. What's that other thing?"

Sebastiana unwrapped the lagniappe and found pickaninny salt and pepper shakers. James stared at her and said, “More junk. You are such an idiot. Why would you want something like that?”

She started to explain but then she started laughing. She laughed harder and harder. Then she burst into tears. When the tears subsided she noticed James scowling disapproving face and said, “James. I want to go back to St. Louis today. I want a divorce.”

Jo Schnellmann is a graduate of St. Louis University with a PhD in Psychology. She and her husband live in Clayton and are both enjoying their retirement. Jo devotes her time to writing, reading, and photography.



Classical Conditioning

Jordan Weiner

“No shoes on the table, Claire,” Amber stage-whispers to me. My little sister wiggles her toes. “Why don’t you wear the socks Dexter gave us?”

She’s sprawled on the sofa, her red and white slipper socks swinging just inches from our coffee table. Next to her, I easily prop my high-tops up amongst snack wrappers and Santa cookies. I know Amber longs for my long legs.

“Shh, this is a really famous line,” I say. This is only Amber’s sixth Christmas, but she should know not to interrupt the day-after TBS marathon of *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

She opens her mouth, closes it, then turns to the television, where a grainy, black and white girl tells her father, “teacher says that every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.” Amber finally settles back in the cushions; I relax. But just as Jimmy Stewart replies, “that’s right, that’s right,” both Amber and I jump at a well-timed *ding-a-ling* from down the hall.

The bell and the puppy were a package deal. Rather, my parents decided that a bell would be the best way to keep tabs on last year’s family Christmas present. Dexter is a black and gold cocker spaniel. When his wet nose tickles the brass bell, we know to let Dexter outside, or else his nose won’t be the only thing that’s wet. The bell startles me. We never used a bell for Zoe.

So as Amber gasps, “*an angel?*” I shake my head; to clear it and to tell her no. “It’s Dexter.” The magic is gone. *It’s a Wonderful Life* cuts to commercial.

I said my legs are long. As a result there’s not much room in my twin bed, especially when you add the eleven stuffed animals I keep up there at all times. Mom suggested that after all, I’m seventeen now, I might want to put some away. But I need them: Rudolph, Woody from *Toy Story*, the giant giraffe Dad won for me years ago on Navy Pier. I need them because I do not want to grow up. There’s an all-black cocker spaniel that Amber says looks a lot like Dexter. “No,” I tell her. “Dexter has some gold. This one is more like Zoe.”

Amber always nods, but I know she does not believe me. These moments throw our age gap into sharp relief. Amber has only become aware of things in the last two years; anything before that is fuzzy. Zoe just missed the cutoff.

Taking Amber’s hand, I pull us both off of the sofa, and my high-tops smack the hardwood floor and Amber’s slipper socks pad along as we make our way into the kitchen. I flick on the light and point an accusing finger at Dexter, our culprit. He’s lying by the patio door, facing the dark outside, nose forming a little tent in the dangling blinds as he presses it against the glass. The bell hangs from a string tied to the doorknob just above him: a pendulum of contained noise, swaying slowly back and forth in the air over Dexter’s head.

He hears my shoes’ final *smack* and whisks around; seeing Amber and me, he rises and bumps the bell again and again. *Ding-a-ling. Ding-a-ling.* The blinds scatter and pummel the glass-paneled door, hard – and with Dexter thumping the bell and his tail all at once, the whole scene turns into a kind of awful, rickety a cappella. The bell has the solo, Dexter makes sure of that. He must really have to go.

Each chime hurts.

Zoe was the first real family Christmas present. Sometimes I think my stuffed animals are there to fill up the space she would have taken on the bed, had I been a more flexible five-year-old. After she came home – twelve years ago, yesterday – puppy Zoe would wander into my room and want to snuggle, but I’d demand absolute privacy, chasing her out the door. Mom is constantly reassuring me that Zoe would’ve moved onto her and Dad’s bed regardless, because they stayed up later and ate more animal crackers, while all I could really provide throughout Zoe’s ten years were a tiny mattress and an alarm clock.

Even so, when I was Amber’s age I removed all of the bagel chips from my Chex Mix and crunched them up really small, making them into an

E.T.-style path across the upstairs hallway and up onto my bed. Zoe just ate all of the bagel chips, jumped off the bed, and sniffed my hand for more.

“Get the flashlight,” I tell Amber as I cross the kitchen, skidding onto my knees when I reach the door. *Ding-a-ling*. I pull Dexter back with one hand and cup the bell in the other. For a moment, the a cappella fades: the blinds patter, Dexter’s tail slows, the bell’s final jingles resonate in my palm. And then it is quiet. I hug Dexter to me and gently release the bell. It sails away from me, tapping against the glass, dinging one last time before coming to rest parallel to the blinds. I exhale. I see slipper socks appear on the floor nearby, and a flashlight comes down into my field of view.

“Here you go,” says Amber. She pats Dexter on the head. He’s crying.

“Thanks.”

I take the flashlight and twirl it once before getting to my feet. I reach and snatch Dexter’s leash and collar from the table, motioning Amber aside. Dexter is whining now, eager to make noise, perhaps mimic the annoying reverberation of the bell. “I know, I know,” I murmur, struggling to fasten his blue collar with just one free hand. Zoe had a pink collar, I think. My fingers are clumsy. Amber bends down and clicks the collar into place. “Thanks,” I say again. She’s so calm, so ready to help the puppy. For as young as Amber is I realize that I love these babysitting nights with her. I snap on the leash. I see in Amber what I once saw in me, in those early days of Zoe. I bite my lower lip and instantly regret it.

I had my wisdom teeth pulled out a week ago, right when I got off for winter break. Mom said my mouth would heal up fine by the twenty-fourth, but I still had trouble biting into Santa’s sugar cookies, let alone the fare at Christmas dinner. After the surgery I lay around on the couch, flipping through channels and watching my mom fold laundry. In the past, whenever Mom did this, Zoe would intervene – stealing socks, sitting in the hamper, falling asleep on a pile of warm blankets fresh from the dryer. From the time I was seven to the time Zoe was gone I made a habit of curling up in those toasty covers beside her, petting her ears as she licked my arm and we both cocked our heads at cartoons on television.

The removal of my wisdom teeth had required the doctor to “put me under,” or rather under general anesthesia, artificially induced sleep. I requested as a little a dosage as possible: Zoe taught me, almost two Christmases ago, that when someone is put to sleep they don’t necessarily wake up again.

As I open the door, letting in a sheet of crisp air, Dexter stops crying – but the bell starts up again. The wind rattles the stained brass; it whips wildly back and forth, a wayward kite on a flimsy string. *Ding-a-ling. Ding-ding-ding-a-ling*. Dexter and I push against the wind – I don’t know which of

us is more desperate to get into the backyard – until at last I am able to slam the door shut. Amber pushes aside the blinds so she can watch us from inside, though with the lights blaring in the kitchen I know she sees nothing but glare in the glass. I imagine the blinds rustling, though I cannot hear anything but the wind out here. I imagine the bell tinkling. Thank goodness I cannot hear that.

For a second Amber had believed in angels with Dexter’s timely ring of the bell. But for me each ding is a rupture, not a bringer, of enchantment. Like Pavlov’s dog, I guess, both Dexter and I have been conditioned to associate at the sound of a bell: he pees; I cringe. Because he is there to pee and someone else isn’t.

With the aid of the flashlight, our Christmas bulbs, and the brightness created by Amber’s gap in the blinds, I follow Dexter while he scouts the iced grass for a good place to make. He leads me toward the arborvitaes. I watch Amber trying to watch him, a smile on her face. I admire Amber, I decide. I also pity her, knowing that when the bell, eventually, is forever silent, it will pain her the way its loudness pains me now.

Dexter stops and sniffs. *Ding-a-ling*. Something interrupts the light from the window; Amber has moved and opened the patio door just a crack. The bell is chiming. Amber calls to me, “The movie’s back on.”

Without the window light Dexter is particularly black in the dark. But, I can’t help remind myself, not quite black enough.

Jordan Weiner is a sophomore studying English and Film and Media Studies. Hailing from Buffalo Grove, Illinois, Jordan hopes to return to Chicago in pursuit of a graduate degree in writing. Of course, that’s just the current plan: the only certain agenda in Jordan’s post-Wash. U. life is to adopt a dog.



Warren

Karen Sterbenz

I edged my way slowly across the shop, leading with my stronger left leg and dragging the right leg with its deformed foot and smaller shoe behind it. I kept things tidy and dusted by sweeping the floor and straightening the toys on shelves, trying to keep them in some sort of categorical order. Some days I just didn't have the energy. Tripping on an uneven floor board, I knocked over my metal snail, the only toy left in the shop from my childhood. There was nothing wrong with it, except it was missing its windup key: it was broken, but had a pretty painted green and gold pattern on its body.

When I first received him, it set me to wondering about snails. Checking out library books on the mollusks became my first serious research project. I learned that fossilized snails have been found in Nebraska, though I have never visited there. Paleontologists say the snails lived before the Ice Age or Pleistocene Epoch, way more than 20,000 years ago.

I set Sheldon—yes, I used to name my toys—upright and give him a little pat on his hard shiny back.

The next day, twenty years ago, after one of my usual miserable nights of trying to sleep, my day began with that steely brightness masking a bitter cold which Marches in St. Louis seem so good at serving up. The shop bell tinkled and in walked a typical customer, a worn looking young mother. “Hello, I’m looking for something quiet to amuse my son. He has chicken pox.”

“You’ve come to the right place. These antique toys all operate either by winding them up or following some law of physics.” I smiled. “When I was a small child and very ill, they were what I was most able to play with.”

I started holding up various toys, offering them to her for her consideration. “Of course I had the Falling Tiles toy—several of them. One I wrecked, taking it apart, trying to figure out how it worked. Then I had a clown, made of wood and suspended between two parallel and curving bars. A good push on the head or feet of the clown caused him to do summersaults, back and forth between the two bars. The most I ever got from him was seven spins in a whack.

“One of my favorites was a paddle with chickens on it attached to strings which gathered in a red ball under the paddle. When you rotated the paddle so the ball would swing in a circle, the chickens bobbed their heads as if to peck at the chicken feed at their feet. That was the first toy I sold here. My other favorite was a metal snail, the only original I still have.”

“I’ll take the Falling Tile one,” she said, seeming a little bored by all I had told her.

I took her \$5.18 and put the toy in a *Krepach’s Antique Toy Shop* paper bag. She walked out and I rang up the money in my decrepit cash register. I hobbled over to the stool I keep in the corner of the shop to rest. One little sale and I was tired on that bright day. The sun makes my head hurt and the cold goes from my hip to my toes, filling everything with ache.

People say pain a lot, using the word indiscriminately. In my long life, I’ve had ample opportunity to study it. There is the sharp, bright jab of sudden pain, which often morphs into a tearing, searing kind of feeling. There is the dull ache of pain which has gone on too long, which makes you want to scream. There is the kind of pain that comes in waves, pain you can ride as it crescendos and subsides. I’ve read that this is the kind of pain women in labor feel, a pain which culminates in one great push and then, hopefully, results in the birth of a healthy baby.

There are those little annoying pains. They begin imperceptibly and mount slowly, until you suddenly realize it hurts, really hurts and you don’t know how long it has—like a toothache. There’s pain that explodes, pain that throbs, pain that can satisfy, or that can drive you crazy. It can exhaust you, beat you down, make you crabby before you even know you have it. It can make you moan or cry or wish you were dead.

I have never had any love life at all. Loneliness is its own pain.

Most of all for me it is physical pain: the constant, nagging ache, sometimes just below my consciousness and then again becoming so intense I drop things or run into things, and feel like crying. I am rarely in a good mood—no reason to be.

For over 20 years, I’ve showered sitting down, using a shower stool with side handles on it so it’s easier to stand up when I’m finished. Before I got the shower stool, I used to have to soap the upper half of my body sitting on the toilet seat. Then I’d stand up, wash my legs and between my legs and step into the shower to rinse the soap

off. I could just about be cleaned before the whole left side of my body hurt so bad I didn't think I'd make it another minute. The shower stool helps a lot. Even so, in the colder weather I only bathe every two or three days; I'm still afraid of falling.

Before the summer I got so sick, I was a normal kid. I toddled after my oldest brother, John, or played catch with William or James. Our ball was blue and looked like the sky. "How much longer do I have to watch him, Mama?" James whined.

"Just until I'm finished folding the laundry, then I'll take him," Mother answered.

I rolled the ball far away from James. He chased after it and I cried. Mama picked me up then, sighing. She must have been pregnant with Alice by then.

The next day, a hot one in August, just after my fourth birthday, we went swimming at Heman Park Pool. The weather was scorching hot. We boys did not want to get out of the water, but Mother kept calling us. I was the first to be pulled out of the toddler pool, hot and tired. I didn't feel good. My head was pounding and my throat was sore. Mama tried to get me to walk over to the beach towel, but I wouldn't. "My legs are tired."

So Mama picked me up in both arms, over the bulging expanse of her belly. She stood at the edge of the big boys' pool and shouted until John, William and James, embarrassed, scrambled out.

"Pick up that towel and beach bag and come to the car. Your brother is burning up."

That was the last thing I remembered for a long time. When I woke up, I was gasping for air and aching all over. I was alone in a strange room and a bed that was high off the ground and had metal bars all around it. There were lots of strange women in white dresses and funny hats. They wore masks. When at last Mama walked into the room, I reached for her and she jumped back. She was wearing a mask too. Nobody touched me, except the doctor who examined my body periodically and nurses who wore rubber gloves to bathe me, or put hot compresses on me, or take me to the hospital's shallow pool where I was forced to move my arms and legs this way and that. It was all exhausting, terrifying and lonely.

They say that before the Salk vaccine, which was when I got polio, about 50,000 people in the U.S. were affected by the disease each year. About ten percent were seriously ill. Of those, most survived, but with varying degrees of disability.

My name is Warren I was the fourth of five children in a household with a plumber father and a stay-at-home mother. We all grew up north of Olive in University City, though for the time when I was in Barnes Hospital, my siblings all moved to grandmother's in Maplewood, just around the corner from this toy shop.

My left leg is spindly, 1½" shorter than my right. The shoe for my left foot is a full size smaller. You can get shoes that way. Company in Michigan. But you pay twice as much for a pair of shoes.

My family couldn't afford my deformity. The other kids resented me for the sacrifices they had to make to keep me going: fewer meals out, no money for movies—they all had after-school jobs for spending money, and all of our clothes came from catalogues—Montgomery Ward and Sears. I hated my brothers and sister too. They

were good in school. They played sports. They were popular. I was the crippled kid who was clumsy and often ridiculed. We were all subjected to the crude jokes kids tell about plumbers; my brothers and sister just laughed them off. I was the one who felt ashamed and inferior.

My brothers and sister all got scholarships, went to college, met and married others and led what I thought were interesting lives.

Not that I was ever much of a part of those lives. When they each married, they all served in each others' wedding parties, everyone but me. You want irony? James' bride was the girl I had asked to dance in the seventh grade and who laughed me off the dance floor. I'm not sure she even remembers that. We certainly have never talked about it.

I was the one who stayed home. I got jobs sorting stuff for bulk mail and some delivery work, but nothing really lasted. I hurt too much and employers did not put up with my limitations. Eventually, on disability, I stayed home, reading a lot. My mother and my younger sister, Alice, were the ones who went to the library for me and selected books. Sometimes I had specific requests, but just as often they guessed what might interest me. I read just about all of it—except the Gibbons. I continued to play with and care for my growing toy collection.

When my parents died, I got left the whole house, while my parents' meager savings were split five ways. It was my siblings' turn to resent me again.

After a year, I sold the house and used the money to buy this shop. It seemed like the only thing I could do to both occupy me and have any hope of making a living.

I live in the back and rent out the upstairs, which provides a supplement to my meager income from disability and dealing in antique toys. I got my start with the toy collection I had accumulated as an invalid. Gradually, the shop acquired more toys from trade magazines and, a fair number from manufacturers of replicas.

I had a few good years: there was a surge of interest in these things in the late '80s, but by the '90's everybody wanted plastic and electronic and worst of all video. You should see the punks who hang out at that game parlor across the street. They became my new tormentors.

Five different times over the weekend I had to chase them out of here, one, two, or three at a time. So far they just seem to be teasing, but I feel older and more helpless every day.

At 1:15, after any hope of a lunch hour rush is gone, I step into my back room for a quick sandwich and cup of coffee. Enclosing the toilet and sink in the back room and adding a shower is one of the smartest things I did here. It does cut into my living space, but even with that bathroom chunk out of it, this back room is enough for my needs. It's not like I entertain guests or anything.

Before I finish my sandwich, a ten-year old sidles into my shop. I leave the sandwich half-eaten on the table and move to the front of the store. I keep my eye on the boy. He walks real slow, fingering this toy and that. I am a cagey man. I edge toward the back room where I keep the broom and dustpan, which I retrieve without taking my eyes off of this kid. I begin sweeping, watching him out of the corner of my eye. I see the boy glance at

me and then, quick as the tongue of a lizard, his hand darts out and snatches my snail. His hand is back in his pocket in no time. He is quick, but I have already anticipated him and begin sweeping toward the front of the shop. I beat him to the front door. “What’s that you have in your pocket, son?” I ask.

First he says, “Nothing,” but I keep asking. At last, he withdraws the snail and hands it back to me.

In retrospect, March 15, 2009 turned out to be the best day of my life. It was the day I met Scott, the day I gained a purpose outside of me and stopped feeling so sorry for myself. I made Scott come in after school to help me around the shop. I certainly could use the help, and the boy needed the direction. In addition to the dusting, sweeping and straightening, I made Scott do homework for two hours every day.

That kid worked his way into my heart. At the end of the three weeks, he begged me to be allowed to continue coming to Krespach’s. I agreed to pay him a small amount of money. Over time he became truly helpful. By the time he was in high school, when he might have been losing interest, he kept the books, paid bills and consulted with me and most of my toy purchases.

The next Fall, Scott came into the store waving his report card. “Look, Warren, I got all ‘A’s. That was one proud boy.

I believe that, along with my encouragement, was what helped him get a scholarship to Washington University. One of the most helpful things Scott ever did for me was the day he said, “You know Warren, you don’t have to be a burden to feel like you’re a burden.” I had spent most of my life thinking I had inconvenienced most of my family most of the time. Scott helped me see I could be helpful to others—just by being a good listener. He made me more comfortable about saying “Thank You” for small things.

Seventy four years old now, I enjoy getting up in the morning, thinking of ways Scott can help me make the store a better place to buy toys. I look forward to his arrival a couple of afternoons a week. He is rarely late and I always have a snack waiting for him. He stays for as long as he can, before he has to go home to his wife and own little boy.

My back room is brighter now because Scott insists on keeping the windows washed—inside and out. His wife sends over flowers in a little jar and regularly bakes chocolate chip cookies for me. They are my favorite.

“Don’t eat them all at once, you’ll get a stomach ache,” says Scott. What does he know about my digestion? I eat them all at once and wait for the time when I get another batch.

I took the snail that Scott tried to steal off the market. I finally found a company that could fashion a new windup key and restore Sheldon to working order.

The snail sits on my kitchen table. Every day, I wind up Sheldon and watch him as he spins and turns, eventually traversing the table top until he falls, safe and loved into my hands.

Karen Sterbenz, a retired Religious Education Coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri, has been active in the Lifelong Learning Institute at Washington University in St. Louis for fifteen years. Her major interests are creative writing and a “Reading *The New Yorker*” class which she co-facilitates.



A Snail, Slow but Steady Wins the Race

Aliza Bran

His fingers sweated in his pockets as he clenched his hands. Droplets were running down his long fingers and collecting in a little puddle on his palm. This was the moment. This was his chance. He looked around. Paint was chipping off of the tall ceiling and rust was visible on the surfaces. The aged wood bookcases lining the walls were home to a miscellaneous collection of antique toys. They looked at least six times older than the elderly man behind the register.

The old man had a crown of white hair circling his skull, each individual patch frizzing out like Velcro off of his pink tinted skin. The boy took another step out from behind the bookcase to get a better look at the shopkeeper. The poor old man's eyes were plagued with cataracts like the old Siamese cat that lived down the street, and his eyelids sat partially drooped, making him look perpetually tired. The man looked up and noticed the boy. Their eyes met for two whole seconds before the boy ducked out of view.

With each passing moment, the boy's stress level lowered. He let his breathing slow, his small hands gripping the bookshelves for a foundation stronger than his own shaky legs. He had to do this. There was no backing out now. If he couldn't even lift a small hand-sized toy from a large antique toy shop, then he might as well give up any illusions that he would join his brothers in The Prestige, the gang that ran their neighborhood from South Hanley Road to Florent Avenue.

He held no affinity to violence or illegal behavior, but with his mother working three jobs and his father nowhere to be found, the gang was the closest to a stable family he would ever get. His older brothers had been in it for years, and only now was he old enough to join them.

Scott glanced around the room, his eyes flickering from toy to toy. He knew that he had to find something small enough to fit in his pocket. His eyes caught on a small snail toy, sunset hues twirling all over its shell. The snail looked so delicate, so tragically lonely as it sat on the wall, cramped uncomfortably between an odd wood clown toy and an old miniature car.

Scott walked toward it, picking it up lightly and cradling it in his hands like a baby hardly bigger than Thumbelina. The snail seemed to snuggle into his palm. It pulled at his heartstrings, and reminded him much of the cake at his fifth birthday party. He thought back to that afternoon five years ago.

“Baby, don’t forget to make a wish before you blow out your candles!” Momma cooed into his ear, the strong smell of her perfume dousing his face.

“Make it a big boy wish” Papa added, winking his way.

The cake was covered in sea creatures of all sorts—crabs and lobsters, fish (one that even looked like Nemo!), sharks, sea urchins, and a large, omnipotent snail. The snail sat in the corner of the cake, a large glob of yellow-orange frosting swirled into the shape of a shell. It seemed to be looking at Scott, its bright eyes sending messages through the air.

Scott looked up and smiled at everyone sitting around the table. His forehead scrunched as he thought hard about his wish. Suddenly, his forehead unraveled and his eyes took on a determined glare. He blew his candles out with one long breath, his brothers jumping in at the last second to assist in quenching the small flames the same way they did every year even though he always told them not to.

That was the last year that his whole family was at his birthday. Just eight months later his father left the family for good and hadn’t been heard of since. But at that birthday, all of his family was there: his mother, father, two older brothers, and grandma. His cake was exactly what he’d asked for. Everything was right. Now nothing was, and he felt more lost than ever. So even though pilfering this small snail toy was outside of his comfort zone, Scott knew that stealing it and joining The Prestige was the only way that he would find a family again. And that dream was more important than anything else.

Breaking from his reverie, Scott found himself clutching the toy in his right hand. Glancing around awkwardly, he slid the snail into his right pant pocket, allowing his jacket to just barely cover the bulge. Scott buttoned up his jacket hurriedly, made a false, haphazard attempt at checking the time on his watch, and began his sprint to the front door of the toyshop. As each foot

hit the ground, he tried to make his body look natural, as if he was going back to his house for suppertime rather than trying to escape.

Each step seemed to make a large imprint on the floorboards, the wood paneling squeaking and scraping. But maybe that was just in his mind. He felt his left shoelace untie but knew better than to stop and tie it. The shoe was loosening, his breath was catching and then suddenly, as he turned the corner around the last bookcase to reach the door he found himself face to face with the shopkeeper.

“What’s that in your pocket, son?”

Scott felt his chest jolt. Breathing was getting difficult, the beats of his pulse multiplied exponentially, and he was at a loss for words.

“Nothing” he squeaked. Then, realizing what the man seemed to already be aware of, he quickly changed his position. Scott looked down and pulled the snail from his pocket. He held it out to the elderly man, his palm open and fingers tightly webbed. “I’m so sorry, sir.”

The elderly man looked at him, his droopy eyes opening enough to mull over his appearance. Scott felt as if the man was looking through him, taking in his clothes but really looking for his personality. To see: “was he a bad kid?” or “would he do this again?” or worst, “does he look like the other kids who have done this before?” Scott knew that the boys at school bothered the old man, and he hoped desperately that he did not look like them. He never wanted to be grouped with those kids. He’d heard stories of the boys shooting small animals and terrorizing the younger kids at school. It made him want to say something. But he never did.

After a few seconds of what looked like critical contemplation, the older man finally told Scott to sit down in the chair next to the register. Scott obliged.

“Look, I’m not going to call the cops, but you are going to work off your potential debt to the store. I have toys and bookcases to dust, inventory to take, filing to be done. There are a number of tasks that you will be helping me with in the next three weeks.” The old man finally spoke again.

“Three weeks?” Scott gasped. He wasn’t one to speak out against authority but that seemed like a very long time for a miniature snail toy.

“Yes, three weeks. It’ll be enough to pay back the potential cost of this antique toy and will help you learn your lesson. Honestly, though, it probably won’t hurt to get you off of these streets anyway. Get you away from the real hoodlums.”

It was silent for a couple of minutes as Scott wrapped his head around what had just occurred. He had the equivalent to two weeks detention. Thankfully his mother didn’t get home until midnight from her job; otherwise he would have to tell her why he would be coming back so late. She would be so disappointed in him. He was the good one, her baby, her “smart boy.”

“Alright, let’s go, son.” The old man grabbed a duster from under the counter and thrust it to Scott. Scott took the black, plastic handle begrudg-

ingly. The old man continued, "These bookcases aren't going to clean themselves!"

* * * * *

Scott threw his bag into the back room like he did every day, making sure to keep the straps underneath the pack to ensure that Warren wouldn't trip over them later. He grabbed the vacuum cleaner and began wheeling the whirring device around the store, picking up all sorts of small fuzzes. He had begun to get into a schedule. At 8:00 am he would get to school just in time for his first class and at 3:00 pm he would finish and arrive at the toyshop. Usually he spent about five hours here. Three of those were for doing work around the shop, but during the middle two hours Warren made him do homework. Most nights there was even dinner included. It was like living the dream. The other day Scott had been trying to understand World War II for his homework assignment and Warren had been able to answer his questions and review the textbook with him. Scott had gotten that assignment back today and received a 97 percent. And he felt like he understood it! For the first time in a long time he felt happy.

Scott continued sliding the vacuum around, allowing it to be his dancing partner in the abandoned store. He spun and lunged and glided around the room, leaving a clean path in his wake. He felt the warmth of sunrays slowly seeping through the recently cleaned windows. The wind whistled lightly through cracks in the old front door, but somehow the room kept its comfortable temperature. Scott felt contented in this quaint building.

"Hi Scott," Warren greeted while walking through the front door, setting off the light bell that announced the entrance of a customer. Flapping in the clutch of his hands was the brown envelope that he'd left to pick up. "How was school today?"

Scott turned the vacuum off, the deceleration of the loud droning an exact sound replica to the hum of a motorcycle slowing.

"It was good. Mrs. Joste returned our World War II homework today. I did really well on it. Thanks so much again for helping me!"

Warren laughed. "It was no problem at all. I enjoyed looking over all of that again. It's been a long time since I've been in school."

The room was a comfortable calm. Scott began rolling the vacuum to its place in the back closet. He grabbed the duster and began the long task of dusting all of the toys.

"You realize that this is your last day, don't you?"

Scott turned to face Warren. He let out a sigh. He'd been up all night rehearsing and he wanted his words to come out correctly, "Warren, I was really hoping that maybe I could continue my work here. I think that I could really help out with the toys, the forms, whatever you need around here. I'll work hard, I promise."

Warren smiled, his cheeks squeezing slightly. “I think that would be wonderful. I can’t quite get on the ladder to fix the lights. There are many tasks that I need assistance with. I could give you a small salary for your work here and you can keep the same hours. I would, of course, expect two hours spent on homework just as before. Do you think that’s a fair deal? Does that work for you?”

“Absolutely!” Scott exclaimed enthusiastically. “That would be wonderful. Thank you so much. You won’t regret this.”

“I know,” Warren replied, a hint of a smile in his voice.

* * * * *

Scott sat, both hands flexed out in frustration, fingers digging into his temples. His elbows rested on the scuffed wooden table in the same marks that had been there for at least five years now. He could barely make out the drift wood pattern, lines swirling like a hazy Starry Night on the table, as he tried to keep his cool with his brother.

“Scott, come on, man. Why you doing this? You do two jobs and you’re in. You’re legacy, but you’ve got to push for it.”

“Devon, we’ve already talked about this. I don’t want in.”

“You, me, Mike, we’re family. We gotta stick together. You know Mom can’t take care of us: she can’t afford it and she don’t have the time. This is a chance to have something. To be something.”

Scott fidgeted in his seat, hoping that every small squirm would inch him closer to verbalizing what he wanted to say. He took a deep breath but before he could begin, Devon continued on.

“The only reason you’re even getting another chance is because you’re blood. Last month when you said no to a job, I thought it was a phase. Just a year ago you wanted this more than anything but you was too young! What’s that old man doing to you over there? What is wrong with you? It’s like I don’t even know you anymore.”

Scott looked up, eyes flashing and chest elevated, fueled by the tight and overwhelming twist he felt in his stomach.

“I’m the same exact person as I used to be. Now, I just know what I want and what I don’t want. I have been looking everywhere for something to feel proud of,” Scott paused, his shoulders un-tensing like an unraveling ball of yarn. “I looked at you and Mike and I figured that the only way to make something of myself—to really feel something—was to follow your lead. I’ve always looked up to you guys. But I’m not like you. This isn’t what I want. Not anymore, at least.”

Scott got up from the chair and began to pace across the small kitchen, taking five steps then spinning and repeating the procedure. “When I earn that paycheck at the end of the week for doing work, I feel...good, productive, able. And when I get a quiz back in school that I worked hard to study for, I feel more accomplished than I ever have. This is what I want

more than anything else. And as for what I need—I need you to support me.”

Devon was quiet for several beats, his long arms crossed harshly over his chest. His head was bowed in what appeared to be deliberation. He looked up and met Scott’s eyes. For a moment, Scott felt as though he may have gotten through. Devon looked up at his brother, his eyes gentle, as if seeing innocence and purity he’d heard of in an old dream many years prior. It was the most vulnerable Scott had seen Devon in years, the returning face of the older brother that sat next to him when Dad had tucked them in, reading them bedtime stories in a cacophony of miscellaneous voices and sounds. But just as quickly as it had come, it disappeared: leaving a yelling Devon slamming the kitchen door and a confused Scott contemplating whether that soft look had actually returned, even if only for a moment.

Aliza Bran is a sophomore from the DC area studying political science, anthropology, and writing at Washington University in St Louis. She hopes to find something that she is passionate about to pursue as a career.