

STRATUS: JOURNAL OF ARTS AND WRITING  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
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*Professional & Continuing Education*



# Stratus

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JOURNAL OF ARTS AND WRITING



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, SEATTLE

*Professional & Continuing Education*

2013

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## *Introduction*

**W**ELCOME to the third edition of *Stratus: Journal of Arts and Writing!* University of Washington Educational Outreach recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, and as we pass this milestone, we continue to celebrate the art and writing of our students. *Stratus: Journal of Arts and Writing* promotes the visibility of the talent and efforts of our students, instructors, advisory board members, and staff.

At UW Educational Outreach and Professional & Continuing Education, we offer a wide range of courses and programs in the visual, performing, media, and literary arts, and we add new creative programs every year. New programs are developed in collaboration with our advisory board members, and often arise from suggestions from our students or from the general public. We are always interested in new ways to serve artists and to spur the creativity that is vital to success in today's technology-driven world. We invite your ideas for the future.

As part of our focus on the future, a key element of the Certificate Programs in Arts and Writing at UWEO and PCE is an emphasis on the student's success after the completion of our program. We strive to develop self-sufficient artists who can create and market artistic work for years and decades following graduation.

As in the first two volumes of *Stratus*, top graduates from a range

of our programs are represented here in word and image. In this third edition, these visual and written works are connected by the theme and metaphor of *inspiration taking flight*. Where do our histories, dreams, and imaginations take us?

Our graduates' work is presented in two sections. First, we foreground creative work that is *Close to Home*. Then, we showcase images and writing that take us *Into Other Realms*.

We publish *Stratus: Journal of Arts and Writing* on an annual basis, and would very much like to hear your thoughts.

Roxanne Ray, Ph.D.  
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## *Poem for Writers*

*(written in celebration of the EDGE pilot program)*

*By Lyn Coffin*

INSTRUCTOR, CERTIFICATE PROGRAM  
IN LITERARY FICTION

Is love a sustainable passion, a shared solitude, or a web for learning new ways to fail? Yes. Sky through the doorway is just a high place to fall from, but a delicate girl is dangerous. Holding a pomegranate like a grenade, she'll wake you up to who you are. Your love for her will cost you everything. I don't think you need to know more than that. Too much knowing changes the outcome of event: it's an old way of pulling things apart—tearing the fabric so you go from place to place without getting anywhere—and feeling is a form of non-linear progression, a fact-finding trip to a place where no one can live. But if you name what isn't there, you possess it like a bee owns honeycomb, or a rabbi owns the Talmud, and all there is to see or say is a gift. Writers sustain their passion by writing, readers read to share solitude. Oh, Yes.

# 1 *Close to Home*



BLUE WRENS BY SUSAN POPE

*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*

*Certificate Program in Writing for Children, 2011*





## THE LONELINESS OF ONE

By *Katie Drury-Tanner*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN MEMOIR, 2013

*1990, part 1*

In bubbly cursive, I lament in my diary:

*Dear Diary,*

*It's not fair. I'm TEN YEARS OLD. I should have a boyfriend by now!*

*Love, Me xx*

The societal norms within *The Babysitters' Club* and *Teen* magazine already have me in their firm grasp. My fifth grade year is one of longing to belong. I want a best friend. I want a boyfriend. Four years after moving from England to Michigan, I speak with a fading British accent. I wear my long hair in two braids every day with no perm and no feathered bangs. I'm finally the proud owner of a pair of jeans—hand-me-downs from a cousin during our recent trip back to England. I will never fit in with everyone here,

but perhaps I can find a fit with *someone*.

Over the coming years, whenever I worry aloud about being single, Mum's standard response will be, "You don't want to pair off. It's much better to go around with a group of friends." But I *do* want to pair off, that's the thing.

I grow up singing along to hits of my parents' childhood instead of Madonna and New Kids on the Block. The radio station in Mum's minivan is permanently tuned to Oldies 104.3. She and I always roll our eyes and laugh at the 1969 tune "One" whenever it plays. *One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do*. It seems like such a silly line to us, and yet I absorb it into my being. It's a musical mantra that plays on through the soundtrack of my adolescence and young adulthood.

*1990, part 2*

Something stirs me from my sleep. The night is dark and still, but something furry is moving under the covers. I can feel it making its way from the foot of the bed, along my leg. I freeze and hold my breath. The darkness leaves me blind, heightening my other senses.

I don't want to turn on the light, to look, to see a mouse in my bed. Is it a mouse? I'm sure it's a mouse. I raise the covers, slide out, and zip down the hall to my parents' room, no light needed in this familiar territory.

"Mum?" I say softly. "I think there's a mouse in my bed."

Mum's love of animals began at age five when she arrived home from school one day with a mouse acquired from a classmate. I'm sure she's surprised to find me waking her up with news of a household mouse, but not horrified the way a non-animal loving mum would have been.

I follow in her footsteps down the hall to my room. She turns the knob on the wall, gradually illuminating the room. Looking up at us with a look that reflects the surprise I feel is Snowball the hamster.

“That’s quite a journey,” Mum acknowledges. Snowball’s cage is on top of the washing machine at the opposite end of the house.

He’s a welcome sight, a rodent with no ulterior motive, so unlike his human counterparts whom I would find in my bed in my twenties.

*1990–2001*

My school days are busy and full, but my love life moves at a snail’s pace. By the time I graduate from college, I’ve had one six week relationship that amounted to little more than making out with occasional groping under my shirt. This boyfriend, the first Aaron of two whom I’ll date, queried why I never initiated a kiss. At 19, I was embarrassed to tell him that I didn’t have a clue as to what I was doing. A serial monogamist, he broke up with me and quickly moved on to the next girl.

*2006*

Jeff has stopped by my townhouse, and I’ve let him in. Jeff has suggested going upstairs—just to lie there—and I’ve agreed. When he broke up with me a few days before, he said, “I’m sure you’ve learned a lot from me.” In hindsight, I would later wish I’d called him out for being the arrogant ass he was. Just because he was eight years my senior didn’t mean he’d packed more into his life. Just because he was a lawyer and I was a teacher didn’t mean his knowledge ranked more highly than mine. In four weeks, he should have learned something from me, too.

Lying on my bed that afternoon, though, I’m more focused on trying to get a friendship to rise from the smoldering ashes of our brief relationship than to recognize Jeff for the rat he is.

Lying there, Jeff rolls toward me to kiss me like it’s the most natural next step in building a friendship.

“What are you doing?!” I spit out, sitting up abruptly.

“I’m still really attracted to you,” he explains matter-of-factly, lacking even a note of embarrassment. Yes, he’d said that the other day, too—right after telling me there was no spark and that our relationship reminded him of the one he’d had with his ex-wife.

“You can’t *do* this,” I state with more confidence than I feel. As I do any time a guy breaks up with me, even when I’ve had to work too hard to make the relationship fit, I desperately want him to admit the error of his ways. “You can’t break up with me one day, and then try to make out with me the next... unless you’ve changed your mind.”

Jeff shrugs. “Sorry,” he says, his voice lacking sincerity or regret. He hasn’t changed his mind.

“You need to leave.”

After he goes, I resign myself to my bed again. Lying on top of the duvet, I stare up at the shadows that the autumn sun is projecting onto the ceiling. My two cats I’ve acquired curl up next to me. I mull over my renewed single status, running through my collection of exes and chastising myself for continuing to move at a snail’s pace through love and for allowing the most recent rat to sneak into my bed.

There was Dan, whom I’d dated for three months before he’d started pulling away. He had gone away for the holidays, waited days upon returning to make time for me, and barely touching me when we eventually saw each other. Only after I questioned whether he still wanted to be in a relationship with me did he admit that he didn’t, but that he hadn’t known how to tell me. He never did make it into my bed, but I would have been willing to go there.

Then there was the second Aaron, whom I’d dated for a year and a half, the first one to make it into my bed. Two months into our relationship, I’d watched him get arrested for expired tags and unpaid tickets. I’d bailed him out, then waited months for him to repay me. I waited around for him a lot. I was *still* waiting for my Christmas, Valentine’s Day, anniversary, and birthday presents from him. I’d received a convenient excuse for each instead.

Then there was Lawrence, who felt like we were getting into a relationship, which wasn't what he wanted.

And now Jeff.

At 26, the number one still feels as lonely as ever.

2007

A year after Jeff, I'm living in England, a move partially prompted by him, or, at least, by whom he represented.

Jeff was from Michigan. Jeff had always lived in Michigan. Jeff had no intention of ever living anywhere but Michigan.

Once I'd sufficiently wallowed in my lost relationship, I'd realized that I was lucky to get out. I began to recognize that the longer I remained in Michigan, the greater the risk that I would meet a decent guy who had no desire to leave the state. Michigan was a comfortable home, but I would never be able to make it fit unless I tried on England first. England fit the younger version of me, but I needed to see if it was a good fit for the adult version. Teaching was my vehicle to get there.

I lived my first months there on the bank of the River Thames, in a one-bedroom flat within the commuter town of Surbiton. My cats were enjoying a new adventure with my parents at my childhood home in Michigan. I was enjoying my new adventure in England, but when I arrived home from work each evening, loneliness confronted me. My flat was the shell of my previous home, a rented space with borrowed furniture. All that was mine, I'd carried on my back or in one of the two suitcases that had accompanied me to London Heathrow.

I kept myself busy at weekends by walking along the Thames. I'd admire the swans gliding through the water while side-stepping the occasional rat I saw poking around in the underbrush. I'd literally stop to smell the roses I passed, reminding myself to smile at my good fortune of being in England. Sometimes a snail would catch my eye as I leaned in to a flower. Idling along a leaf or brick

wall in the safety of its shell, it left a clear trail behind, a pest to gardeners everywhere.

Looking back, I could see the trail I'd created to lead me to England. I wondered where it would lead me.

One Sunday in October, I ambled along the river into Kingston, the neighboring town. I was in one of those moods that affect single people when they're tired of being single. Everywhere—*everywhere*—I looked, all I saw were couples. Even the swans were in twos. I wondered when it was going to be my turn and why my life was inching along in the relationship world.

By the time I turned off the path that led along the Thames, this sadness had dragged me so far down that tears pricked my eyes. Despite my state of mind, the romantic in me continued to hope—ridiculously and unrealistically. Perhaps a handsome stranger would see my distress and come to my rescue. Although I'm theoretically opposed to fairy tales, their cultural presence was too ingrained in me for me to rise above wanting my own Prince Charming. Having moved across the Atlantic by myself wasn't enough to give me my happily ever after.

That evening, I joined Facebook, despite having eschewed it for a while. If I had to be single, at least I could connect with friends across the ocean. Perhaps I wouldn't feel quite so alone.

Facebook was different in 2007. It was easier to search for people. After connecting with friends miles away, I decided to take a risk. I told myself I was seeking to expand my friendship circle, no longer wanting to be confined to socializing only with fellow teachers. I searched for males in the 25 to 35 age range living in London. Clearly, I was hoping for more than friendship. I wasn't going to wait for Prince Charming to see me as I walked home one day; I was going to find him.

Dan caught my eye, or at least, his profile did. My history would show a preference for Aarons and Dans. This one was from Birmingham, a city only 12 miles from my birthplace of Wolverhampton. Other men in this age range had profile photos of themselves shirtless with bulging biceps and smarmy expressions. Dan's pro-

file photo showed him fully clothed and looking away from the camera, gazing out over the snow-covered Alps. Although 25, I suspected he had greater maturity than those a decade his senior.

I sent him a message.

I got a response.

Another message. Another response.

A phone call.

A plan.

On November 11th, another Sunday, I walked along the Thames again, this time along its South Bank in London. I felt a lightness in my step brought by my excitement and the potential that lay before me. Dan was about to move off the page and into my life.

I wondered if I'd know him when I saw him and if he'd be as lovely in person as on the screen.

I did, and he was.

We met at the Tate Modern Museum, following our visit with coffee and cake at a nearby café.

At the Tate, Monet, Miró, Picasso, and Dalí provided a backdrop for our conversation. Dan told me about his move from Birmingham to London five years earlier because of a girl, a girl who broke his heart, but not his desire to escape the dead end of his hometown and make a life for himself in the city. We lingered in front of Matisse's *Le Escargot*, sharing a mutual disgusted admiration for it with no pretense of being impressed by the spiraling collage of colored paper.

At the café, he told me about his parents' working class background and how hard they'd worked to be where they were today. He told me about his mum's desire to learn and how she found jobs that would further her personal growth. He told me about his younger sisters, ten and twelve, born only after his parents knew they could provide for more children. He told me of his love of France and desire to live in Australia—or somewhere abroad.

Sometimes first dates have an innate awkwardness as two incompatible people struggle politely through a few hours together. Sometimes first dates have an innate ease as two compatible peo-

ple build the foundation for a relationship.

Dan and I had the latter.

Six weeks into our relationship, I flew back to Michigan for the holidays. The night before I left, Dan gave me a present with the strict instruction not to open it until precisely 7:30 p.m. on Boxing Day. Although our relationship was young, I had the sneaking suspicion that Dan was going to fly to the U.S. to surprise me. He'd dropped a hint or two along the way. I'd told Mum what I suspected, although it seemed a bit too fairy tale-esque to be part of my story. It was probably better that I warn at least one of my parents that this new boyfriend of mine might make an appearance, even if I turned out to be wrong.

On December 26th at around 7, the phone rang. I recognized Dan's number. Ah. I was wrong. If he were in the U.S., he wouldn't be using his British mobile phone. My heart dropped a little, then my mind started racing as I wondered what else the present could be.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"Chatting with Mum in the kitchen. You?"

"Sitting in the front room with a roaring fire." Dan was at his parents' house in Birmingham. "And wishing my girlfriend were here with me."

"I miss you, too, but I have to confess I'm having such a good time here with everyone. I'll be back soon enough. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right? Um, and by the way, isn't 7 close enough to half past?" I asked.

"You're clearly pining away for me," Dan joked. "Go on, then. Open your present. I'll allow it! Call me back when you've opened it."

I eagerly slid open the sealed flap. A book fell out. A blank book. Inside, Dan had written:



*Dear Katie,*

*I can't believe we've only shared six weeks together. You're amazing, and we're amazing together! Knowing that you love to write, I thought you'd like a new book to record our adventures in. Perhaps starting now...*

*Now go and open the front door, please!*

*Your Dan xx*

Confused, but hopeful, I turned the brass handle and yanked open the door. A cold blast of winter air hit me as I scanned the semi-circular driveway and the road beyond. Standing at the end of the driveway with a bouquet of flowers in his hand stood Dan. His face broke into a huge grin as I rushed toward him. We wrapped our arms around each other and kissed a kiss of new love separated for a week.

"It's so nice to have another English accent in the house!" was Mum's reaction to Dan.

My dad laughed a laugh of awe, acknowledging that he could never have pulled off such a surprise. Before I flew back to England, he shared with me that he thought I'd found my soul mate.

My brother, not one to overly emote, was also suitably impressed, as evidenced by the, "Wow. Cool," he expressed when I introduced the two men.

My fifth grade math teacher was one of the guests at our annual holiday party that took place that weekend.

"How long have you known each other?" he asked, after I introduced Dan.

"Six weeks," I replied.

He smiled, "No, really."

"Really. Six weeks."

He looked skeptical.

But six weeks became three months, and then our birthdays were on the doorstep. On March 1st, my birthday, Dan was snowboard-

ing with friends in the Alps and I was at an education conference in Geneva, events we'd planned long before our paths had crossed. I'd be back on the 2nd, and he'd return on his birthday six days later.

Walking home from the station, I noticed that the magnolia outside my flat was already blooming. Spring arrived early in England. It was hard to believe that Dan and I had been celebrating a snowy New Year in Michigan such a short time ago. Harder still to remember how lonely I'd been only four months before.

I walked up the four flights of stairs to my flat, noticing a glad-to-be-home feeling as I dropped my bags on the floor. Dan had told me that the first part of my birthday present would be waiting for me. Leaning against the wall was a wrapped square measuring about two feet on each side. I carefully opened the paper to find an artist's canvas within.

During the week that followed, I arrived home each day to find a new envelope awaiting me from Dan. Each envelope contained a colored piece of paper cut into an asymmetrical shape and printed with either an image or a word that related to me or us. On Friday, a postcard accompanied the last shape, a final hint, although I'd put the pieces together by then.

Each piece of Matisse's collage represented a piece of Dan and me, memories swirling together.

The path that had led me to Dan had been a maze of false starts and dead ends. It seemed fitting that Matisse's snail had become our symbol. My snail's pace had led me at last to someone amazing, someone I may never have met if it weren't for the rats that had preceded him. One was still a lonely number, but it wasn't my number any longer.

## AMONG THE TREES

*By Peter Wise*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN NONFICTION, 2013

**W**E FOUGHT AS soldiers and cowboys and Indians. We transformed ourselves into policemen, spies and criminals. Half-feral, we spent every day, all summer, in the tiny woods near our house: a vast landscape of shifting backdrops and loyalties populated by a wild-eyed pack of scabby-kneed kids and their snot-nosed baby sisters and brothers.

Away from the woods, I would close my eyes and escape to them. I'd fly inches above the ground along trails and rock walls, I'd come to the trunk of a chestnut tree and shoot up it, reliving our glorious ambush of the enemy in August Beneath my desk at school, my limbs twitched like a dreaming dog's.

At one end of the woods sat a rounded rock the size of a baby hippo, red and crystalline. We spent futile, joyous hours smashing smaller stones against it as we tried to break off chunks of crimson treasure to carry to our bedrooms. Other times we attempted to move the stone by constructing complicated levers and pulleys. No matter what we tried, the rock remained at peace in place.

In fall, leaves of oak, maple and chestnut trees blanketed the woods. We built a vast settlement of teepees made with fallen tree branches that we covered with the leaves. The teepees never looked like the ones in the movies, but we were convinced ours were better, more camouflaged, than any Hollywood teepees covered in white deerskin.

One day, while the others were playing prison (you wanted to be a guard) in my best friend's garage, I visited the teepees on my own. I crawled on my belly through one of the entrances.

The enclosed space smelled of decaying forest, dirt, and the faint odor of smoke from a burning leaf pile. I sat in the middle of the teepee, folded like an Indian with my legs crossed. Branches formed a dark cone above me. Shafts of sun cut through the imperfectly-covered roof, and glowed like warm coals on the leafy floor. I watched a daddy longlegs pick its way up towards the teepee's peak, and from somewhere in the gloom I heard a small animal scratching.

It was the time before leaf blowers, and the quiet was a force of its own, made even stronger by the occasional bird song and my own breath. The shafts of sun slowly crept along the teepee's floor. A few more daddy longlegs spread out across the sloped roof. I may have slept for a moment, because my whole body suddenly jumped. The spell broken, I began to feel scared, so I scrambled out the entryway and joined my friends in Jimmy's garage.

The teepees were destroyed that night. It was a group of older kids; we knew by the empty beer cans.

I got older myself of course. We didn't abandon the woods. It still served as a crucible for fun, though a fun corrupted by age. We deployed a cherry bomb with a delayed-timer cigarette fuse and

blew up a model of The Wolfman, then laughed as we stomped out the small fire created by our explosion. Under a fallen tree, we hid a cache of gory monster magazines. When those moldered away, we replaced them with Playboys stolen from Jimmy's father. In time, we drank a few beers out there too. I don't remember us ever kicking over a little kid's fort or teepee, although we may have.

Today, I look through the all-seeing eye of Google Earth and the woods are a speck, a floating life raft surrounded by oceans of suburban New Jersey homes.

A few years ago, when my wife's aunt died, we used the small inheritance to buy a cabin and ten acres of forest on the Olympic Peninsula. It overlooks the water, and we go there to kayak and clam and crab, and to lounge on the deck far away from our regular lives.

Over the years, I've trimmed back and opened up abandoned paths through the forest, and I've created a few new trails. When we notice visitors becoming bored or restless, we take them out to walk the paths, and I sometimes tramp out there alone for no reason at all.

In a grove of older cedars, I discovered an indentation about the size of an inverted tent, a tiny grotto created from nurse logs and bent branches that have become overgrown with ferns and moss. Lying on the ground was a pile of deer bones.

I paused and sat cross-legged and thought: Did those bones arrive in a carcass dragged here by coyotes? Or did the deer walk here for solitude, only to fall asleep under the cedars and never wake up?

I'm dragged to my refuge by strands to the past. I retreat there by choice.

My refuge warps and forms anew, bent by time and circumstances. It's a patch of woods, a penciled notebook, a dark attic filled with books and a single light. It's my wife's arms guarding me against the cold.

Today, my refuge is two cats sleeping nearby as I write at a desk of sturdy oak.

I breathe deeply, look down into the grain of the wood, and see children playing.







LEO BY MICHELLE POSTON  
*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*





## NEW YEARS WITH BA

By *Elena Reitman*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN NONFICTION, 2013

**C**LINK “*NA ZDAROVYE* Ba!”

“Be healthy...and find a companion this year. It will make things right,” says Ba, my Soviet, Jewish grandmother with a shot of Smirnoff in her right hand and a piece of bread in her left for *zakuska*, a chaser. 2008 was like the others, another year I didn’t get pregnant.

Finding a companion! A husband and kids were the furthest things from my mind. In 2008 I had a well-paying but ill-fitting IT consulting job and was applying to graduate school in hopes of fixing my restlessness and anxiety.

Before I could get my Converse sneakers off, Ba grabs my arm

and pulls me with a troika's force to the window facing the parking lot of her apartment building.

"Look look. It's Lena, Grisha's granddaughter. Without exception, in any weather, any time of day she is in heels! Ooo what a beauty." Lena is her neighbor's granddaughter known to wear prints featuring the complete feline phylum.

I walk over to the window, cross my arms, and look at the pines past the parking lot instead. Misplacing my annoyance with confusion, Baba turns her back to the window and Lena's black Audi speeding out of the driveway, and stands on her tiptoes demonstrating with each step the gentle sway of her watermelon hips. Like Venus's moons, her arms orbit the celestial orb. With her chin to the Gods Baba Sofa bounces across the room in a pair of imaginary stilettos. At the end of her catwalk—across the length of her living room, Ba's arms fall with a loud thud. I'm wearing a black crewneck sweater and a light blue collared shirt with dark jeans cuffed twice, a typical outfit for a nerdy Seattleite.

She drops her shoulders in indignation and looks me up and down with her mildly bulging hypothyroidic eyes.

It's going to be one of *those* visits. There are two kinds: the sharp tongued match of Ba reminding me of my failure to pass on the family gene pool and the preferred, eating beet dishes and talking like adults. The quicker I got the two of us eating beet products the better, so I set two plates and two shot glasses across from each other on a flowerchild print tablecloth. I take my usual spot on the half of the table not covered in Danielle Steele novels and *Evreyskiy Mir* newspapers. The food is already out in anticipation for my visit.

"Let's eat." I take a spoonful of Salat Olivier, pickled fish, mashed potatoes and cut cucumber.

"When will I see you in something more seductive?"

"This is my weekend gear. I dress very well when I'm out and at work. Plus you're my grandmother; you are supposed to love me no matter what I wear." We've been fighting about my urbanized grandpa style and my unacceptable number of flat oxford shoes

since my adolescence.

My Baba and I began sparring as soon as I could wiggle away from her cream of wheat filled spoon. My grandmother, Sofia Yusim, is a great woman. I never underestimate her. When I was a kid she'd run down the staircase to the street and back six flights of stairs to catch me. She'd hop over ottomans and leap onto beds to corner me on windowsills. She'd slyly read the newspaper waiting for me to be within reach with a bowl of kasha on her lap hidden behind the paper. And before I could dart away, a silver spoon filled with buckwheat, oatmeal, mashed potatoes or cream of wheat sloshed in my cheeks. The chase often occurred after Ba worked a full day as the director of accounting at a construction company and after standing in several long queues for dinner groceries. Ba filled in the role of a sibling, and like an older sibling, she challenged my freedom, personal space, and attention. Today she keeps me on my toes and forces me to find new ways to work with and around the latest spoon in my face—her need for me to wear high heels and boobier shirts.

Oil crackles and Ba is again under the fluorescent light of her narrow kitchen holding a hot pan filled with potatoes and chicken cutlets, the second course. As she looks at the cutlets her eyes sharpen ready to make a point. "You should understand that the success you seek in life has more to do with the height of your stiletto not the content of your character, or however they say it in fairy tales they teach in your American schools. *Tfu!*" She makes a spitting motion through her lips. "If one day you listened to me, to the truth, you would see that you would be well taken care of. And your mother would get more restful sleep."

"Ma sleeps just fine. You need new material," I reply coolly.

"Nu, what's the use?" she continues as she takes out more butter from the fridge, "Your grandfather never got to see any great grandchildren, why should it be different for me. Your aunt who is twenty years younger than me has four." She ups her game. The continuation of her family line is at stake. And here I am jeopardizing her chances by wearing flat boy shoes! I'm going to need a

sharp come back if I'm going to even out this match.

"That's what happens when you get married six months after you start menstruating."

"I just ask for one. You know her Anusia, when she goes somewhere she's got red lipstick on, her boobs are on display and her *zadnitsa* is swaying thanks to a white pair of twelve-centimeter patent leather heels," Baba's passionate pantomime accentuates each body part with a serving spoon in her hand. My cousin Anya wears heels and bold colors regularly that according to my grandmother "energizes the room with her womanliness."

Comparisons to Anya were my breaking point. Anya has always been my foil, the model woman I should learn from according to Ba. I love my cousin, but we couldn't be more different. She's an uninhibited, thick-skinned extrovert. I never saw Ba wear provocative clothes or cut corners in her professional or personal life. Her incessant barrage of superficial advice made no sense. She didn't choose that path, why would she push it on me? Ba's life experiences gave her a strong build, a sharp mind, and a rational outlook on survival. Not her clothes or flirtations. She lived through the War and married my grandfather Veniamin Yusim, his family's sole survivor of the Holocaust, when she was 25 and he was 34—after fully completing her studies in both accounting and brewery chemistry.

Ba was asking me to throw away what I most respected about her and tough survivor women like her. I felt the hurt tighten chest, and a hurtful, dismissive comeback on the tip of my tongue. I summoned all the hardened self-control I had to ask Ba to sit. That year as a New Year's gift I wrote my Ba an "apology" poem.

I got up from the table and pulled out my computer. I opened "Apology: 2008" from my desktop files.

"I wrote you a funny poem."

"Oh a poem. Nu, let's see it. Read it out loud."

"It's in English, so you may want to look at it as I read." Ba stood at my side as I read looking at my screen asking about words she didn't understand.

*I'm sorry Baba Sofia, I'm not pregnant yet  
but I did loads of great stuff—don't fret*

“What is fret?”

“To worry.”

*I scheduled lots of meetings and color-coded decks  
and even pretended to know stuff, only to vex*

“Decks are presentations you make on the computer. Vex is to irritate,” I say.

*I read Milton Friedman and schemed of grand plots  
08 was a year of the luckiest flops*

“Milton Friendman? Flops?”

“Big capitalist and mistakes.”

*I smoked illegal cigars and drank manly liquors,  
all for inspiring funnier kickers*

“Fu, cigars are terrible.”

“Fu, uzhas,” Ba is horrified.

*I tried to play nice and laugh with the boys  
they do all the fun stuff, play with the best toys!*

*I upset you a lot by not wearing stilettos  
it's an 09 resolution, that, and freeing babies from ghettos*

“Stilettos?”

“Heels.”

“You need to wear them!”

*I have good intentions, but times are so strange*

*so far from your norms of the Carpathian range*

*But you should know, my roundest of Babas, and here we'll agree,  
life is simpler when you fight, not become bourgeoisie*

“Haha, well I don’t understand all of it so I will have to reread again. So next year you write another one? And you come over and read it to me. Maybe in a better outfit?”

“No promises on the outfit but I can write another one next year.”

“Ok let’s drink to this. Your poem and you finding a nice companion.”

**HOCKOCK AND HERNAN:  
A STORY ABOUT REAL LOVE AND  
IMAGINARY FRIENDS**

*By Amy Fields*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN NONFICTION, 2013

**W**E ARE DRIVING along a stretch of Interstate 94 West between Minneapolis and St. Cloud, Minnesota, when I first hear the news about my dad.

“Sue, you are talking about Sue!” I say, frustrated now, to my mom. She does not seem to be making any sense. Aunt Sue, my dad’s sister, was diagnosed with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) about a year ago, and my mom has been filling me in on the latest news about her condition. But now she is saying things that do not seem to be referring to Sue anymore.

“No,” she says, equally frustrated, her hands tight on the steering wheel. “I am talking about your dad now. He has MCI too.”

A moment passes. It is brief, but it is such a big moment that it seems to last longer. It is a moment on the edge, where one second prior to it everything was OK, and then there is this moment, and then there is everything after. I am in the middle moment now, but I am plunging toward the after-moment way too fast. My dad was fine, and now he is not. Nothing will ever be the same again.

### Do you have a mirror?

“Dorothy, bring me a mirror so I can watch myself starve to death!” my great grandfather would yell to my grandmother, rapping his cane on the window. This phrase became a family favorite, passed down generations. Shortened to “do you have a mirror?” it has happily replaced asking if dinner is ready or mentioning that we might be hungry.

But it is another mirror now. My parents are visiting me in West Seattle and I have put them to work. My mom used to list chores for me and my brother each Saturday. She would title the list of chores “busy week” or “lazy week.” Other than the title, there appeared to be no distinction between the two lists. So whenever my parents visit it is always “busy week.” Turnabout is fair play, after all.

Two of the items listed for this busy week are “Hang mirror above fireplace” and “Put up coat rack.” Neither chore is completed. My dad starts with the coat rack, an antique I bought for \$50 that consists of a foot-long black lacquered piece of wood with four evenly spaced metal lion heads with coat hooks protruding from the lions’ mouths.

The assignment is simple—line it up and screw it to the wall—but my dad spends days thinking and talking about how he might accomplish the task, and consults at least three people at the hardware store. In the end, I am left with a hole in my wall the size of a softball and my dad sitting on the couch in defeat, looking up at me blankly. He says, “I don’t know what to do.”

It is the first sign of his illness surfacing.



## People in hell want ice water

When I would want something I could not have, Dad would say “People in hell want ice water.”

He goes from MCI to Alzheimer’s over the course of a few years. The difference between the two is negligible—he gets slowly worse—yet significant. The first diagnosis, which I now think of as cute, light, easy, almost catchy “Mild Cognitive Impairment”—is now the ugly, dark, hard, and impossible to spell and pronounce “Alzheimer’s disease.”

Mild Cognitive Impairment even has an easy-to-reference, handy acronym: MCI. Alzheimer’s disease does not; it lives as a complicated mouthful. The obvious acronym, AD, is not used. I wonder why. It seems fitting for it to parallel the biblical “After Death” because to find out that a loved one has this disease is to die a little inside. And then to die a little more as time goes by. And even more so for the person who is diagnosed. It is as if his essence was placed in a special AD hourglass that was flipped at the moment of diagnosis, and slowly, particle by particle, he disappears.

I think about a morning in seventh grade. I was walking to the school bus stop and my dad took the dog and attempted to walk with me. I snapped that I wanted to walk alone; I was a big girl who did not need to be seen with her dad. Even then, through the lens of selfishness, I felt bad and turned to look for him, but he was not there. I ended up missing my bus.

Now when I turn to look for him, he is not there anymore.

I want my dad back. People in hell want ice water.

## A couple for each corner

Dad had imaginary friends when he was a boy. There were eight total, four couples. Each couple lived in a separate corner of a vacant lot next to his childhood home. Every day he would take his golden retriever, Shep, and together they would make the rounds.

The couples were named Hockock and Hernan, Aidie and Therm, Hucklebine and Wine...no one remembers the name of the fourth couple.

Years ago, before his diagnosis, I jokingly asked what he thought his friends were doing now. I was laughing, expecting him to say something to the effect that they were imaginary, so they do not exist, but instead he said, "They'd be long dead by now; they were pretty old back then."

I think of these friends often. I used to think of them as simply one of many of Dad's colorful childhood memories, but now I think about them and wonder if they have come back to him. I hope they are comforting him, as old friends do.

### You got your girl

My dad always wanted a girl. When I was born, he was not allowed in the room during my mom's labor and delivery. It was a nice spring day in Wisconsin, so he went home and raked the yard to try to keep busy and not worry about Mom and me. When he finally got the OK to see her, he walked in the room and she looked up at him and smiled.

"You got your girl," she said.

From that moment on, he and I had a special bond. We have the same sense of humor, and the same kindness and gentleness of spirit. He has a special place in my heart, and he has always taken care of me.

Our favorite joke by far—me and my dad's—is the classic "A horse walks into a bar. The bartender says, 'Hey buddy, why the long face?'"

One of us tells the joke and we laugh. Then we laugh at each other laughing, and again at the joke itself, and then at each other again. My mom does not think the joke is funny and this sets us off again, doubled over now, gasping for breath.

As my dad slowly leaves me, the joke leaves me as well. As if the

humor is in the sharing, not in the joke itself. Or maybe it is a selfish thing and I do not want to ever share this with anyone else.

When I was five, I made my dad a “tie”—a makeshift fabric triangle—out of leftover material from a jumper Mom made for me. The material was maraschino-cherry color corduroy with a graffiti pattern of words (ball, kite) and corresponding pictures. Since it was a triangular piece of fabric, he had to tuck the top of it under his shirt collar. The bottom of the tie rested just above the chest.

Each morning I padded in my footed pajamas to his room to watch him get ready for work. Part of his morning ritual was to dutifully “put on” my tie before he left the house. I did not know he would remove it the minute he stepped out the door. What I knew is he loved it so much he wore it every day.

Around that same age I also drew him a picture—it was in pencil and depicted a misshapen head, rectangle eyeglasses and the caption “Dad—Ape.” My dad has an abundance of body hair and so I thought the caption was quite fitting, despite the lack of any actual hair—even on his head—in the drawing. This one he hung in his office. He was a professor at a university and I often wonder what his students thought of that drawing.

As the father/daughter dynamic changes and I take care of him now, I think about what my mom said to him the day I was born.

You got your girl.

### **I may have been born at night, but not last night**

Denial is a funny thing. I could not get through this without him, so he has been like a friend to me—a friend who makes it all better. My dad used to be the one who could make it all better, but Denial has had to step in.

Dad would say “I may have been born at night, but not last night” when he was illustrating that he was not naïve or oblivious to what was going on. But I want that oblivion. I do not want to know what is going on now with my dad; I do not want to know,

see, talk about, hear about, or even think about it. Maybe it will not be real then.

Unfortunately Denial travels with his side-kick Guilt. I hate that bitch. Having been raised Catholic, I am tremendously familiar with her already. Denial wants me to hold back, hold in, and hold on. He is stoic and unemotional. Guilt wants me to feel. Not sad, but *bad*. She makes me feel bad about being in denial, not feeling bad enough, not doing enough, not wanting the right things. As I said, I hate that bitch.

That is not to say that I have not felt sad. Denial and Guilt are only so strong, after all. And this introduces the third player. Grief is unisex. It is sneaky and a bully. It bulldozes over Denial effortlessly, scoffs at Guilt and tackles me out of nowhere. Grief says, "This. Is. Happening. Now."

I use Denial to hold back Grief, and end up living with Guilt. Can I be born last night?

### Is that a neon squirrel?

Dad's love of birds drove him to concoct elaborate houses and feeders for them and he would become increasingly irate when other animals ate the bird food, namely squirrels. The bird houses started to be adorned with long metal casings around the stands and then were built with smaller and smaller ledges and openings. Not only did the squirrels still find a way to get to the food, but the ones that he trapped and drove across town most certainly came back.

"See it? That's the same goddamn squirrel from last week!"

"Dad, how can you possibly tell?"

"Look at that bastard! I know it's him."

He started driving them further away, even across the Mississippi river, but those bastards came back time and again. One day I saw a squirrel in a cage with a neon green stripe down his back.

"Dad! What did you do?"

“This way I’ll know when he comes back” he said.

I often wondered if the squirrel was ostracized in the squirrel community after that. I told the story to a friend who lived across the river where Dad took his squirrels. Laughing, she told me, “You are not going to believe this, but my dad does the same—sprays paints them and brings them to your side of the river!”

We never did see a spray-painted squirrel eating our bird food but this story illustrates the kind of person my dad was—first, calling a squirrel a bastard is about as angry as he ever got and even then he used a live trap and drove it across town. And, he was only trying to protect the birds.

I feel protective of him now; I want to build elaborate structures to keep him safe, and physically remove obstacles in his way. Since I cannot spray paint a squirrel to protect him, I do this by simply letting him be. Instead of correcting or questioning him, I let him live in his reality. When he tells me he is friends with President Obama, who just called him, I smile and ask what they talked about, secretly happy he is still a liberal.

This comes so easily and intuitively to me but I know it is hard for some people. They get frustrated, or embarrassed, and want their loved ones to “act normal.”

There’s a place in the Netherlands called “Dementiaville” that lets patients do whatever comes naturally to them. They nurture the individual’s reality, whatever that may be.

This is what I do when I am with my dad, and I learned this from him.

Protect the birds.

### Is it time for coconut oil?

You cannot be a child of a parent with Alzheimer’s without thinking about your own future. Do I want to know if I have the gene? *Absolutely not*. If there was a cure or a way to prevent it—especially

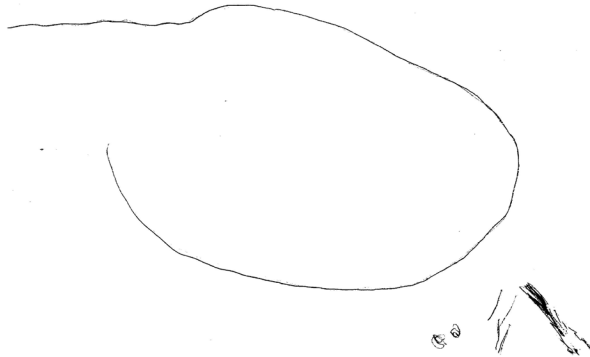
if it was “caught early”—that would be different. But as it stands, it would only torment me, potentially even more than it already does.

According to the Alzheimer’s Association, one in eight older Americans has Alzheimer’s disease, and it is the sixth leading cause of death in America. It is the most common type of dementia (accounting for 60-80% of all dementias), it is fatal, and there is no cure.

We are in Wisconsin visiting my grandma Dot and I notice a quart-sized tub of coconut oil sitting on the counter. I ask my mom about it and she said she read a book written by a doctor about how coconut oil helped her husband with Alzheimer’s. Dr. Mary Newport found that medium chain triglycerides, the key ingredient in coconut oil, may slow and even reverse the effects of Alzheimer’s.

A common assessment test for Alzheimer’s is called the clock drawing test. As the title implies, you ask the person to draw a clock. It may sound simple, but the images produced by patients with this disease are shocking.

After my mom read Dr. Newport’s book she had my dad draw a clock and this is what it looked like.



My mom started to give my dad coconut oil, but he was too far along for it to have any impact. I went out and bought several tubs for myself.

## It's like being pecked to death by a duck

Alzheimer's disease is an agonizingly slow demise. I have used one of my dad's favorite sayings—"It's like being pecked to death by a duck"—many times, but never before has it been as fitting as when describing the trajectory of Alzheimer's.

On my dad's side of the family, his mom has old age dementia, and he and his sister Sue have Alzheimer's. Not the best odds. I used to think that dementia was dementia—yes, there are different types—but they all present in a similar fashion. I was wrong.

My grandmother's dementia leaves her with short-term memory loss. Spend a day with her, and you will have one of the best days of your life. She is the funniest person I know. Her nickname is "Giggles" and she tells jokes and then laughs at them. I find her delightful. With dementia, she acts the same as she always has (and I am sure she can draw a clock), but she will likely not remember much, if any, of what you talked about an hour ago. She will remember many things that happened years ago, however, as her long-term memory is still fairly intact.

In sharp contrast, my dad and Sue are unable to hold a conversation. It started with struggling to find the words they were looking for, and progressed to simply not being able to speak in a coherent fashion. Alzheimer's is far more than memory loss. People with the disease cannot identify objects that are directly in front of them. They may see the object, but since they do not recognize it, it is as if it is not there. Sue was diagnosed first, and this was the initial behavior change in her that struck me. She was in the kitchen trying to make dinner and items she was looking for were sitting on the counter directly in front of her and she had no idea, even after they were pointed out.

Later, they lose their depth perception and consequently their mobility. Something as simple as walking across the living room becomes potentially walking off the side of a cliff to someone without depth perception. A throw rug could be a black hole. Now that I see the difference first hand between old age dementia and Al-

zheimer's (at least how it presents in my family) I think dementia would be a walk in the park. Literally, I could take a walk in the park, and carry on a conversation with loved ones at the same time. I might not remember it, but at least I could do it. And they would remember it.

With medication, Alzheimer's can be slowed, but only for so long, and then there is "the drop." My dad's drop was right after I saw him in the summer of 2012. My mom had to make the heart-breaking yet inevitable decision to move him to an adult family home.

Before I saw him for the first time after his move, my mom and brother and I met with the priest at my parents' church. My mom told her priest that it is hard for her to see my dad because it is "like his soul already went to heaven but his body is still here."

And that is the worst part. Letting go is often easier than hanging on. Sometimes I find myself talking about him in the past tense. My husband lost his mom a year ago and tells me what we are going through seems much worse. It is a concept that is as hard to feel as it is to swallow, but death may be better than this disease's aftermath. With death I could kick Guilt to the door, and finally open it to grief.

## Hockock and Hernan

I am visiting my dad where he now lives with a caregiver and a handful of others. It is a home like any other really, with home-cooked meals, and kids running around; there is even a sweet black cat named "Hoot" that lives in Dad's room, left by its former owner who passed away. We are sitting in the living room and I am trying to bring up stories that might entice some sort of recognition from my dad.

He seems content and smiles sometimes, but his eyes are vacant of those moments of knowing, those flickers of recognition that others have.



I mention that I have our old canoe out in Seattle now and I see something, briefly, in his eyes. He laughs. I ask him if he remembers our canoe trips down the Black River, or those times when he was in training for treks to the boundary waters and would run around the cemetery adjacent to his house with the canoe on his head, often receiving honks from passing cars. But the vacancy is back.

I know what to ask.

“Hey Dad, have you talked to Hockock and Hernan lately?”

His eyes are bright can see. His smile reaches his eyes and he slaps his hand emphatically on his knee.

“Yes!” he exclaims.

He looks at me, as if to say, “How did you know?”



ANGRY BIRDS BY MICHELLE POSTON  
*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*







## IN THE HEART OF DETROIT: A EULOGY IN FRAGMENTS

*By Louis Whitford*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION II, 2013

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION I, 2011

### POLITICS

**I**N 1968, AS I worked on my Ph.D., there were half a million American soldiers in Vietnam, Martin Luther King had just been assassinated, cities were burning across America, and the world seemed headed for an apocalyptic breakdown. Being crazy struck me as a perfectly sane response to the hand I had been dealt—the hand that all young men had been dealt in that crazy year when my heart was forged. The instant I graduated from college, I would be drafted to fight in a war I despised to the depths of my being, and because I had already made up my mind to refuse to be a soldier in that war, I knew that my future held only two options: fight or flight. Protesting seemed futile so I fled to Canada. Eventually, I

came out of hiding and with the help of a friend found a job teaching at a small college in Toronto. Soon I was moonlighting as a drummer in a local funk band. We called our singer Diana Ross, her big hair and black skin and booming voice the three things they had in common. Soon we were dating, two anti-war Americans waiting out the war. Inter-racial dating was a little edgy then but we were proud, holding our heads high when a disapproving glare came our way.

When the Vietnam war was over, we decided to return to the states, to Detroit. An uncle who worked in the state department had my deserter's file shredded. The Minority Studies Department at the University of Detroit hired me, a white man, to teach civil rights. History is an indecipherable pile of events but we write it as a story so that it can seem to have a purpose, to be on its way somewhere. People want a story and I could tell a good one. We were the new America and Detroit was our future.

One's not half of two. It's two are halves of one; this from our wedding. We were, unto ourselves, a country indivisible. The state of our union was never stronger than when our son was born. I never imagined that one day, years hence, he would tear us apart.

#### MY HOUSE

On my bedroom wall I have a photograph of me, my wife, and my son, who was then about 24. We're bundled up on the snow-covered front porch of our house. The light is crepuscular. My father took the picture, that I know, but I cannot remember if we were coming or going, or whether it was early morning or evening. In a photograph it is impossible to know, without other referents, whether you are looking at dawn or dusk. In the photograph, our house was well-tended but I see something else now, in our smiling faces: our decay had already begun.

## CLOSE TO HOME

### WEATHER

A low pressure zone has brought an early winter chill to our autumn. I've gone to the downtown mall for new earmuffs. The parking garage escalator is broken. Motionless, the stairs feel unstable. Outside all is bluster; leaves blow wildly around, brown and red and yellow, like kid's kites mounting and diving through the air, until at last they fall and scurry about the ground, frighteningly malevolent. The foot of the stairs is covered in a pile lying in wait for me. Be on your guard for withered leaves: they draw you down.

### WAR

Under a blue sky, the leaves just turning their first shades of red, two white planes brought the twin towers to the ground. Three months later my son, 30 years old, out of work and a little lost, walked into the local recruiter and signed up. I screamed, how can the son of a man who teaches the peaceful message of Martin Luther King go to fight a war? I quoted The King, "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind." Less than a year later a C-130 Hercules military transport plane brought his body back to Detroit.

### MY NEIGHBORHOOD

Ruins are the visible part of the entropy of nature and civilization, testaments to past glory. Broken windows and leaky roofs turn the abandoned houses in my neighborhood into grotesque conservatories with plush green carpets of moss and wallpaper colonies of colorful molds. Fast growing trees take root in the accumulating dirt and pierce roofs, rising majestic as though vanquishing their former conquerers. Watching this slow return of the country and forest to my neighborhood seems to represent not just the physical



encroachment of nature but the proliferating undergrowth of the human psyche.

Still, my neighborhood is an eloquent grid of memories. To think that these four blocks that I look down on from my house were once the limits of my son's world and all he knew. But how he knew it; every house, every alley, and which young girl, at which times, came out to play, and who sat on their front porch in the evenings and who would yell at the kids trespassing in their yards. These four blocks, now crumbling and mostly deserted, were the frontier of my son's adolescence, the scenery of his secret anguish.

#### MY SON

Big, slope shouldered, with the easy confidence of the best sandlot baseball player in the neighborhood, my son was always a bit of an outsider. In the way kids tend to divide by race he was always in between, one set of folks thinking he wasn't black enough and another set of folks who thought he was insufficiently white.

Once when my wife was picking him up from second grade, she heard a group of kids surrounding him chanting: *inky binky bonky your daddy is a honky*. But my son never put his head down, trying always to see a thing from both sides. He kept trying to do right in the city he celebrated, always rooting for its teams and its people: Tigers, Lions, Red Wings, black, white, yellow, brown, rich, poor, tall, thin, weak, strong; didn't matter. So long as you were Detroit, he had your back.

Life got hard after college. He dreamed of being a veterinarian but didn't get accepted into the school of veterinary medicine and work in the city's animal shelters didn't pay well. He was perhaps too sensitive for this world. When the World Trade towers fell, like a piece of sewage my son was flushed into war like so many sons. He died by friendly fire as he cradled the head of a bleeding five year old Afghan boy on the battlefield.



CLOSE TO HOME

THE STATION

The winds have risen and leaves plaster themselves to the windows of the abandoned train station, like advancing armies. I've come here to disappear. I long to sit with my back against the past and to see and so to go out against new things like air in a breeze. I toss back a shot of whiskey. It burns my throat. I take another, and another.

To disappear. To curse the river of time and its relentless rush forward before allowing its currents to pull me under, succumbing to the same currents that are taking my city and that took my son. How many more like my son are out there, lost and looking for a way?

Amidst the shadows I see my son. Take my hand he mouths. I reach out and think I hear his voice. Come home, come home papa. The King and his people never gave up. Broke back, broke faith, broke hope, but no broken covenant with courage. I put the cap back on the bottle. God it's hard. An only life, it's all we've got; to climb free of our wrongs can take so long, if ever. I stand and I curse aloud, shaking my fist. My son lives in me now, only in me. I must keep on. The shadows are empty again. I stand, crying. Yes, yes, you can go now. Good-bye...good-bye...I will always wait for you, soldier, stranger, son, my friend, my little boy, my heart.

## TAKING HEART

*By Marcy O'Hara*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN MEMOIR, 2013

WHEN MY DAUGHTER was three, she'd already chosen her career path.

She had a pint-sized, royal blue plastic doctor's kit, complete with all the requisite medical gear—including a stethoscope, thermometer, blood pressure monitor, Band-Aids and a white plastic cast she could snap on to any willing young patient.

Her doctor's kit was even personalized. "Dr. Gabriella," it read. Along with the doctor's kit came a pale green doctor's coat, also personalized—all compliments of her doting Italian grandparents. Eventually, a sturdy plastic "crash cart" was added to her arsenal. She was ready for any medical emergency

When she was 13, crash carts were again prevalent—along with a wheelchair, an IV and a heart rate that had plunged to an erratic 28 beats per minute.

The summer before seventh grade, a confluence of circumstances and a genetic predisposition combined to create a “perfect storm.” My 12-year-old daughter Gabriella began losing weight rapidly. In just months, she would be battling anorexia and exercise bulimia, consuming 600 calories a day—and burning 600 calories a day.

I look back and wonder what could I have done, should I have done differently? *Where did I fail her as a mother?*

I made what in retrospect was a horrible decision. I decided Gabriella was old enough to spend the summer at home, without any camps or structured activities.

It is now a part of my “I Should be Fired as a Mother” file. I think most mothers on the planet can relate. Our precious new charges enter the world and, despite the amount of preparation we undertake—prenatal classes, books like “What to Expect When You’re Expecting,” and sage advice (frequently unsolicited) from grizzled veterans of the motherhood tribe—we are unprepared and overwhelmed. We make mistakes. We mean well, but sometimes behave badly. We love fiercely—but oftentimes discover that it is simply not enough.

I decided that Gabriella could ease into her mornings, hang with neighborhood friends, and formulate plans as the long, lazy days of summer unfolded.

She loved the idea. I remember discussing it with her one Saturday afternoon as a big pot of marinara sauce simmered on the stove. She was busy spritzing her salad with a few squirts of a new fat-free salad dressing she had recently discovered at the grocery store. I glanced across the kitchen at my girl, amazed at how she was growing so tall and strong. She looked up from her task at hand, chocolate brown eyes shining, and beamed. “Mom, I’m gonna’ have the best summer ever! I’m gonna’ get really good on my violin, work on at least five badges for Girl Scouts, sleep in and just do whatever I feel like! Plus, Rudy will be so happy to have

someone home with him all day. It's gonna be so great."

I'd save money, she'd have newfound freedom and unbridled summer fun, and our aging Dalmatian would not be alone every workday. It seemed like a win-win" all around. She was, after all, practically a teenager.

I now know that it was a deplorable decision. I look back and realize that in fact she was *just a girl*, a girl on the verge of teendom and *so not ready* for it. She was too young, too emotionally immature to have a completely unstructured summer.

It's the dance we do as mothers. We lead our young along, at times completely sure and supremely confident that the steps we are taking are graceful and perfectly timed. Then, a day passes and instantaneously, it seems, we are knocked on our feet. We slip up, stumble and lose our rhythm, paralyzed with uncertainty and utterly devoid of confidence.

With the onset of her adolescence, the easy grace of our relationship inevitably changed. Her moods became as mercurial as an unexpected summer thunderstorm. Her sunny smile gave way to a sullen scowl. She'd retreat to her room for hours on end, door resolutely closed and her hand-drawn "keep out" sign prominently posted. And then, the storm would pass and she would emerge, back to her usual sweet self.

As her sixth-grade year was winding down, Gabriella was becoming increasingly more disciplined about exercising. She'd head out after school to shoot hoops—hundreds of hoops—in our front yard. And jog around and around and around the perimeter of our house. She was looking great; slimmed down but strong and athletic-looking. The compliments started coming with greater frequency, and she loved hearing them. (Who wouldn't?)

Her newfound discipline and slimmed-down body were doing wonders for her self-esteem. I thought it was all good.

As our summer plans took shape, all seemed well with the world. Gabriella seemed generally happy, excited for the school year to end and ready to ease into a gloriously relaxing, unstructured summer.

The weeks passed and summer finally arrived. I was working full-time at the corporate offices of an outdoor retailer in Bellevue, Washington, and would leave before she'd arise and arrive home in the early evening. Her dad, too, worked all day—so she and Rudy had the house to themselves. Things seemed to be going okay.

In reality, things were most definitely not okay. Gabriella continued losing weight, exercising and paying close attention to everything she put in her mouth—which wasn't much. She became a rabid gum chewer. She began voraciously reading cooking magazines and websites, and checking out healthy cookbooks at the library.

All that glorious free summer time had also opened up a window for a dangerous intruder—"Ed." It was a voice in her head, one that said "You're so fat. You're so ugly. You're such a disgusting pig. If you eat that you'll be sorry." That evil voice—the one that many others who fall into the clutches of an eating disorder had nicknamed Ed for "eating disorder"—grew stronger as the summer progressed. Ed took up residence inside Gabriella's brain, and in short order reigned supreme.

If you've ever known someone in the clutches of anorexia, you know what I mean when I say they have a certain look in their eyes. It's a terrifyingly haunted look—and by early September, it's what I saw when I looked into my girl's eyes.

Throughout the previous year—her last year of elementary school—her petite and fit teacher had made it a point to focus on healthy eating and exercise habits. She taught the students in her sixth grade class how to read nutrition labels. She started a "walking club," which Gabriella enthusiastically joined.

Gabriella became more and more into healthy eating. We'd meander through the aisles of Safeway, and she'd study the nutrition facts on everything I purchased. Lean Cuisine and Progresso Light soup replaced items like Cheezits and cookies 'n cream ice cream. She loved imparting her newfound wisdom upon me. "Now look here, Mom," she'd say, patiently, her soulful brown eyes shining with insight. "This frozen dinner says 'light,' but look at the fat

content. Look how much salt it has—and over 400 calories! It's not healthy at all."

When she was young, one of my favorite go-to dinner options on a hectic weeknight were Marie Callender's chicken pot pies. She had loved them. Now, they were absolutely off-limits, with a shockingly high fat content. Our eyes had been opened, and there was no turning back. Dangerous, unhealthy choices lurked at every turn of the aisle.

As the leaves began to turn and the warm summer evenings began demanding a light jacket to ward off the chill, a truly evil intruder had taken over Gabriella's mind—and the end result was not good.

I came across the most recent copy of Newsweek at the grocery store, and stared at the cover. It was an emaciated girl, and the story focused on the rise of eating disorders in adolescence. I snatched it up and brought it home to read and share with Gabriella. I remember her sitting quietly in the green floral rocking chair in our living room, rocking oh-so-slowly and reading it carefully. I watched, surreptitiously, to see her reaction, and when she finished, I spoke. I couldn't suppress my accusatory tone.

"It sounds like you, doesn't it? You have an eating disorder. You know that, right?!"

She hesitated, and then stared back. A few tears plopped softly onto the face of the emaciated girl on the magazine cover. She looked up at me from the rocker, and whispered, barely audible: "I'm scared, Mommy." By now, we both knew that a terrifying journey was underway, and neither of us knew where it would lead. *We weren't the ones in control anymore.*

*Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia?* I've learned that she had a lot of, what one expert calls them, "landmines"—being "Type A," marital discord, developing early, a family history of mental illness or eating disorders, and the death of a family member or pet.

Throughout her school years, she'd always pushed herself (a good thing), and usually earned straight A's. When she'd fall short,

no one was harder on Gabriella than Gabriella.

The marital discord, I know now, contributed greatly to her illness. Her dad and I were having problems before she was even born. I should have left when she was a toddler, but I was not strong enough. I left for a year when she was four, but we reconciled and tried again. That's what you do when you have kids, right? You try to work it out for the sake of the children.

We were coexisting on the path of least resistance, and our only child was caught in the middle. The bickering, the barbs, the tension: they had all been there throughout her life, but it was getting worse. I was seriously thinking of leaving again, this time for good.

*Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia?* When she was about four, shortly after the separation, I was watching *Seinfeld* one evening and she wandered by. It was an episode with an actor who was a "little person." She stopped in her tracks and stared, transfixed, at the TV. "Why is that man so short?" she asked. "Oh, he's a midget," I replied, reverting back to the terminology I had grown up with and had not yet realized was politically incorrect. "I want to be a midget when I grow up!" she exclaimed.

I laughed, hard. She was supremely amusing, I thought, as I explained that it's not something you can choose to be. You are born that way. Months later, I was no longer laughing. She continued to grow, as 4-year-olds do, and did not like it at all. In fact, she'd fly into fits of hysteria when things would no longer fit or if her shoes weren't tied to a precise tightness that would constantly elude me.

I remember choosing a new pink and purple floral dress I had recently purchased, slipping it over her head and zipping it up. She stood in front of the mirror and looked, horrified. "I'm so biiiiig!" she wailed. Her obsession with staying small seemed more than just a phase, yet her pediatrician assured me that it was nothing at all to worry about. It continued for almost a year.

I look back now and realize that my mother's intuition was correct. Not wanting to grow—and being obsessed with it for an extended period of time—was a definite issue. Now I know it was related to the stress of the separation, and wish that I had found a

good therapist for her—and me.

Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia? She had developed early, and had absolutely hated it. (They say with the hormones in chicken and milk, girls are developing earlier. Or maybe it was just genetics.)

I remember a day when she was in second grade. She and a friend from class accompanied me to Safeway to pick some things up for dinner. I was loading the cart with a few essentials, and the girls wandered around the corner to choose some yogurt snacks. I ended up behind two scruffy 30-something construction workers. As they walked past the two giggling girls, I watched. The two men looked them over from head to toe, and then back up again. Their eyes lingered too long on their 7-year-old chests. “Look at the little girrrlls!” one murmured, and let out a low chuckle. The other one smiled broadly, and they sauntered on.

I wanted to take my cart and mow them both over. I felt sick, scared and utterly disgusted. They had been leering at the girls, and there was nothing I could do about it. In time, she would notice those looks, too—way before she should have to.

By fourth grade, Gabriella’s breasts were developing, and she became increasingly self-conscious. She’d hunch her shoulders over and wear sports bras, baggy shirts and sweaters.

In fifth grade, her 20-something cousin was getting married, and she was in the wedding. By now she was a bit plump but exquisitely beautiful. She didn’t see it that way. The junior bridesmaid’s dress was strapless and form fitting at the chest, and the whole process of getting fitted became a drama-filled ordeal. She abhorred how she looked, and nothing we said or did would change that.

*Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia?* Rudolph Valentino, our handsome aging Dalmatian who we had welcomed into the family a year before Gabriella’s debut in 1992, died in late July of that fateful summer before 7th grade.

I’d been attempting to prepare for his death for a few years, and had been trying to prepare her, too. We’d had him for 14 years by then, a long time for a big Dalmatian. He was crotchety and ar-



thritic, but still capable of absconding a loaf of bread and stick of butter off the kitchen counter and scurrying out the almost-too-tight dog door to wolf it down in a few bites.

Gabriella was home with him that July day, and called me at work. “Mom, something’s wrong with Rudy! He can’t get up. He’s just lying on the bathroom rug. I brought the fan in put it on and gave him a bowl of water—but he won’t get up.”

My heart sank, but I tried to remain calm. “Okay, honey. Don’t worry. I’ll come home and take him to the vet. You just go over to Aunt ReRe’s house and have fun. Don’t worry! It will be okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. He had broken his back, probably from the wear and tear of squeezing his old, overweight body through the dog door. I didn’t know that yet, but I did know that I couldn’t possibly move him. He probably weighed at least 85 pounds, and was obviously injured. After a rash of calls to various veterinarians, I finally found one that would come to our house. An hour later, my husband finally arrived, the doctor administered the shot that stopped his heart—and just like that, Rudy was gone.

We had a funeral in the back yard. Drew, Miles Shannon and Kristi—friends from the neighborhood—joined in. Afterwards, Gabriella sat with me on my bed. We weren’t cried out yet, not by any means. “I’m sad about Nana, but I didn’t see her that much. Rudy was here every day of my life.” I told her it was okay, that Nana (my mother) would understand. She seemed to believe me, and in time fell fast asleep.

Around midnight, after finally drifting off to sleep myself, I awoke with a start. What was the sound I was hearing, a sound unlike any I’d heard before? It was loud-pitched, hysterical, terrifying...screaming mixed with sobbing. It was coming from Gabriella’s room. I rushed in and turned on the bedside lamp. She was utterly inconsolable. Her cries grew louder, snot pouring down her face and dripping onto her cheerful, flower-festooned pillowcase.

I pulled back the comforter, crawled into bed, wrapped her in my arms and gently stroked her soft curls. I’d never heard such depths of sorrow emanating from my girl. This was unbridled, gut-

wrenching grief. “I...I...I just wanna go in the backyard, dig Rudy up and give him a big hug!” she cried.

*Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia?* She’d always been bigger rather than smaller, tall...strong and beautiful. She’s half O’Hara, after all, which means she’s certainly not and will never be petite. (To illustrate, I’m the shortest of the eight O’Haras, and I’m almost 5’8”.)

When Rudy died that July, she weighed 165 and was about 5’5”. By October of that same year, she was down to the low 120s. By the following summer—she hit her lowest weight ever—102.

Her curly chestnut locks were a distant memory. So were her breasts, her period—and her sturdy, beautiful body.

By October, she was clearly anorexic. Her size 16½ jeans had been replaced by size 4s. Her hands were blue, and she was freezing all the time, no matter how many layers she’d put on. That’s what happens when you rapidly lose body fat. (I found out later that by this time she was eating 600 calories a day and burning 600 calories.)

Despite the irrefutable facts, it took five more months for her to be officially declared “medically unstable”—which meant her heart rate had plunged under 30 beats per minute. Insurance companies have their charts and graphs, and based on their calculations, Gabriella was not yet at a dangerous weight. Finally, our family doctor made the call, and advised us to immediately head to Seattle Children’s emergency room. It was now February; midway through Gabriella’s seventh grade-year.

On Valentine’s Day, we were in the midst of a weeklong stay at Children’s. Her now 80-something Italian grandparents came to visit, and took her for a short stroll around the hospital in her wheelchair.

I remember thinking how wrong it all seemed; her preteen heart too weak for any activity while her elderly grandparents wheeled her around the hospital grounds.

In between forced feedings—three meals and three snacks—and the long, agonizing days and nights sitting by her bedside, witness-

ing the excruciating pain of her refeeding process, I recalled the first time I'd heard her heart beat. I was 32 years old, a few months pregnant and terrified at the prospect of motherhood. The strong, steady drumbeat deep within me was irrefutable proof of another burgeoning life within me.

Where had it all gone wrong? How did we end up here witnessing a life fading away? *My only child's life?*

Those agonizing days and nights at Children's Hospital were followed by many years of medical appointments, nutritional counseling and intensive therapy. In time, and because she truly wanted to recover, she did.

From those therapy sessions, I discovered the root of her "not wanting to grow" phase. She saw how everyone loved the babies and little kids and daycare, and she didn't think anyone would love her if she was big.

I also faced this harsh truth: I was not there enough for her during that period, neither physically nor emotionally. I was so wrapped up in my own turmoil and depression, unhappy at home and at work, immersing myself in spinning and biking and after-work happy hours—trying to escape but lacking the courage to make it happen.

Over the past few years, I've also learned of debilitating anxiety disorders and depression that had plagued other family members from earlier generations—and a newly revealed story of a relative who had struggled with an eating disorder as a young teen.

Lately, I've been thinking about yet another potential factor that demands further research. I was two weeks' pregnant when the L.A. riots erupted. The day after the verdicts was the most terrifying day of my life—and the ensuing months were some of the most stressful I'd ever experienced. I literally had this thought every day as I cruised down the freeway on my way to work: "Today is the day I'm going to get shot in the head." Did the stress that I experienced during my entire pregnancy take a toll on Gabriella, too?

*Why did Gabriella get anorexia and exercise bulimia?* So many factors contributed to her disorder, and I will probably never know

for sure. But all those signs—all those landmines—were hiding in plain sight. So for others, in time, our hope is that this story may help.

Soon after Gabriella's release from the hospital, her dad and I divorced. She slowly embarked on the road to recovery, with intensive therapy, medical monitoring and nutritional guidance. In time, she fell in love with a boy who adored her—just the way she was—and kicked Ed to the curb. She dove into her high school scholastics, survived the social swirl and intense scrutiny that defines those teenage years and is now thriving in college. She's at a healthy weight, working out at a reasonable pace, and learning to manage the stresses of daily life.

And yet, I remain ever-vigilant—and always will. I now know what can happen, in a heartbeat.

## HOT AND SOUR

*By Yvonne Mark*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2013

**T**HIS YEAR I dodged Thanksgiving by citing extensive work obligations, Christmas with a trip to California, and New Year's because of a conveniently-timed cold. But Chinese New Year was non-negotiable. I was summoned to my ancestral home in Richmond, British Columbia.

When I complained to Len, instead of sympathizing, he asked why he'd never gotten to share in this annual feast and invited himself without delay. Len and I met at a cooking class ages ago, when we were both in our early twenties, and consuming food together was a significant aspect of our friendship. More importantly, he would be my ally.

“What’s the big deal about seeing your family, Suzie Q?” Len asked as the car he was driving nosed its way north on I-5, away from Seattle.

“It’s a little known fact that family dinners are a method of oppression.”

“W-W-What?”

“Yep, it’s a tactic to wear people down. Other families have skirmishes or outright wars. Our family specializes in tests of patience.”

“You’re not making any sense, Sue. What is it you don’t like?”

I said, “It’s always the same old thing. It’s like we’re following a script or something. The only thing that changes is what we’re eating.”

“So tell me what’s going to happen.”

“You’ll see.”

“Are you going to make the big announcement about quitting your job and going back to school?”

“Absolutely not. Don’t you say anything either. Try not to leak any intel about me whatsoever.”

“Paranoid much?”

“Shut up.”

Stepping into Mike and Georgia’s house, I was met by my mother. “I thought you were arriving an hour ago.”

“It took 45 minutes to cross the Canadian border,” I said in English.

“Oh? When I looked at the website it said 20 minutes.”

“I had to stop at the Chinese grocery store to pick up a few things.”

Len strolled in at that moment, having been delayed by a phone call, and my mother switched on her fluttery hostess persona. “Oh hello! How are you?” she said in English. Her words marched out precisely as if timed by a metronome. “You Len, right? Sue’s friend?”

“Mom, I think you’ve met Len before. We all went out for dim sum when you came to Seattle a few years ago. And no, he’s not my

boyfriend.”

After a too long pause, my mother let out a hiccup-sounding laugh.

I held up one of the heavy grocery bags, the plastic handles cutting into my fingers. “I’m going to make some noodles.” This was a lie. The cooking I liked best involved pushing buttons on the microwave. Len, who continued honing his skills after the cooking class, would make the noodles. It would be considered horribly rude if I let Georgia in her delicate state bear the responsibility of cooking all the dishes.

“Noodles already done!” said my mother.

“Uhhh...Okay? I also bought mustard greens. Shall I make those?”

“I suppose,” my mother said. “Your dad getting Angelica from the airport.”

Len sidled up to me and whispered, “You want to create a diversion for your mother so I can cook the vegetables?”

“I think I’ll start it. I’ll call you when I need you.”

Walking into the kitchen, I was met with a soup of smells: the piquant high notes of ginger, the earthiness of fermented black beans, the tang of garlic, and a trace of something fishy. My sister-in-law’s typically spotless kitchen was cluttered with the detritus of a cooking marathon. There were cooking utensils strewn on the countertop, the decapitated tops of carrots piled on a damp cutting board, and an eviscerated fish in the sink.

“Have you been eating sushi?” my mother asked Georgia in Chinese as she shut the refrigerator door.

“Of course not! I’m pregnant.”

“There’s a takeout container from Ajisai in the refrigerator.”

“We were there last night. But I ate cooked stuff.”

My mother strode to the stove where I was standing. “Is that all you bought?” She peered over my shoulder as I tossed mustard greens into a pot of boiling water. “Do you think that’s enough?” It was anathema to run out of food for New Year’s.

“How’re you feeling, Mom? Are the shingles pretty bad still?” I

asked.

“Better, not as bothersome, maybe even almost gone... In fact we could have had the dinner at our place, the way we do every year.” She rubbed the outer portion of her right leg where the shingles lesions had been. “Georgia, I shouldn’t have let you talk me into hosting this dinner.”

“No, Mom! You should take it easy. And you know I love having people over.” Georgia looked up at me, pausing from her task of arranging mandarin oranges on a platter with chocolate coins wrapped in gold foil. “I made everything from scratch, including the candied lotus seed and sesame seed cookies.”

I said, “It’s nice that you’ve got time to do that.”

“Isn’t it? Now I can really concentrate on growing the baby.”

“Sue, don’t cook those greens for so long. They’ll be bitter,” said my mother. Her hand was raised, as if she wanted to wrestle the chopsticks from my inexperienced hand and rescue the greens from the pot. “I thought you said you were cooking more now.”

My brother, Mike, sauntered into the kitchen before my mother finished speaking. Our eyes met. “Hi Sue! You know I care.”

I clamped my teeth together to keep the smile from forming. From childhood our catchphrase to describe our mother was, “I criticize because I care.” Whenever she speared one of us with a critical comment, the other would say “Ibic” or merely “I care” to deliver some levity into the situation.

“Mike, you look great!” said my mother. “You stopped drinking Coke like I told you. Am I right? Feel like a new person, right? Coke is loaded with toxins.”

I grinned at Mike and said, “You’ve definitely got that pregnancy glow.” The last time I visited my brother showed me where he hid the soda when my mother was around.

The front door slammed and my father called out, “Guess who’s here!”

My mother gave an exclamation and hurried out of the kitchen to greet Angelica, back from London. What was originally a summer stint at the BBC between her second and third year at McGill



University had stretched into a “gap year” traveling all over Europe.

“Time to eat!” my mother said as she hustled back into the kitchen. “Take the fish out of the steamer!”

“But I haven’t stir fried the mustard greens with garlic and ginger,” I objected. Or more accurately, Len hadn’t had a chance to stir fry them.

“Just serve it as is,” said my mother. “Angelica’s here. Everything else is ready. Let’s eat while it’s still hot.”

We converged on the dining room. The actual table top was hidden by the number of plates piled on its surface. My mother had made her signature Chinese New Year dishes: a whole steamed chicken with feet and head intact on a bed of baby boy chok, a tureen brimming over with a soup, plump white dumplings almost bursting with filling, and a steamed complete fish covered with scallions and ginger. Georgia had made white daikon cakes, spicy stir-fried shrimp, noodles with baby spinach and chicken, barbecued duck and a multi-colored vegetable dish containing grass mushrooms, uniformly round carrot slices, snow peas, red peppers, and sea cucumber. Georgia’s food was ready for a photo shoot: the sauces pooled in perfect ovals, the contents arranged on the plates for maximum negative spacing, and all garnished with carved carrots or shaved radishes made to look like flowers.

I edged my small plate of unadorned, unseasoned mustard greens onto the table.

My mother and father sat opposite to each other. I took the seat next to my dad but my mother said, “No Sue. I want you to sit here, next to me.”

Without saying a word, I moved to the other chair.

“What is this?” asked Len, poking at the soup bowl in front of him with his chopstick. Bobbing in the liquid were black cloud ear mushrooms, yellow-orange dried oysters which always made me think of a duck bill, and black fungus which resembled black hair.

I explained what each ingredient was and added, “Everything has significance at this meal. Dried oysters stand for success in

business. Black fungus in Chinese sounds like the words for prosperity.”

“Is that why so many Chinese people are rich?” said Len. “Maybe I need to eat more symbolically.”

“Not everything about money,” my mother interjected. “The fish is whole. Means good start, good end to year. Chinese word for fish, yeuw, sounds like word for plenty. Long noodles stand for long life.”

“The lotus seeds represent lots of sons,” put in Mike. “The Chinese love their sons.”

“Daughters are good too,” said my dad with a smile at Angelica, then at me.

Len pointed at the mustard greens. “What’s that stand for?”

“I didn’t break any of the stems,” I said, “so it’s to wish my parents a long life.”

Len let out a low whistle. “I’m impressed that you know all this, Sue! You’re the most unChinese Chinese person I’ve ever met. How come you never know what to order when we go for dim sum?”

“Wait, I forgot one thing!” said my mother and she rushed back into the kitchen. When she returned, she was carrying a bowl of steaming soup which she placed in front of Len. “Sue said you like hot and sour soup. I make just for you.”

Len looked at my mother for a few moments without speaking and then said, “Thank you. That’s very kind of you. Hot and sour soup is my favorite.” He took a small sip from his spoon and closed his eyes. “Wow. This is the best I’ve ever tasted. I’ve tried to make it myself but it always seems to be missing something.”

“After dinner, I tell you how to make,” said my mother.

I’d never seen Len smile so widely. “That’d be awesome.”

“So what’s going on in London?” I asked Angelica.

“I’m working with a documentary filmmaker right now. I’m learning a lot.”

“For free?”

“I earned a stipend last summer. This is part of my education,

just not in a classroom. You wouldn't expect someone to pay you to go to school, would you?"

"Angelica's always been a bit unconventional," said my father as he gazed at her with his head cocked to one side.

"You should have done a gap year, Sue," said Angelica. "You would have loved it."

"Not all of us get the same opportunities," I answered. Mike and I had taken extra credits every semester in university and our summers were packed with internships and part-time jobs. "Some of us had student loans."

"Mom and Dad paid those off for you!"

"Not until we graduated. We didn't know they were going to pay it off while we were in school." They later said that we wouldn't have valued our education otherwise.

"Well, I made my own opportunity. I'm not like you and Mike. I didn't know what I wanted to do after high school. I need to do some exploring."

I stole a glance at Mike to see his reaction but he seemed intent on eating his chicken. In his last year of high school, my parents had lobbied for engineering, eventually persuading him to give up the idea of architecture. Two years later when it was my time, my mother turned every conversation into a campaign for accounting.

"There's no way you can make a living as an illustrator," she said. "Your drawings are beautiful but are they commercial enough? You never have to worry about that if you're working with numbers. You can always sketch as a hobby."

"When are you returning to London?" Len asked.

"Next Wednesday," responded Angelica.

"What?" My mother's head jerked to the left to look at Angelica.

Angelica chewed her food and swallowed before she smiled at my mother. "Your travel agent forgot to buy me a return ticket to London. I emailed you but you never answered. It must have gotten lost in cyberspace."

"You can't buy a return ticket now. It'll cost a small fortune."

"I know. That's why I bought it a couple of months ago when I

realized what happened.”

My mother dropped her gaze on her food. After a moment, she said, “I know you want to see Europe. But better wait until you graduate. Older is better.”

“I don’t want to wait until I’m older. Stop worrying Mom! Channel some of your worrying energy into a hobby.”

“No time for hobbies with you three around!” My mother’s voice rose, drawing a sidelong glance from Len.

“We’re not around much anymore. You have time now. Go with dad and mentor some kids at the elementary school.”

A chilly hush descended over the table and we all ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Every single dish is so tasty!” said Len to my mother and Georgia. “You’ve got so many different flavors!”

“Thank you,” said my mother.

Len nudged me. “Way, way better than that place we used to go to after our climbing nights.”

My mother stared at Len. “Sue goes climbing?”

“It’s at a climbing gym,” I cut in before Len could answer. “There’s six of us who go regularly.”

My mother’s face became very still. “So dangerous?”

“No, it’s not. It’s a controlled environment.”

“Why not do something safer? Like gardening.”

“Gardening? I live in an apartment!”

“Pea patch. Grow vegetables. Tastes so good when you grow yourself. Help your cooking too.”

There was pressure building in my chest, growing, expanding, filling me. I stood straight up with chopsticks still in hand, almost knocking over the chair and mumbled, “I have to get something to drink.”

I punched at the swinging door to the kitchen and went immediately to the corner cupboard. Reaching around the 50 pound bag of rice, my hand felt for the neat stack of soda cans behind it. I snapped one open and it sprayed my face. I tipped it back and poured it straight down my throat.

The door swung open and my mother advanced towards me.

"You spend a lot of time with him?" Her voice was low: words meant only for my ears.

"We hang out," I said, looking at the ceiling.

"Most of the time?"

"Sometimes."

"How are you going to meet someone—"

"Don't start this again. There's nothing wrong with being single."

"Of course there's nothing wrong with being single. But—"

"Stop! You got your eighteen years to micromanage me. Lay off!"

"You're thirty-one but you live like you're twenty-one and it's time—"

"You don't know how I live!" I snapped. "If I were twenty-one, I'd be meandering through Europe on your tab making a documentary film. Don't lecture me on how I ought to live."

I spun on my heel and stormed out of the kitchen, using the other doorway to avoid the dining room and then out the front door. There were tiny snowflakes drifting down from the sky. The brisk night's air filled my lungs with pin pricks of cold, as if the snowflake edges were lodging inside me. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and kicked a stone by the edge of the garden bed on my way to the car then stopped short. We had driven Len's car up and I didn't have the car keys.

After quick draw of breath, I stomped to the sidewalk and continued on, without any destination in mind. I swung at random pine tree branches and kicked bushes that happened to fall somewhat close to my feet. When the chill ate through my shirt and was too much, I turned and trudged back.

Mike was leaning against the railing on the stairs of the porch, a bottle of Tsingtao in his hand. As I drew closer, he faced me and held the bottle out. I raised it to my lips and gave it a quick tip. We stood without talking for a few minutes. I handed the bottle back to him. He tilted his head and took a swig.

"Fortified?" Mike asked.

"Icbic," I said with a slight nod of my head.

"Icbic," replied Mike.

He held the door open for me as I walked inside.

"We're having dessert downstairs and Dad's agreed to play that dance game on the Kinect. You don't wanna miss that."

"Let me wash my hands first."

I slid my feet in the direction of the kitchen. As I got closer, my mother and Len's voices reached me.

"It's a nice tradition how your whole family comes together for Chinese New Year," Len was saying.

I was glad I wasn't in the room. I might have let loose a sarcastic comment.

Len went on, "My mom died when I was eleven and my dad was never much into celebrating holidays after that. We always joined another family for their Christmas dinner so he wouldn't have to fake his own holiday cheer. We could borrow another family's happiness."

My steps slowed. I had never heard that story from Len before.

"My mother, she too, died too young," my mother said. "Everyone tell me I'm lucky. My mother passed on when I was sixteen, not six. But everyday I wish she was here. She was so wise. And I didn't hear all she had to say."

I stopped in the doorway of the kitchen. My mother was sitting on a stool by the island. Her hair, styled in the same perm she'd had since I was ten, was threaded with gray and her whole body seemed curled into itself, like a brittle autumn leaf. She massaged the outer area of her leg, her hand rubbing the area over and over again.

I wondered what it felt like. Did it sting with the ferocity of a hundred bee stings? Or was it the scalding, red hot pain of a burn? Or had time worn it down to a dull ache?

I reached out a hand towards my mother. "Should we go downstairs for dessert?" I said.

## SEE ME

*By Annmarie LoGerfo*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION II, 2013

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION I, 2009

**T**HE STRUGGLING OR better yet, hungrily thin, writer bears romantic appeal. When you're young, you are full of ideas which haven't aged or bloated beyond recognition, still enlivened until the wee hours by cheap red wine and winding conversations with equally tortured artist friends. Bags under your eyes, middle-aged spread and an inability to work late at night because you can't stay up later than your own child, not so charming.

\* \* \*

"But think," my friend says, the one four months younger than me,

“how much smarter we are than these younger writers. How much we *bring to the table*.” Recently, I needed to ask my son to fetch me something from the dishwasher. I couldn’t remember the name of the desired utensil. I was forced to resort to, “Would you hand me one of those scoopy-type things you use for eating cereal?” I’m forty-five. How does this help me as a writer, to forget the words I learned as an infant?

\* \* \*

Whenever a debut novel is lauded in the New York Review of Books or the Wall Street Journal or, quite after the fact, the Seattle Times Arts & Leisure Sunday section, I scan first for the age of the author. It rarely brings any insight, just a fizzling sort of heartburn. Tea Albright, Joshua Ferris, Junot Diaz. I could hardly bear the New Yorker’s “Twenty Under Forty” issue. Carson McCullers was twenty-three when she wrote *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Yet under thirty for *Member of the Wedding*. Yes, I know she died a few years later, but still.

\* \* \*

Secret confession, I felt a moment of gloating, no not that ugly, but relief, that ZZ Packer is struggling to write her first novel, after the success of her brilliant short story collection, *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere*. I love ZZ Packer. I’m at war with the *schadenfreude*. Don’t ask me for the English equivalent. Remember? I can’t recall the word for spoon.

\* \* \*

In her collection of essays, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, Nora Ephron complains, “Every so often I read a book about age, and whoever’s writing it says it’s great to be old. It’s great to be wise and sage and mellow; it’s great to be at the point where you understand just



what matters in life. I can't stand people who say things like this. What can they be thinking? Don't they have necks?"

Nora Ephron recently died. I was saddened to read of her passing, more so than I had expected as she's not one of my favorite authors. But might I get morbid here? This body she railed against has been reduced to ashes or consumed by bacteria and insects. Was the time she spent bemoaning the neck circles wasted? Should she have cherished every moment, celebrated every tree ring rising to her chin? Is that our obligation for the privilege of aging?

\* \* \*

A number of years ago, on a birthday trip to Mexico with friends of my husband's, I was floored by the red bikini worn by the oldest of the wives. She really did look great, considering she was sixty. "Fantastic!" I gushed. "Able to wear a bikini, at your age." Not the most elegant of compliments, but honest.

"I'm so sick of that," she hissed. "People are always telling me I look good for my age. What's that supposed to mean anyway? Good for your age. I just want to look good, period."

"Please, woman," I had thought but naturally did not say. "You don't look like a hot twenty-something, even if you look *good for your age*." Poor thing, with that unrealistic idea of how the world works. Now I know just what she meant.

\* \* \*

Fine, you can't have it all, but at one time, I had enough. At one time, I was still young, still successful, still seen. I didn't have to look up the ages of my fellow men and women, to see who had surpassed me ten-fold at twenty years my junior. I was the youngest vice-president of a fifty-billion dollar company. I could carry off skirts barely longer than my suit-jackets. When people found out my daughter's age, I was asked whether I had given birth in kindergarten. People tend to claim they took those times for granted,

didn't know what they had. But I did know. And I loved it.

\* \* \*

In a magazine interview, actress Frances McDormand exalts the benefits of turning forty. Now she doesn't need to think about her appearance any more, now she is invisible. How freeing, she chortles, that no one looks at women over forty. What if she weren't married to one of the Cohen brothers? What if she weren't an Oscar-winning actress, photographed and interviewed and watched, yes watched for hours with each new play or movie. Maybe it's not so delightful to be unseen, when being visible has never been a burden to you.

\* \* \*

I'm flying United to San Francisco, he's Virgin Atlantic. His flight doesn't take off for another hour, mine is in fifteen minutes and we are in the same multi-coiled security line, way in the back. Another two checkpoints have just been closed because the TSA part-timers have ended their shift. If you don't make your flight, he offers, just take my arm and fly with me. Cute, I think, as one does when being hit on by an old man, especially a gentleman as he is, wearing a cashmere sweater under his sports jacket, light wool slacks. Indian, with that particular British accent of the educated class. As we part to find benches where we can slip back on our shoes, he turns and extols, "One last chance to take my arm." I laughingly tell him my flight change would be hard to explain to my husband. How delightful, this elderly man's propositions. Watching him collect his bags, I realize he's my age.

\* \* \*

CLOSE TO HOME

This happened to my friend last fall. He wasn't feeling well after dinner Friday night and checked in to the local hospital. Saturday he was dead. He was away from home, in a small town, deposing a witness in a lawsuit. He wouldn't be litigating much longer, regardless. He'd just won an election. He was to be sworn in as a judge in three months, the career he had sought for years, the reason he went to law school in the first place. This should make me grateful for every hour, every minute that my heart still beats. Instead it makes me afraid. Heart, just keep churning that oxygen-laden blood long enough for me to get that mess of a novel edited, so that no one can see where I really was when I died.

\* \* \*

I don't want to become invisible. I'm not ready to disappear.

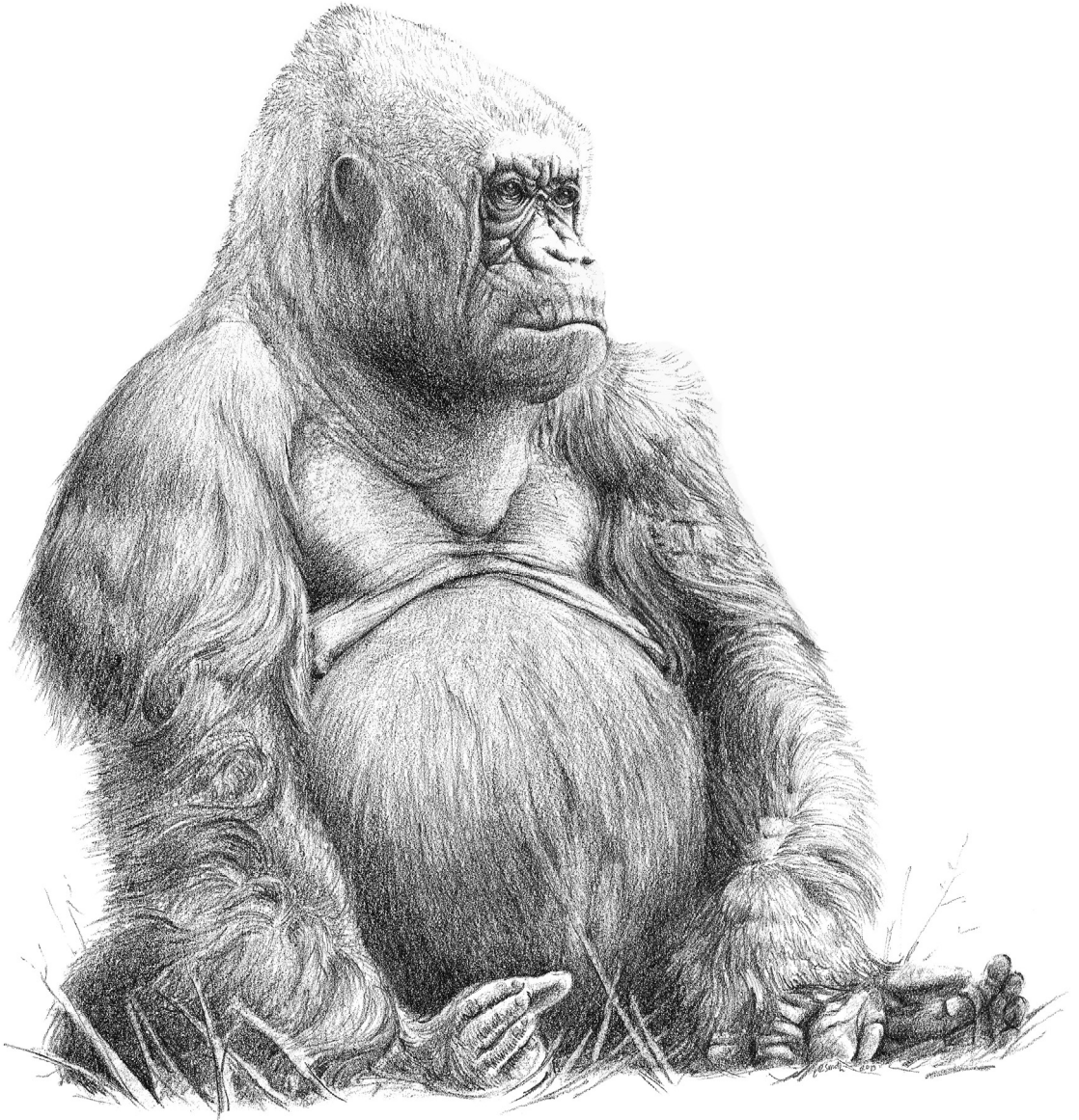
STARGAZER BY ELIZABETH SMITH  
*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*



# 2 *Into Other Realms*

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*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*







## THIS IS WILDERNESS

*By Ethan Yarbrough*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2013

“**A** GAIN,” MY BROTHER says, “you cannot bury a dead horse. Just carry the box. Just do like I asked.” And after a pause he adds, “for once.”

“I do what you ask all the time,” I say.

“I didn’t ask you to kill my horse.” He stands up, shrugs into his backpack and starts walking through the trees again.

“So we’re both done resting because you’re done resting?”

“You killed my horse. Carry the box.”

He is down the trail walking fast. “I told you I was sorry for that,” I call after him. He keeps walking away from me. I stand, wrestle my backpack over my shoulders, and stoop to lift the box

I've been sitting on. "I am sorry for that!" My voice falls at my feet in the dust and the spruce. I walk.

The box is heavy in my arms. I move it to one hip and carry it that way for a while. My arm burns with the effort. I shift it to the other hip. After a couple of switch-backs that arm is shot too and I can't walk right with the box hanging against my hip. I move it back into both hands and hang it in front of me. But then it bangs against my nuts.

"Is it dangerous to be carrying dynamite like this?" I ask.

"Don't bang it around too much you'll be fine."

I lift the box to my shoulder. I go OK like this a while but pretty soon my shoulder screams, my arm starts to shake. Sweat salts my eyes and they sting.

"I have to stop," I say.

"We already stopped."

"Gonna be sick."

John stops and turns back to look at me. "You are out of shape."

"I'm carrying a fifty pound box up a mountain. Plus a backpack. Are you punishing me?"

I put the box on the ground and sit down on top of it again. I wipe my sleeve across my forehead to dry the sweat and I wheeze. A biting fly buzzes my face.

"No kidding I think the altitude is getting me."

John takes a sip from his water bottle.

"Just six thousand feet," John says. "You think about yourself too much."

"I'm not thinking about myself. I'm explaining why I'm tired."

"I told you we had to move fast."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

"So are the grizzlies."

"There won't be grizzlies."

"Dead horse is grizzly food."

"Then why don't we just leave it?"

"Hiking trail. Hikers are grizzly food too. Let's go," John says. But he steps toward me when I stand and he takes hold of one end

of the box. “Little brother,” John says.

I take the other end of the box.

John walks in front. I walk behind. We walk with the box between us.

John wrote to me and asked me to come visit. I wasn’t in school and I wasn’t working and John never wrote to me. But this time he asked me to visit him so I did. But when I arrived, he loaded his horse with gear and we left his Forest Service ranger station heading for the back country. John had trail work to do and he wanted me to spend my visit helping him.

Now we lug past two deadfall logs we sawed through and cleared from the trail two days ago. Our feet make soft scuffing noises in the summer dust of the trail. Scoof-scoof. Somewhere up-slope through the trees, a woodpecker. Tunk. Catunk-catunk. The rest of this place is ancient quiet. The loudest sound—rasping and out of place—is my breathing as I try to keep pace with John tugging at the lead end of the box.

We pass our campsite from the night before. Our tent is still set up where we left it. I see the clearing and the small patch of dry grass where John staked the horse while he strung a hitching line between two trees and set up camp.

John checked the stake before he went into the tent for the night. I stayed up smoking beside the fire. “Pull the stake and clip him to the hitch line before you come to bed,” John said.

I forgot.

Then I remembered after I was already in my sleeping bag warm and drowsy. I decided it would be OK.

In the morning the horse was gone. “You fuck-up,” John said. “You fuck-up!” He ran up to the trail to look for tracks. He found them and he started jogging up the mountain. I looked out of the tent flap and wasn’t sure what I should do. I put on my boots and followed after him.

We found the horse two miles up the trail. Dead on the edge of a meadow.

A deadfall blocked the trail from the meadow and the horse had tried to get over it. But its halter snagged on a branch and the big animal had turned over on itself and either its neck had broken or it had choked to death or both. John cut the halter loose with his knife and the body slumped and slid to the ground on the meadow side of the log. John pocketed his knife and he squatted by the horse's head and reached to put a hand on its cheek.

I stepped toward him and he spoke to me without looking up.

"You go away from me," he said. "Now. Go. I don't care where."

He sat by the horse a while. When he got up he started walking down the mountain. I followed him all the way back to the ranger station.

Now we're back at the meadow and we have the dynamite.

A few flies pop around on the sides of the horse and in its nostrils. Just checking things out. Other than those few flies, the horse doesn't seem like a dead thing yet.

John whips at the flies and clears them away.

I put the box down beside the horse and I put a foot on the big round hip and push. It is like pushing a boulder. I almost push myself over backward.

"Don't do that. Take your foot off of him."

I stand quiet and put my hands in my pockets.

We drop our backpacks and John opens the box. Inside, lined up neat like sausages, are sticks of dynamite. I've never seen the real thing; I've only seen it in cartoons or movies. But there it is. I take a step back when I see it.

John pulls fuses and detonator cable from his backpack. He lays them beside the box. Then he pulls out a hatchet. He leans over the horse and swings the hatchet in a high arc and sinks it into the horse's neck.

"Shit," I say.

"Shut up."

He backs the hatchet out of the gash. The horse's flesh sucks and slurps at the bloody hatchet blade. John takes a side step down

the horse's body and sinks the hatchet in between two ribs. Then he's moving and swinging all around the horse, opening holes in its body: stomach, thigh, along the back, and then the neck again. With one final swing he buries the hatchet blade in the sandy soil beside the dynamite box.

He pulls out a handful of sticks and now works his way around the carcass fitting dynamite into the holes he's made.

"That seems like a lot," I say.

John keeps plugging the horse with dynamite.

"Is that too much?" I say.

All the holes are filled and the horse is a pin cushion. John goes back to the box and gets out more dynamite sticks. He uses the hatchet to dig a trench along the foreleg and another along the length of the back leg. He lines the trenches with dynamite and then hollows out a space under the horse's belly and slides a couple sticks under there.

"You're going to blow us up too," I say.

"Shut up. I said shut up. You can tell me how to do this when you know how to do something. Anything. Go scare the bears away."

"How do you know how to do this?"

"It's my job."

"When did this become your job?"

"When I grew up and stopped playing with myself. You should try it."

"It just seems like a lot is all I'm saying."

"We only get one shot," John says. "There can't be anything left. Nothing big."

John pulls one more stick out of the box and he walks over to his horse's head. He kneels down in front of its nose and he strokes it a few times. Then he folds back the horse's lip. The horse's yellow teeth are clenched in a death grimace, but John works the stick into the bit notch at the back of the jaw. When he lets go of the lip it curls around the dynamite stick and makes the horse look like a fat man with a cigar.

John starts fitting the fuses and tying them together with the

detonator cable. I squat by my pack. I open it and see my cigarettes. I think about smoking.

“Do you understand what a huge mess you’ve made?” John says. His hands are working fast with the cords. I’ve never seen anyone do this before, and it turns out my own brother is an expert.

“I’m sorry. You know?”

“You can be sorry and still not understand. I need you to understand.”

“Why? I do understand. What does it matter if I understand?”

“We’re going to detonate. There’s going to be horse all over this meadow. The trail’s going to have to be closed for at least a month while the animals come clear it away.”

“Bears?”

“You think I’m joking about that. It’s no joke. It’s serious. You don’t understand anything serious.”

“I know serious.”

“You’re the kind of guy who comes out here and gets eaten by a bear because you don’t understand what you’re getting into. This is wilderness. Bears are real in wilderness. We see idiots out here all the time who go off without knowing what they’re dealing with and then they need us to come out and rescue them.”

“I don’t need you to rescue me.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

“I can handle myself. You’re not the only one who’s ever gone hiking.”

“Which way is north?”

“I don’t have a compass.”

“You shouldn’t need one.”

I pull my cigarettes out of my backpack and stand up. “I’m going to have a smoke.” I turn to walk across the meadow.

“I’m not talking about hiking.” John says.

I turn back to him. “What *are* you talking about? You know, that’s a good point. Why don’t you just cut to it and tell me what you *are* talking about?”

“I’m talking about surviving.”

"I'm surviving fine."

"On Mom's money."

"She offered it."

"You begged for it and she doesn't know how to say no."

"You don't know."

"That's all she's got left from Dad. For the rest of her life. You need to take responsibility for yourself. He would say that too."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"I'm working."

"You're hiding in the woods."

"How are we from the same family?"

"I'm adopted," I say.

"I wouldn't be surprised," John says.

I walk off across the meadow with my cigarettes.

The meadow is sun-warmed and quiet. Long grasses baked brown whisper across my jeans as I walk. I find a sandy spot in the middle and sit down there and light up.

From across the meadow I watch John moving around the horse. The mountain looms out of the trees behind him and the blue sky above him is empty and forever. He looks alone and small and far away.

I smoke a couple and then I punch the butt out in the dust and I'm suddenly exhausted. My body aches from no sleep and the miles of walking up and down this mountain. I think I could lie down and sleep right here in the dirt and I look behind me to pick a spot to rest my head. But there in a patch of pressed down grass is a big pile of animal shit. Big animal shit. I jump to my feet, wide awake and buzzing now, and I hurry away from that spot back toward John and the horse.

John is squatting near the horse's back legs. He sweeps some large stones into a pile, scoops them into his arms and then stands.

"Put these in your backpack," he says.

I look at the stones in his arms and they are not stones. They are the horse's feet. Hooves. There are the sharp crags of chopped leg

bones and they dangle tendons John has cut through with his knife.

“What did you do? Jesus!”

“Calm down. Put these in your pack.”

“You cut off its feet.”

“These are projectiles in an explosion. They will kill you.”

“Why do you want to keep them?”

“I want the shoes. They’re hand-forged. I had them made and had him hot-shoed when we were in Mexico.”

“What does that mean?”

“That they’re special to me. That’s all you need to know. I’ll take them off later. Put them in your pack.”

I reach for my backpack and zip it open and hold it out to John. He dumps the horse’s feet into the pack and I zip it closed without looking.

“Ready?” John says.

The blast is an eye blink.

We’re down behind a rock maybe twenty yards away from the horse, the detonator cable trailing back from us up the slope to the animal. John has a little electronic detonator in his hand.

“Stay down,” he says. He presses the button and nothing. Long enough for the idea to flash in my mind that something went wrong. Then swoomp! A sand cloud in the air above us, and sifting down on us, shards of wood rattling in the branches and on the big rock and littering into our laps too.

And then falling horse meat. Wet slaps through the branches and heavy plops of red meat dropping all around us like someone spilled stew out of the sky.

John stands up and slaps himself clean of sand and wood fragments. He wipes his hands through his hair. I follow his lead and do the same thing. I find something in my shirt collar. A bone fragment. It still has pink flesh and some brown horse hair attached. I hold it out to John so he can see. He just nods and bends over at his waist and shakes his own collar clean. He starts rolling the detonator cable back up toward the horse and I follow.



Where the horse had been there is a crater and a fallen tree and a spray of red stretching out into the meadow and half a ribcage. Nothing more. Total obliteration. A day ago it was an animal. It ate. It walked with us. When John clucked his tongue at it, it trotted to him and pushed its nose against his chest and made him dance backward on his heels and smile. I turned it into a body and a problem John had to solve.

“So long horse,” I say.

“Strider,” John says.

“So long Strider.”

John puts the rolled detonator cable in his backpack and slings the pack onto his shoulders.

“This way,” John says and he steps to the trail and starts walking up the mountain.

“Why this way? Camp’s the other way. Don’t we need to go back to the camp?” But John’s going fast and he’s not talking to me now and I’m hurrying behind him again.

We walk for half an hour and then we clear the tree line. We come out onto a rocky slope and look down into a deep valley between the peak we’re on and the next one over. A tiny thread of river runs along the valley floor, brown and glinting in the sunlight and stretching into the shadow of the peaks. It is so far below us it does not appear to move. Above us is a field of boulders stretching up toward the snow patch shining against the blue dome of sky.

The trail continues up the mountain toward the snow, but John leaves the trail and begins working his way across the boulder field. We walk this way another twenty minutes and then we round a boulder that’s as big as the school bus we used to ride when we were kids and we come to the end of the trail. A sheer cliff.

A slim finger of rock sticks out from the edge of the cliff and hangs in the air like a Stone Age diving board. Nothing below it but sky for a thousand feet.

John drops his backpack and I’m slipping out of mine when he takes it from my back. He opens it and pours Strider’s feet onto the dirt.

He picks up the hooves and carries them out onto the finger of stone. He squats and places each hoof carefully in front of him at the edge of the precipice. He hangs in the sky with nothing below him and dark-shouldered mountains stretched out beyond him and I know this is how I will remember him probably forever. He looks like a little boy laying out the first pieces of a model horse. But then he stays there for a long time. He sits beside the hooves and I watch and he changes and then he isn't a boy beside a toy; he is a man, able and at ease in the place where he belongs.

John stands up and he picks up a hoof. He sets his feet wide apart and then he swings his arm like he's throwing a discus and he launches the hoof out into the abyss; it sails straight away from the cliff and then it drops out of sight. He picks up another hoof and launches it. And then a third hoof. He watches it fall. He inches toward the edge of the stone and looks down after the hooves searching for them in the stones far below.

There is one hoof left. John picks it up and turns to me.

"You want to throw it?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I think you should."

I stand up and I inch out onto the platform with John.

"Will this hold us both?" I say.

"We'll find out."

John holds the hoof out toward me and I let him put it in my hands. It's heavy and warm from the sun. I run my fingers along its ridged surface, turn it over and trace the edge of the horse shoe still nailed to the bottom of it. There's a clot of dirt stuck to it from some mud that it walked through when it was still part of John's horse.

I weigh the hoof in my hands. Toss it lightly and catch it. I turn my body, ready to throw. I look back over my shoulder at John. He nods at me.

"Make it good," he says.

I lean back, coil my body and then sling my arm toward the sky and the hoof sails up and away from me and spins and turns over

and hangs and drops out of sunlight into the shadow of the valley below.

John sits down on the end of the rock and hangs his feet over the edge. I sit beside him.

“I thought you wanted the horse shoes,” I finally say.

“I don’t need them. I decided Strider might need them more wherever he’s going.”

“Since when are you so spiritual?” I say.

“I’ve always been.”

“I never knew that.”

“And now you do.”

We sit a little longer and then John gets up and slings his pack over his back.

“We gotta go,” he says.

“Down? Out?” I say.

“Get our gear and hike through to the south end of the trail and turn back anyone we see coming this way and then close the trail.”

“Because bears.”

“Yes.”

I get up and hurry into my pack too.

John starts walking.

“John,” I say.

He stops and turns back to look at me.

“It was my mistake,” I say. “I am sorry. For everything.”

John nods, then turns and starts walking fast. And I am coming right behind him.

## STONE KARMA

*By Janice Sabin*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2013

THEY WERE IN love. The diamond was given to honor this love. It was a traditional gesture, an expression of everlasting commitment. It had been in the family for many generations. It was all that was left of a family's wealth that was made and lost long ago, passed down through the years from one to the other. The recipient felt cherished. It was a declaration of love to be worn proudly. Wearing this diamond was a testament to all of the others who had worn it through the centuries.

The stone was huge. It was an antique cut, beyond brilliant. It was unique, irreplaceable. When brought to the jeweler to be set into a ring, it inspired awe. Beautiful. The ring would be simple.

The stone was eased into a simple bezel of brushed gold. The ring would be worn for a lifetime and then passed to another generation.

The stone sat in its bezel on the well-manicured finger. People commented on its size. “Bling,” they said. It was worn with joy. Another chapter of history was added to the lore of this stone. The stone would witness the comings and goings of a lifetime.

The trouble began right away. The well-manicured finger erupted into blisters and a rash. There was a trip to the doctor. Instructions were given about creams and salves.

The ring was removed for a while for the sake of healing. The stone sat in a dark drawer. The finger recovered. There were no blisters, no rash.

Time passed and the magnificent stone was placed back on the finger. Again, blisters bubbled on the finger. The jeweler was consulted. The metal material was to blame. White gold contains nickel. The metal would be changed. The stone was eased once again into a simple setting, this time palladium. The stone ring was placed back on the well-manicured finger.

Again, the finger erupted into blisters and a rash. There was another trip to the doctor. More instructions were given about creams and salves.

The jeweler was consulted. No nickel in palladium but there are other impurities. The metal would be changed. The stone was placed into a setting of platinum. No impurities in platinum. Extraordinary steps were taken to wear the stone. It was, after all, of great value—a testament to true love across many generations.

Soon, the well-manicured finger, encircled in the purity of platinum, blistered again. There was nothing left to do. The ring was removed. The spectacular stone sat exiled in a dark drawer.

In time, the relationship deflated. It had nothing to do with the ring. It was just, “not meant to be.” The stone was returned to the giver. The finger recovered. The recipient recovered.

Why had the well-manicured finger rejected the stone? Because it was not true love? Maybe. Was it a blood diamond? Likely. But,

it's not that simple.

Family secrets.

Centuries ago the ancestors of this family had made profits of biblical proportion in human trade.

It turns out that the noble, well-manicured finger had blistered under the weight of a secret and shameful history. The heirloom stone was connected to the commerce of the Triangle Slave Trade. In the 1700s, over the course of three generations, this Yankee family accumulated one of the greatest fortunes in American history by the buying and selling of over 10,000 human beings.<sup>1</sup>

This family's ships had sailed from New England to West Africa loaded with textiles and rum to finance the purchase of men, women, and children. These bought souls were transported to ports and sold at auction in Havana and Charleston. The profits from these sales were used to buy sugar and molasses in Cuba, which were then sent on to this family's businesses in New England to distill into rum, and then back to Africa to sell. The family created an economic triangle that produced unimaginable wealth and left a legacy of shame. Today it is estimated that there are about a half million living descendants of the African people that this family forced into slavery.<sup>1</sup>

This Yankee family erected buildings and churches in their New England town. These remnants of their tainted fortune still survive today.

I believe that somewhere, just beyond our reach, there is an invisible spirit, a visceral memory of injustice that lurks in our cells, and every now and then, this spirit bubbles to the surface, makes its presence known, and rejects evil whether we are aware of its presence or not.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tracesofthetrade.org/guides-and-materials/historical/the-the-dewolf-family/>

## KISS OF THE SPANISH LADY

*By Mary Senter*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION II, 2013

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION I, 2011

FORT WORDEN, WASHINGTON, 1918

A BRISK FALL BREEZE blew off Admiralty Inlet and gave Private Charles Sommers a chill as he marched in formation with his platoon across the grassy parade grounds of Fort Worden. Three weeks more and the 49th Artillery Regiment would be on a transport ship to Europe to fight the Germans. Charles had been giving it everything he had to be the very best soldier the 49th had seen. He would show the Kaiser who was in charge.

Charles had wanted to be a soldier his whole life. Men in his family had been fighting wars in America since the Revolutionary War. It was serendipity that the U.S. entered the war in Europe just as he came of age. He enlisted the day he was eighteen.

Stinging sweat dripped from underneath his saturated canvas cap into his eyes, blurring his vision. The day wasn't warm enough and his exertion wasn't strenuous enough to merit such perspiration. His head pounded. Everything began to spin. He blinked his eyes and took a deep breath—he would not pass out. His heart raced faster and he fought to remain calm until he could no longer fight the blackness filling his field of vision.

When he woke, he found himself looking up at a high ceiling. Beside him row after row of metal cots were filled with young soldiers. Panic struck him when he realized what had happened. He tried to sit up, but couldn't find the strength and instead, flew into a fit of coughing that burned his lungs and left him breathless. Spanish Influenza had found him.

Many soldiers at the fort had died. So many that that he and his platoon had been put on burial detail over the past week. From what he knew of the epidemic, his chances were not good. If he wasn't dead within forty-eight hours, he might have a chance, but he had no idea how long he'd been lying there.

"Hey, Buddy." He said to the fellow next to him, but received no response other than raspy, labored breathing.

He turned to the other side.

"Hey!" The word barely came out, followed by painful hacking.

The young man opened his eyes slightly and rolled his yellow cow eyes to look at Charles, but didn't seem to focus. The kid had red hair, but patches of his face had turned blue.

"How long've I been here?" Charles asked him.

The kid looked away without answering, and then himself went into coughing fit, unable to stop until he vomited pink liquid across his chest.

Charles closed his eyes and lost consciousness. When he next awoke, he looked over at the kid. His eyes and mouth were open as if he were about to speak. The boy was dead. Nobody had even noticed.

He looked around for a nurse. A woman in a white dress sat at the far end of the room, but he had no strength to summon her.



Every surface of his body ached, his head throbbed, and his throat was on fire. His sheets were damp from sweat. He was sure he had wet himself.

He opened his eyes when he felt the sheets being pulled from under him.

“What’s happening?” he said weakly.

“I’m changing you.” A male voice said.

He was stripped naked, wiped down with a wet cloth and then redressed in a clean gown, sheets and blanket.

“How long have I been here?” he managed to say.

“Oh, ‘bout three days, I’d guess.”

“I’m so thirsty. Can I get a drink of water?”

“Don’t know about that. You’ll have to ask the nurse,” he said through his mask.

“Where is the nurse?”

“Over there.” He pointed across the room.

“Do they feed us? I’m so hungry.”

The man shrugged, bundled up the dirty linens and went away.

“I’m starving, too.” someone said.

Charles rolled over to see the guy he first spoke to. Not only was he awake, but he looked much better. His dark hair was greasy from lack of washing, but he still had a rugged handsomeness as if he had been the one posing for the recruitment posters. He smiled at Charles and stretched out his hand. “The name’s Kimmerle. Private Walter Kimmerle. Think I might have survived the Plague of the Spanish Lady. Now I suppose they’ll ship me off to die the war.”

Charles moved to shake the man’s hand but quickly brought his fist up to his mouth when he began to cough violently. “Charles,” he finally managed in between hacks. Private Kimmerle withdrew his hand.

When his coughing subsided, Charles spoke. “You’re lucky. I can’t wait to leave.”

“Are you kidding? You can’t wait to get killed? To sit around in a

wet trench until your feet fall off?”

“I can’t wait to kill those filthy Heinies! I’m going to blow them off the map if I can ever get out of here.”

“That so? You got a problem with Germans?”

“Of course I do,” Charles said. “You went to the same training I did. You know what they’ve been up to. They deserve to die.” He rested and caught his breath. “Are you telling me you don’t want to kill the Huns?”

“I don’t want to kill anybody. I was drafted. I’d just as soon stay here at the fort and pick up cigarette butts everyday as kill any Germans.”

Charles closed his eyes. He meant to shake his head, but the movement never came. “That’s down-right un-American.”

“Maybe, but why are you so hot to kill them all? What did they do to you?”

“It’s not what they did to me. It’s what they’ve done to France, and the others. We can’t let them get away with it.”

“If you really want to be mad about something it should be that this hospital is starving us to death. I’m getting food. You coming?” Private Kimmerle asked.

“Sure.” Charles tried to sit up, but his coughing got worse and he started to sweat and became dizzy and he fell back onto his pillow.

“Don’t worry, sport. I’ll bring you something.”

Charles watched Walter Kimmerle crouch down and duck-walk between the rows of cots to the double doors at the end of the room, keeping out of sight of the over-worked nurse. Charles hoped for the day when he would have the strength to duck walk... or walk at all.

Walter returned with a pitcher of cold water, an opened can of salmon and two mess hall forks.

“How did you get that?” Charles asked.

“Don’t worry about it. Just eat so you can get back to your training, if that’s what you want.”

Walter propped Charles’ head up with a pillow and helped him

eat and drink what he could.

"I've got to get well enough to get out of here by tomorrow," Walter said. "The nurse told me this morning that my folks wired. They got word I was sick and they got right on the train from Montana. Should be here by tomorrow afternoon."

"That's nice," Charles said. "Won't they be put out when they find you're fit as a fiddle?" He tried to laugh, but coughed, instead.

"Maybe. But I'll be glad to see them anyway, especially my kid sis Clara."

"Maybe I should have someone send a wire to my folks in Illinois and tell them I'm dying. I sure miss 'em."

"You aren't dying, Charlie."

"Sure feel like it. I think my fever's gone though. I was burning up last night. Had a dream I was blasting those Germans to bits."

"You sure have a lot of hate in you for people you haven't met."

"They're the enemy, aren't they?"

"Okay, Charlie. You better get some rest now."

Charles was determined to beat the influenza and recover quickly so that his company wouldn't leave without him. He spent a fitful night tossing between strange dreams and melancholy restlessness. In the morning he was grouchy and miserable, until he opened his eyes and saw Clara Kimmerle standing before him.

Her black hair was fastened at the back of her neck and she wore a silk blouse opened wide at the neck with a shawl collar trimmed in lace and gathered at the waist over a straight ankle-length skirt. She wore a single strand of pearls and a gauze mask. Even though the mask covered her mouth, Charles could tell by the brightness in her brown eyes that she was smiling. The way Walter described her, Charles thought she was a girl. But this was a beautiful young woman.

"Walt!" She gasped. "You are nothing but a bean pole! But I am so glad to see you!"

"Baby sister!" Walter sat up in bed and she bent down and she gave him a long hug.

When she finally stood, she looked at Charles, who realized his mouth was hanging open. "Hello," she said.

"Where are my manners?" said Walter. "Clara, this is my newest friend, Private Sommers."

Charles meant to smile, to be friendly, but he was so taken by her, he just stared like an imbecile. Finally he managed to speak. "Charles. You can call me Charles."

"Hello, Charles."

"Where are Mom and Pop?" Walter asked.

"Mother was weary from the journey. She's resting. Dad said he would keep her company, but I think he's tired too. Can you leave this hospital? It's so dreary in here. I saw a beach coming in. Can we go? I've never been to a beach!"

"Sure. I'll bet I can bust outta here without the nurse even noticing. But we have to take Charlie, here. Can't leave him by himself. Besides, he needs some food."

"Oh, I couldn't," Charles said. "I couldn't go for a walk. I can barely sit up."

"Nonsense. You can do it." Walter dispatched his sister to fetch a wheelchair and Walter helped him get from his bed into the chair and they placed masks on their faces. The group waited until the nurse stepped out of the room and they left through the other door.

They made their way to the beach, Walter pushing Charles in the chair through the grass until they reached the bleached driftwood logs that lined the shore. Along the way, Walter and his sister talked of people back home and of the influenza and the beauty of the Northwest. Charles enjoyed the softness of Clara's voice and her enthusiasm for life and could not remember when he had had such a pleasurable distraction from the rigid masculine structure of military life.

Walt excused himself to find food and while he was gone, Charles and Clara sat on a log and chatted. Despite his nervousness, Charles found her easy to talk to.

"Are you afraid?" She asked him, looking into his eyes.

“Afraid of those barbarians? No. I’m more afraid of letting them brutalize innocent people. Liars, brutes and savages, every one.”

“Who?”

“The Germans, of course.”

“Oh. I meant, aren’t you afraid of getting shot? Killed?”

“Not really. Besides, I may never even get there with this wretched illness.”

“Well let’s hope you don’t have to go. I worry about Walter going. I don’t like the idea of him fighting.”

Charles wasn’t sure what to say next. He wanted to change the subject.

“Did you really mean that about the Germans? Do you really hate them?” Clara asked.

Why would she ask that? Everyone hated the Germans.

“Well, yes. Don’t you?”

“Barbarians? Liars? Do you feel that way about all Germans?”

Her voice had changed. She was no longer smiling. He had said something wrong. “Well, sure. It’s not just one or two people invading other countries, killing innocent people, it’s the country as a whole, so yes, I suppose, all Germans.”

Charles changed the subject, but the conversation ceased to flow. Clara had grown quiet until Walter arrived with a dishpan full of food.

“Can you believe it? Fried chicken. It’s a genuine picnic now.”

That night, lying in bed, Charles could not stop thinking about Clara. He wanted to do something nice for her. He wanted to give her flowers. That’s what a man does for a lady.

As soon as the sky had turned from black to midnight blue, Charles slipped into his boots, put on a mask and sneaked out of the hospital. He climbed Artillery Hill to the place near Battery Brannon where he remembered seeing some wildflowers growing. When he reached the spot, he fell to the ground, wheezing, coughing and dripping with sweat.

When he regained enough strength, he gathered two handfuls of

little purple flowers and began the trek back to the sick ward. The sky was beginning to lighten and the seagulls were starting to cry overhead. He had to hurry.

In the hallway, he washed himself in the lavatory and slicked his bed-ravaged hair to his head as best he could. He coughed up great wads of blood-tinged phlegm which he spat into the sink and washed away. He steadied himself, gripping both sides of the porcelain when he became faint. When he looked into the mirror, he hardly recognized the hollowed-eyed man looking back at him. His skin was pale, almost green with nausea and his skin glistened with perspiration. His fever was back.

He found a glass urinal which would have to do for a vase, filled it with water and arranged the flowers neatly. He set the flowers on the little table between his bed and Walter's, slipped into bed unnoticed and fell asleep.

When Charles awoke, Walter's bed was empty. The flowers were gone. Charles was weaker again. The orderly came around with broth, but Charles couldn't eat.

"Your friend's been discharged." The orderly said. "He didn't want to wake you."

"What? He's out?" He gave the bed a closer inspection. It had been remade with clean sheets. His friend was gone for good, and with him his hope of winning the heart of Clara.

When the doctor came for rounds the next morning, Charles felt almost human again. His aches had subsided and his fever was completely gone, but his lungs felt heavy and his cough remained.

"I don't like the sound of this," the doctor said, listening to his lungs.

"The sound of what?" Charles asked.

"Your lungs. Take a deep breath." The doctor made a disapproving face. "Again." Charles inhaled halfway and coughed. The doctor moved his stethoscope over his back and chest. "Once more."

His chest felt like an anvil was resting on it. The doctor shook

his head.

“What is it?”

“Damaged.”

“Damaged? What does that mean?”

“It happens in some patients. Fluid in the lungs damages tissue. It’s irreparable, but only a mild nuisance to live with. Lucky for you, I can’t clear you to go overseas.”

“What! But you said it’s a mild nuisance. I can still fight!”

The doctor stared at Charles blankly. “Private, you survived the influenza. Count your blessings,” he said and walked away.

Charles wished Walter was there to cheer him up. He would find the bright side. But he was the lucky one. He was well. Fully recovered. He would be sent off to France and be a hero and would kill hundreds of Germans and would receive the glory Charles wanted for himself. Charles would be assigned to an artillery station at the fort in the off-chance that someone actually had the gall to attack the western U.S. by sea. His service would mean nothing.

Devastated as Charles was about the news that he would not be able to fight, he found his thoughts drifting to Clara. Every time he closed his eyes. He saw her face, her sweet smile and her big brown eyes. He heard her voice and thought of all of the things he wished he had said to her, and what he might say to her in the future.

He was released from the hospital the following day and was given three days rest by the doctor before he had to return to duty. He went to the mess hall and ate until his belly ached from fullness, then he went directly to the barracks where Kimmerle lived.

He was not there, of course. It was a duty day. He would be training with his unit in the field. What would he say to him? He had been surprised when Walter left without a word and when he didn’t come back the next day to visit him. He was probably busy visiting his folks. But surely they would be gone by now.

He walked out into the bright sunshine. He felt so good to be out of the hospital, even though he did not feel completely well,

he felt much better than he had in over a week. He strolled toward the beach. He would sit on the log where he sat with Clara and think of her.

The water was deep blue and the sun shining on the ripples sparkled like a million diamonds. A few puffy clouds hung in the sky and he tried to see shapes in them.

"You made it," a woman said, to his left.

It was Clara. He turned and looked up at her, the sun was positioned directly behind her head lighting her up like an angel. And she could have been an angel the way she made him feel.

"You're still here? I thought for sure you'd gone."

"We don't leave until tomorrow." She turned toward an older couple walking hand-in-hand behind her. The two wore simple clothes and seemed tired and beaten down from years of hard work. "Let me introduce you to my parents. This is my mother Ilsa and my father Klaus. Mom, Pop, this is Charles, he's a friend of Walt."

The man outstretched his hand to Charles. "Tis is vontervul. It is goot to meet a frient of Vahlter." Charles stuck out his hand instinctively, but could not say anything further. The accent was German. He looked at Clara, dejected.

"Why didn't you say something?" he asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "You had your mind made up."

It didn't make sense. She wasn't anything like he knew Germans to be. She wasn't a barbarian. She was sweet and kind and lovely. And Walter had been a good friend to him. He may even have saved his life.

He motioned for Clara to walk with him. When they were a few feet from his parents he spoke. "I'm sorry, Clara. I was wrong."

"I knew you didn't really mean it. It's war. They want you to hate the enemy, whoever it may be. You couldn't kill them otherwise, I suppose. I think that's why I'm so worried about Walter. What if he can't do it? He'll be killed by some German who hates Americans, just because they're the enemy."

Charles shook his head. "It isn't fair. I wanted to go and now I'm



told I can't. Walter doesn't want to go and he has to..." then he had a brilliant idea. They would switch. He would switch identities with Walt. The Army was a huge impersonal bureaucracy. They would never figure it out. Charles would go to war as Walter Kimmerle and Walt would stay home and look after Clara. Suddenly he wasn't so hot to kill the Germans, and he certainly didn't want to leave Clara, but he couldn't stand the thought of Clara losing her brother. He would go to war and honor his family, his country and most of all, Clara.

BAHRAINI CAMELS BY MICHELLE POSTON  
*Certificate Program in Natural Science Illustration, 2013*





## THE UNDERSIDE OF WAR

*By Mina Mitchell*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2012

**T** IRED AND HUNGRY after completing another mission in Afghanistan, eighteen-year-old Private Elena Santos sat by herself in the chow hall. Wooden-lacquered tables and metal-folding chairs lined dress-right-dress. Salt and pepper shakers sat atop each table. Elena wolfed down a plate of mashed potatoes slathered in warm, thick gravy, and a breaded pork chop. She liked eating alone. It helped her recharge and feel thankful she had lived another day, that her platoon had come back unharmed. She reflected upon a recent letter she received from her mother, grateful for the extra funds Elena had wired. She had bought some steaks, her mother wrote, and ingredients to make cake; the rest went into savings.

Elena smiled. She liked the idea of her family eating so well. She calculated that her mother would've had to harvest 300 apples to pay for the steak. Everything Elena bought, she calculated in apples. A thousand apples bought their family warm socks for the winter; a hundred apples bought a small bag of candy for her sisters.

Elena looked around the chow hall and her eyes fell upon two soldiers sitting nearby. They were laughing at something one of the soldiers said. She felt sorry for them. In the midst of their laughter they had no idea that their deployment had been extended for another six months. She overheard a conversation earlier between Sergeant Rodrigues and an officer. She knew the soldiers were anxious to return home to their loved ones, just as much as everyone here. Elena's chest tightened at the image of their disheartened faces, come morning, after hearing the news. Irritated by the thought of staying longer than planned, she flicked her spoon off the table. The laughing soldiers glanced at her for a brief moment before turning back to their conversation.

"Mind if I join you?"

Elena looked up from her plate. Sergeant Rodrigues hovered over her. Even in war-time his uniform appeared immaculately pressed, always the model soldier. Not waiting for her to answer, Rodrigues set his tray next to hers and sat down.

"You hear about that team of senators coming to Bagram next week? Pretty exciting, don't you think?" he said between mouthfuls of mashed potatoes.

Elena shrugged her shoulders. "They have no idea what we really do here, how dangerous it is. If they did, we wouldn't be here for another six months."

"Geez, Santos."

"Those senators coming here make people back home feel better about what's going on." For once she'd like to see a senator leave Bagram and convoy up to their FOB, experience what it's like to drive along the unpaved roads strewn with hidden IEDs. The fear of sudden death scared her. Before each convoy she placed a letter

on her pillow, her last words penned to her family, easily accessible for the chaplain to retrieve in case she never made it back.

“They’re coming here to make sure we’re on track and that the work is getting done,” Rodrigues said. “This is a war we’re fighting, we can’t have everything we want. Life doesn’t work like that.”

Elena looked away. So much of her life here was out of her control and she hated it. When she signed the enlistment papers she thought she would be free, on her own, making a life for herself. The Army had been anything but that, authority hovered over her everywhere she went. She had expected a certain amount of authoritarian intrusion, but not this much, someone was always barking orders. “You’re right, Sergeant,” she said. “We can’t worry about what other people do or don’t do, so I’ll just worry about myself.”

Sergeant Rodrigues shook his head. “That’s a dangerous position to be in, Santos.”

Elena drank the last of her soda and stood to leave. “We’ll see, Sergeant.”

\* \* \*

Elena returned to the barracks and she changed out of her uniform and dressed for bed. The routine of taking her bullet proof vest, knee and elbow guards, Kevlar, and weapon each night became second nature and donning them in the morning was just the same. A mundane task. The gear was meant to protect her from flying shrapnel and bullets, but all the equipment in the world couldn’t protect her from roadside bombs or the mortars that pounded the base as she slept. Sleep, most often, was disturbed and restless. Constant sounds reverberated around her and voices made their way through the thin plywood walls of the makeshift barracks. The base hustled twenty-four hours a day. Soldiers readied for their missions by cleaning weapons and vehicles, and loading supplies and potable water onto trucks. Civilian cooks rushed to prepare and serve meals.

As Elena pulled the covers over her, she realized she'd forgotten what silence sounded like. But if she closed her eyes and placed the pillow over her head, she could almost hear the stillness that covered the apple orchards back home after a long day of harvesting. The Yakima Valley would become serene with the gentle croaking of the frogs. The melodic song of crickets would encircle her as she sleeps and the sweet scent of apples would linger in the night air. She pictured herself in the orchards and she could see rows of apple trees—red and golden fruits ripe for picking. The soil beneath her boots reeked of organic vitality and the early morning sun heated the land. She wanted to be in those orchards again and away from the pandemonium of war.

She remembered asking the Army recruiter six months after September 11 if she would be fighting in combat. She asked because she felt so removed from what was happening over here. The evening news only showed young men fighting heroically in the rugged mountains of Tora Bora. She wondered where the women were and if she'd see war like those young men. The recruiter said that women weren't allowed on the frontlines, that's what our infantry is for. Don't worry, he continued, you'll be fine. She believed him. She recalled reading the contract one last time. She'd been excited about what was to come—she would be in charge of her own destiny. In a swift, confident stroke, she signed the enlistment papers.

Now, here she was, fighting a war where the enemy took lives without care. Her platoon had already lost two soldiers. Each day when her platoon convoyed out to the villages, she wondered if she would live or die, or which of her comrades would become a fallen hero. Pulling her covers tight around her and shaking away the image of war, Elena closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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On their way to deliver supplies to the refugee camps, Elena looked out of the LMTV window. The verdant, picturesque moun-



tain ranges always surprised her most about Afghanistan. Back home the media portrayed this part of the world as desolate and parched and dangerous. But during the late-fall months, lush mountains hovered over the land.

Elena often looked forward to convoying out to the villages, bringing blankets and food to the Afghans displaced by the war. As she walked toward the main house, made of mud and brick, a group of children circled around her, asking her for the colored candies they loved. She smiled and set the ration box down. She pulled out a handful of Skittles and a few Tootsie Rolls from her cargo pockets. "Skittles or chocolate?" she asked a six-year-old girl. The child grinned and pointed to the chocolate.

"I figured as much," Elena said, and placed the Tootsie Rolls in the girl's already cupped hands. "I think you're the only one in Afghanistan who likes those." The girl giggled and moved aside for the next child. The children reminded her of her sisters when they were young and how she used to cut slices of apples for them at first harvest. Her sisters would jump up and down, eagerly anticipating their first bite.

"Hurry up Santos!" Sergeant Rodrigues barked, carrying a box of rations into one of the tents. "No time for play, we got work to do. All those boxes we loaded this morning need to come out of the LMTV before we head back to the FOB."

"Hooah, Sergeant." She would rather spend time in the villages. Being here helped distance the war somehow. Perhaps it was because she was around civilians, people who were like the ones back home, who worked hard and raised their children and provided the best they could for their families. She found comfort in this. The same comfort she felt in the orchard before she'd joined the Army. She remembered her last day in the orchard, where she took a hold of an apple and twisted it, the stem releasing its grip from the branch. She admired the apple's perfect shape, the skin smooth, no bruises or dents. She placed the apple in her netted basket and repeated the motion until the basket was full. As the sun dipped under the skyline, her mother and three sisters encircled her, wait-

ing for her to climb down the ladder.

"*Mija*, come rest," her mother said.

"Sí, Mamá."

When she reached the bottom of the ladder, her mother handed her a thermos full of cool water. Elena wiped her forehead, the sweat burning her eyes. She took the thermos and drank in large gulps. When she finished she wiped her mouth with the front of her sleeve.

"Come sit, all of us," her mother said. A cool breeze fanned them as they leaned their backs against the trunks of the trees. Exhausted, Elena closed her eyes. She could hear a tractor motoring in the distance and the sounds of laughter and banter from the other workers on the farm.

"You work hard," her mother said, reaching over and tucking away a few stray strands of her daughter's hair. "You're a tough girl. Whatever you do in life, I want you to be happy Elena. Happiness is what's important."

She met her mother's eyes and saw how exhausted she looked: deep shades of purple encircled the undersides of her eyes, her body slowly deteriorating from the demands of harvesting apples year after year. "Mamá, I'll be happy when we have enough money to buy a house of our own."

"*Mija*, listen to me. Owning something is not happiness." Her mother cupped her coarse hand under Elena's chin and tilted it upward. "Life on the farm is tough, but at the end of the day we have what we need. We have food on the table and clothes on our backs. We have it better than most can ever dream of."

"Sí, Mamá."

Elena's younger sister Maria sat up and plucked an apple from the tree and handed it to her. Elena chuckled at the gesture and said, "How about we share one like old times?"

"I was thinking the same thing," Maria said, pulling a paring knife out of a case. "You do the honors."

Elena took the knife and carved out thick slices of apple, a bit of juice ran down her wrist. She handed the first piece to her mother,

then Clara, then to Maria.

“Are you scared, Elena?” Clara asked.

“A little bit, but it’s a good kind of scared,” Elena said.

“Papá would be so proud of you,” Maria said. Her lips trembled as she wiped away her tears. They sat in silence thinking of their father who once farmed these orchards, a place he had loved dearly. He had passed away the winter when Elena was twelve.

Elena smiled. “I think he’d be proud of all us.” She took a bite of her apple and savored the sweetness as it danced on her tongue.

Now, as Elena wiped her eyes, moist from the memory, she handed the rest of the candy to a tall Afghan boy, whose eyes were as green as the hills. When the last piece left her, the group of children flew away like hungry honey bees and swarmed around the boy. She felt a sudden emptiness within her.

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The next day under the pelting warm monsoon rain, Elena and her platoon trekked to the field for training. They practiced setting up claymore mines and navigating their vehicles out of harm’s way if under attack. In case of chemical warfare, they trained so that it took less than nine seconds to put on their protective masks. Taking more time than that could cause death depending on the agent the enemy used.

The soldiers were now at the firing range for the last session of the day. Elena aligned the sights on her rifle. She could smell the damp heat around her, earthy and thick. She breathed hard, through her nose, waiting for her target to pop up. When it did, she froze. She stared at the mannequin dressed in civilian clothes: loose fitting jeans and a white shirt. She shuddered. She could take anyone’s life with her own hands if she wanted to.

“Shoot the target, Private Santos. Kill the enemy before he kills you!” Sergeant Rodrigues yelled from behind. “Fire the goddamn weapon, Private. NOW!”

Elena imagined the enemy shooting off her hands. She would no longer be able to help her family in the orchards. She could hear the soldiers yelling at her to shoot, but still, she couldn’t move.

The noise from the soldiers grew louder. Overwhelmed and frightened, Elena closed her eyes. She heard herself breathing hard, the adrenaline pulsating through her veins. The rain continued to fall. Elena opened her eyes and shot haphazardly at her target. The bullet landed in the dirt. From behind, Sergeant Rodrigues yelled at Elena to clear her rifle and stand at attention. She did as she was told and met Rodrigues eyes. He stared at her, his contempt penetrating into her. She shivered. The warm rain pelted her face.

"This is no time for doubts, Santos. Whatever you're thinking up here," he said, tapping his index finger to his head, "let it go. You're a soldier, Santos, a goddamn soldier. Act like one. I'm not going to die over here because you doubt yourself. I'll be damn sure that doesn't happen. My wife and kids need me. Got that?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You signed up for this, you'll finish this. That goes for all of you!" Sergeant Rodrigues barked, turning toward the platoon. "Our country and our families are depending on us. I'll tell you this soldiers, my class A uniform is pressed and ready. If you decide you want to die over there, then I'll be happy to put it on and salute you in your casket."

"Hooah, Sergeant!" The soldiers yelled unison. Elena remained quiet. She wanted to go home. This was no place for her. Joining the Army had been a mistake. Even Sergeant Rodrigues could see that.

\* \* \*

On their way back to the FOB, Elena sat in silence. The sun had dried up the day's rain. A slight coolness in the air touched upon her skin. Winter in Afghanistan would come early this year.

She checked the date on her watch and realized she had missed the autumn cider fest back home, the hay rides through the orchards and the freshly pressed apples. Mostly she missed her family and her heart ached thinking about the miles that separate them.

"You okay, Santos?" Sergeant Rodrigues asked. "You know,

whatever happened earlier at the range, just shake it off and move on.”

Elena turned to look at him, but before she could respond she heard an explosion. Then she saw it: plumes of smoke billowing into the sky. Up ahead, what once was a Humvee now looked like confetti. The putrid smell of burning flesh and diesel saturated the air. An RPG from an old hand-held Soviet launcher struck a Humvee two vehicles in front of them. Like they had rehearsed in training, the vehicles ahead of the destroyed Humvee continued on to safety. The vehicles traveling behind the blown Humvee, such as the one her and Sergeant Rodrigues were in, slammed to a halt. The soldiers dismounted from the vehicles and moved ten meters out before dropping to their knees. Seeing muzzle flashes to the right of them, they began firing in the direction of the enemy.

Elena glanced over and saw Sergeant Rodrigues slumped over his semi-automatic weapon, blood seeping from the back of his leg. She low-crawled toward him as bullets zinged over her head. Dust swirled around her and she coughed. She could feel the sun searing through her Kevlar and sweat ran down her forehead, into her eyes, making it hard to see. She swiped the sweat away with her soiled hands. Crimson blood pooled from the sergeant's thigh. In one swift motion she pulled off her dust cover and used it as a bandage, wrapping it around his thigh as tightly as she could. The sergeant lost consciousness, shock had set in.

Elena quickly peered around and spotted large boulders ten meters away. She didn't know if she had enough strength to drag him there. She had to get him out of the target area, but a moving target is like gold to the enemy. Dragging him put her at risk. As the eldest child, her family counted on her to provide for their family. Another bullet whizzed by her ear.

She looked again at the sergeant and pictured him in his class A's, lying in a casket, the American flag draped honorably over him. His wife and children crying.

A bullet ricocheted off of Elena's Kevlar. Stunned, she sighted her rifle and started shooting toward the enemy. Out of the corner

of her eye she saw life draining from Rodrigues' face.

No, she would not let him die, not on this bloody road surrounded by the carnage of war. She yelled at the soldiers to provide cover and she moved quickly, slipping her hands under Sergeant Rodrigues' shoulders and taking a firm grip. His body felt dense in her arms as she dragged him across the scorching dirt road. Her sweat-slippery hands lost their grip. She wiped them on her BDU's and grabbed him again under his arms. As another bullet flew by, she prayed that none would hit them, and then she dragged Sergeant Rodrigues as fast as she could toward the boulders.

Safe behind the rocks and keeping her head low to the ground, Elena removed the first aid pouch attached to her body armor and pulled out the tourniquet kit. Rodrigues had lost a lot of blood. Only the tourniquet could save him. She wrapped the black band around his thigh, inserted the windlass rod into the loops, and twisted it tight before locking it. She scribbled the time on the tourniquet. 1515. She shook her head in disbelief, trying to process it all—the ambush, the war, this soldier dying beside her—but she couldn't, it was too much.

The two-minute firefight ended as quickly as it had come. The enemy retreated behind a rocky mount and into the hills. Silence followed. War was incongruous. Serenity exploded into chaos and returned to serenity in mere seconds.

Sergeant Rodrigues' breath was shallow. She glanced at her watch gauging how long it would be before help arrived. A young, blond-haired sergeant said reinforcements would be here soon, but she knew it could be hours. She checked Rodrigues' wounds again and noticed the bleeding had stopped. What was once crimson blood on his uniform had turned the color of rust. She held his hand and waited for help to arrive.

The Blackhawks came for them.

From her seat in the helicopter, Elena could see fertile mountains and pomegranate trees abundant with fruit. Life continued.

This is not the way her life was supposed to turn out. When she signed her enlistment papers she had been naïve—she hadn't ex-

pected to fight in combat and nurse the wounded. The recruiter had been wrong, women were allowed on the frontlines. In this war it was all battlefield.

Elena yearned for home, to be back at the orchards where life was less complicated. In her hands she held her dust cover, stained with Rodrigues' blood. She understood now that her life could not always be controlled, no matter how hard she tried or planned. It was as if the universe had its own agenda and she hadn't discovered how to balance her life alongside it.

Peering out the window of the Blackhawk she could see villages in the distance. She recalled the joy in the children's faces and the excitement in their young voices as she handed out candy. Happiness is what she saw in them.

Her thoughts turned to Sergeant Rodrigues. She imagined his family at the airport waving a 'Welcome Home' banner. His wife searching the crowd, looking for him. Waiting.

Tears trickled down Elena's cheeks; she wiped them away. For six more months Afghanistan was home, she accepted this now.

## RISK FOR LIFE

*By Barbara Durbin Wean*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN MEMOIR, 2013

**T**HE TRUCK WITH the Maharana's polo ponies arrived at camp while we were en route by bus on the high desert of Rajasthan. From New Delhi to Ranakpur, India, were hours traveling on torturous, pitted roads that might injure a crucial organ. If I could have looked ahead and seen what was in store for us, I wouldn't have worried about a bumpy bus ride. The safari director told us this was the first safari in India in modern times. As our small group of twelve intrepid riders rattled along on the impossible road, I thought about the decision I'd made.

I'd turned fifty! How was it possible to be fifty so soon? Most of my life up to this time I'd been labeled the "pretty" one. Now



what? As I aged dry and wrinkled, my waist as thick as a frog, would I be invisible? Would I find myself alone as the young and vital tripped to new horizons? I had some hard decisions to make. In my usual world of clients and friends, the choice might normally be a facelift and botox. But, true to my growing sense of mystifying unrest, I was considering an adventure.

My mother had fought aging with a vengeance and it affected me in a visceral way. Mom fretted over every wrinkle, gray hair, and weight gain. She spent hours in front of a mirror propped in a sunny window, checking for new chin hairs, or pulling out gray and looking for any other sign of decrepitude. Finally at sixty two she had a full face lift. She never looked the same. I remembered the horrible full white head mask of gauze, closed black eyes, swollen face and the pain she felt for weeks. Then the numbness in her face that never went away. Mom looked like a space alien. What could be good about that?

After much thinking, and because I loved and owned horses, I chose a horse safari in Rajasthan, India. All my friends thought I was crazy, but I needed to find meaning in my life and for me to be able to focus on the big picture I had to change my usual environment. For the next few weeks there were continued negative comments from my family and clients. I was getting worried. Was this a mistake? I was beginning to doubt my decision when I had a very close call.

I was on my way home from work on a cold rainy night driving seventy miles an hour when I nearly had an accident on the freeway. It would have been fatal, if not at the very least serious. After recovering my wits, I decided if I was going to die I would rather it be in India instead of the freeway between Blaine and Bellingham. I sent in my money the next day.

By the time we arrived at our first camp, Hegi, our trail leader had ridden in with his three desert horses after several days trek from Jodhpur, sixty miles away. Our tracker appeared wearing flowing desert robes, a turban, and riding a very cranky camel that spit! Tomorrow we would be assigned our horse for the safari. I was

excited because I'd had a lot of experience with horses and owned two high-strung Spanish Arabian geldings I'd trained myself.

When our small group entered the camp site, the khaki colored tents had been erected; a cooking spot had logs burning and crackling, an awning set up and table ready for our evening buffet meal. I wondered if the cackling chickens in a crate would be our dinner. They were!

I'd paid for a single tent because I wanted to be alone, but the Safari Director came to me and said, "Barbara, we are short one tent and two women need a space, would you share your tent with them?"

"Of course." (*Damn!! How can I think now?*)

It would be crowded, but the rest of the tents were occupied by married couples.

The tents were divided into three sections. The back held a portable toilet and small tin tub. The middle had three cots placed a foot apart, and the front held our gear. Fortunately, the new roommates were horse experts and we got along great. After a spicy Indian dinner we were ready to try to sleep. We said goodnight and walked to our tent, the last one in the campsite.

We were a little concerned because the villagers, guarding the horses, told us there had been jaguars seen in the area; in addition, packs of jackals were roaming around. Lying in our sleeping bags, trying to stay warm in the freezing desert night, we heard the jackals start howling. They were close! All of a sudden I heard a rustling noise in the back of our tent. Then, Lap! Lap! Lap! The back of my neck quivered when I heard the second lapping sounds. There had been leftover water in the tub. Again, lap! Lap! Lap! Then a long low growl.

"Sally, Sallee, did you hear that?" I managed in a strangled whisper.

"Yah," she squeeked, "what do you think it is?"

"I don't *know*, but let's stand on our cots and yell. Maybe we'll scare it."

Just as we stood up, this large, smelly, furry animal ran between

our cots and out the front of the tent. Our roommate Kathy, had slept through it all. As we tried to calm down, all I could think was GOD, where are you? I was just *kidding* when I said, "I'd rather die in India then on the freeway at home." Here I was on the first day of the safari part of my adventure and I might not live through the night. That can't happen; I had work to do here! I needed to discover who I was beneath the visual and internal mask I'd developed for as long as I could remember.

As Sally and I started to relax enough to sleep I fell into musing again about my life and what had brought me to India.

I'd been horribly insecure as a child and young adult. It started when our life turned upside down and we moved from a comfortable farm in Vermont to my uncle's small acreage in California. I had just turned nine. We went from living what I thought a "normal" life in a farmhouse to a chicken house on my uncle's property. My mother was close to filing a divorce, my father had been in and out of the state mental hospital with schizophrenia and depression for a few years, and my mother had had just about enough of the drama. These were the fifties, people didn't get divorced and certainly didn't discuss mental illness, so my very conventional mother went through a lot of fear and indecision trying to make a choice about her future that would fly in the face of convention. At this point my sister's and I had all the ingredients for a traumatized childhood. More about that story later, but believe me, "*Father Knows Best*" lived nowhere near our chicken house. I finally fell into a restless sleep.

We woke up to lots of activity the next day. Breakfast was being prepared, the horses were saddled, ready to be assigned. Hegi, our trail boss, rode one of the horses, a breed unique to India (a Sindhi), to show us what he could do. Impressive! Many of the other horses were Marwari, also developed in India. Both breeds are beautiful with lines related to the Arabian horse. They had such an unusual feature; their turned-in ears touched tips over the top of their heads.

I was excited because Hegi assigned the Sindhi to me. I was a

little scared, but I said, "great, I've had two concussions and several broken bones riding in England, so I'm putting on my safety gear." I was prepared to ride a tough trail. We rode at least eight hours a day and one day, lost in the desert, for twelve.

I made one serious mistake. I had asked the doctor for antibiotics so I wouldn't get stomach problems (i.e. diarrhea) on the ride. They made me photosensitive. On the first day of the ride I got a severe sunburn on the right side of my face, nose and neck that were made more painful by a scarf hanging down the back of my helmet to subsequently protect me from a deeper burn. I was in pure misery for a whole week. Riding through the pain I felt stronger as I met each challenge with new found ability.

It was thrilling to find the Sindhi I was riding was spirited and tireless. Hegi often had me ride beside him if the horses were walking. He told me stories about his childhood and the many legends with which he grew up. He also described the flora and fauna we would see. My favorite comment from Hegi seeing two doves perched together in a tree, "two for joy." Hegi was a great fan of John Wayne. He told me about all his favorite movies. He was a romantic. He told me the most important things in life are a good horse and a good weapon. He carried a long blade brass knife and would die a hero if he could. Omens were very important in his world. In a day or so I had an adolescent crush on Hegi. He was handsome, a fabulous rider, and effortlessly took charge. He was also about twenty years younger than me. So what, I thought, this was just a blip in time. I could fantasize.

I also found plenty of time to daydream about my past and future as many of the long hours on horseback were uneventful. I thought back to my first ride.

I was about ten or eleven. It was a hot California day, the sky hazy but cloudless. Across the road was a pasture of a large Portuguese owned dairy farm. Usually it was filled with milk cows, but the last few days there had been a brown horse nibbling hay. I just had to go see him. My sisters and I crossed the country lane to the pasture. I wanted to pat him and maybe even sit on his back.

“Girls, I want you to feed him the carrots while I climb the fence, okay? Don’t scare him though,” I warned.

“We won’t,” said Susan confidently.

Carol asked, with a worried look on her face, “will he bite us?”

“No, just hold your hand flat when you feed him,” I said.

Suddenly, I surprised myself and leaped on his back; within a split second he took off on a terrified gallop. I was startled but managed to hang on with my fingers twisted into his mane, and my legs gripping his belly with a fierce hug that certainly urged him into faster flight. As I bent over his neck, his mane whipped my cheeks like a dozen stinging bees. My arms moved like pistons as his head and neck moved with his bodily motion. I could hear my sisters shrieking with fear as he jumped a water drainage ditch and continued his panicked dash with me still clinging to his body like a baby monkey clutching her mother’s back.

After what seemed like an interminable time of hearing his loud huffing in perfect rhythm to his pounding hooves on the dry clay, I looked ahead and saw a white fence crossing our path. I was sure we were going to crash. I didn’t have long to worry because just as we were ready to connect, the horse jumped straight up as if his legs were pogo sticks, bounced stiff-legged a couple of times and came to a dead stop at the gate. As he was stamping, snorting, and gasping for breath, I slipped to the ground astonished I hadn’t been bucked off. I was still *alive*. I almost fell as my feet hit the solid surface because my legs felt rubbery. My fingers had some mane wrapped around them and were numb and cramped, and I was soaked to the skin with hot horse sweat. I tried to stand up straight so I could walk out of the pasture, but I was bent nearly double with my legs almost useless. My sisters were running down the street screaming, “Are you okay? Are you okay? We thought you were going to *die!*” I draped my arms around my sisters’ shoulders and leaned on them as they half-carried me home. I was in pain, but so exhilarated from the actual experience of being on a wild creature of such speed and power, I’d felt free, and it was the first time I remember the feeling of joy. I was hooked on horses for life.

Now, here I was in India in the middle of my life, pushing the edge of my universe, again on a horse, having adventures I could never have predicted. The first day of riding we passed camel- and goatherds, rode into villages with people running out of their market to see the strange riders. Children everywhere wanted to touch us. This was the first time any of the villagers had seen westerners on horses riding through their villages. I loved this part of India. It was farmland, homes were made of camel dung; some of the people had stick built compounds. The women were the workers. They took care of the children, cooked the meals, trucked the water from the village wells on their heads, tarred the roads, broke up the concrete and generally did all the hard labor. The men sat around the well under the shade of a tree drinking tea and gossiping. I was trying to stay neutral and not be upset about the unfair division of labor, but it was tough. I kept reminding myself that I was here to observe, not to judge or try to “help.” (It would have been easier to figure out what to do for them than to face my own problems.)

Sally was riding a very temperamental mare that kicked every time she tried to mount. The horse was beautiful but almost unmanageable. As we were riding around a village a loose black stallion came galloping into our group and terrified all of us and our horses. He was trying to mount Sallie’s mare while the rest of us were trying to control our own horses. Somehow the villagers managed to get control of the stallion before any damage was done to Sally or her mare but it was a frantic scramble. That explained the mare’s irritability. She was in heat! Sally kept her head and managed to ride the mare the whole trip.

That night afterward we had drinks and dinner. (Drinks were important at this point!) Tribal people started to arrive and gathered around a bonfire we had burning. The huge rug we sat on for lunch was unfurled. People brought drums and started to drum and dance. It was magical. More people drifted down from the hills surrounding us to join whatever celebration they thought was going on. A young man jumped into the center and started to act and dance a tribute to a jaguar hunter. He carried a spear and por-

trayed a successful hunt. After an hour or so everyone started to drift away.

The next day we saddled up at 8:00 AM so we could arrive at a ranch that Hegi's family owned for lunch. As we rode around large boulders and through small passages that not even a jeep could get through, we realized we *really* were in an area only accessible by horse or walking. As we came through an opening in the area, we saw ahead of us a village and a large lake filled with small bare islands. The whole village came running out to see us. They were so excited they wanted us to have lunch with the head of the village. Our guide told them that we were expected for lunch at a ranch not too far from there. Then they said, "we want you to see our shrine, it is in the middle of the lake." No one outside our village has seen our shrine, you will be the first. Hegi felt we couldn't turn them down for fear of insulting their generosity.

The people ran to bring the boats, three of them. They were sheet metal and wood held together with wire. We all were worried they couldn't possibly make it twenty feet from shore. Only one of us refused to enter the boats. As the rest of us crowded into a too small space and the boys started rowing us across the lake we started taking on water. As we rowed past one of the little islands I looked at what I thought was a large log. It turned out to be a crocodile. The lake was *full* of them! The boat was filling with water so we started bailing with our hats or helmets. Somehow we made it to the island with the shrine before the boat nearly sunk.

As we sloshed to the cliff of a large rocky mass, the boat fortunately lodged on an underwater ledge and we jumped out in our squishy boots onto a shale shelf and breathed a huge sigh of relief. At that point no one talked about how we were going to return. The boys started to empty the boat of water while we hiked around the hill to find the shrine. As we turned a corner I felt instantly alarmed. I was allergic to bee stings and here were two enormous bee hives hanging from the ceiling of the cave almost as if they were guarding the entrance. The hives were at least four feet long and one foot wide. We stood rooted to the spot wondering if we

were going to run back to the boat. No one heard any buzzing so a couple of the men decided to investigate. They waved us in. The cave floor immediately sloped down into a hollow space about the size of a medium room. The roof of rock was very low so we had to bend down. Across from the entrance sitting cross-legged on the floor was a holy man mouthing prayers. A large God made of stone was behind him festooned with garlands of ribbon (of all things, plastic flowers) and other decorations. Incense and candles were burning, and it was dark and smoky but created a scene of quiet contemplation. None of us spoke but sat on the floor and waited. After about fifteen or twenty minutes, the mystic opened his eyes and acknowledged us. Hegi translated "Welcome, there's a tunnel through the rock. You may use it if you wish."

Claustrophobia and anxiety were some major issues of mine so I bowed out of the tunnel, saying I'd stay with our boots. Another member of our group said, "I'm with Barbara!" We waited about an hour before the first of our group crawled out from beneath an overhang. He was on belly and elbows. He gasped with relief. "One of the women got stuck partway through and couldn't go backward because of the people behind her so we had to push and pull her beyond the tight spot. Barbara we're really glad you decided not to go!" It was black as pitch and there was no light until we got close to the end. Finally everyone crawled out and rested on the side of the rock.

When everyone recovered, we made our way back to the boat wondering what we'd find. Since the boat got hung up on the shale shelf the boys were able to finally empty it of water. Now what? The general consensus was to get back in the boat and try to make it back to the village. Bailing water shortly became a passion.

As we came to a little island one of the other boats had sunk and the group was standing there wondering what to do. Our boys said, "we'll deliver these people and we'll come back for you." Fortunately there were no alligators there so no one objected. Their boat had gone to the bottom of the lake. As we continued on, bailing like crazy, the boat was only about an inch above the water by



the time we returned. The boys *again* bailed out the boat and went back to the stranded group. Finally we were all back in the saddle.

I was exhausted from the constant excitement, but I was also learning that I could experience many things and not just survive but thrive. I wasn't sure how I would live my life when I returned home, but I could not live the way I'd formerly accepted as predetermined. I would question everything.

# HAHA

*By Jennifer Barry*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2013



soooo gunA kil Mself!!  
haha me 2 :)  
no realy  
omg y?  
coz evryting sux  
mEt me @ mal @ 3  
ok c u @ 3

:-T

“Hey Megan.”

“Hey Rach.”

“What’s up?”

“I told you. I’m going to kill myself.”

“Well that’s totes random.”

“I mean it. It’s the only way Michael will notice me. I’m totally invisible to him and I’m sick of it.”

“How are you going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“Kill yourself!”

“I don’t know...maybe an overdose or something.”

“Awesome.”

“Or maybe I’ll jump off a bridge.”

“Epic.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah. Like it’s soooo hard to choose.”

“Haha freak.”

“Sorry. Want to get some smokes?”

“Yeah.”

“I got some money.”

“OK.”

:-II

**From:** Megan Tregonan [mailto:megtreg@msn.com]

**Sent:** Tuesday, 16 December 2012 4:16 PM

**To:** Rachel Keys

**Subject:** Ways to kill myself

Hey Rach, here’s my list. I’m not sure which one would be best.

What do you think? M x

1. Jump off freeway overpass
2. Shoot myself in school cafeteria
3. Hang myself in Michael’s bedroom
4. Get drunk and walk into lake with rocks in pockets

5. Steal a car and crash into a tree
6. Overdose on heroin or sleeping pills or whatever
7. Run out in front of a bus
8. Gas myself in mom's car
9. Starve to death
10. Slit my wrists in the bath

**From:** Rachel Keys [mailto:keys@comcast.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 16 December 2012 4:21 PM  
**To:** Megan Tregonan  
**Subject:** RE: Ways to kill myself

2 or 3 would get the most attention for sure. 11 might be messy. Maybe you could mix up 4, 5 & 6? Get drunk, take pills, and then crash the car? You want to be dead certain, right? J

**From:** Megan Tregonan [mailto:megtreg@msn.com]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 16 December 2012 4:24 PM  
**To:** Rachel Keys  
**Subject:** RE: Ways to kill myself

Haha.

Not sure how I would get a gun, or heroin. And you're right about 11—mom would kill me...

Maybe hanging's the best...it's easy to get rope, right?

Let's check out Hardware City tomorrow after school.

X-)

"Just get off the stage Megan and quit using some romantic drama as an excuse for not getting anything done."

"It's not an excuse. It's how I'm feeling. Moms are supposed to

care.”

“I do care. I care that you never get your homework done and your grades are slipping; I care that your bedroom is never tidy and that you never lift a finger to help around the house; I care that you can’t say a civil word to me or your brother. I care a lot!”

“Yeah right...haha.”

@

Rachel Keys retweeted

**Megan Tregonan** @megstregs 3m  
RT f u h8 yr mom!!!

>\_>

“This one looks good.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah, it’s really strong but not scratchy like the others, so it won’t hurt your neck.”

“Haha. Is it long enough?”

“Twenty feet. That should be enough, right?”

“I guess so. How much is it?”

“It’s on special for \$4.99. It’s normally \$7.99. That’s pretty good.”

“Yeah cool. OK, let’s get it...Hey Rach, is that cute guy at the checkout looking at me?”

^\_^

**Megan Tregonan** @megstregs 2s  
I luv @HardwareCity haha!!

:-O

“Coming Mom.”

“Have you fed the dog?”

“Yep.”

“And done your homework?”

“Yep.”

“Good. How was school?”

“Great.”

“Great? What am I missing?”

“Haha.”

,!!!!

OMG Rach, wotz yr hrry? we jst got it dis arvo - cn I @ least e@  
my dinA?

sry

idk wen ok? itz gotta B d ryt tym

@ least d rope won't go off

haha

<3

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“You were working here yesterday, right?”

“Yeah. You bought some rope, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Awesome. Was that your friend with you?”

“Rachel? Yeah. She lives in my street. You work here every  
afternoon?”

“No, just Wednesday to Friday.”

“Cool. Is it a good place to work?”

"It's alright. My dad's pretty stoked that I get a 10% staff discount. He's always asking me to pick up stuff for his home workshop. lame, right?"

"Yeah right... What school are you at?"

"Lincoln."

"Cool."

"You?"

"West Stanley... I'm Megan."

"Hi. I'm Paul."

"OK. Well... I've got to go but I'll be here Saturday morning. Maybe I'll see you?"

"Yeah. Hope so."

-:))??

omg hes soooo cute!

who?

hotty @ hardware CT

u dreamin agn ☺?

hs nme s paul

hw do u no?

he tld me

wen?

jst saw him

no way!

yes wa

u sly trol

haha—u wn2 go 2 mal on s@?

wot 4?

dk - jst hng 4 a bit

lol

wot?

hng...gt it?

haha

u gunA tel him?  
tel him wot?  
bout d rope  
wtf! y w%d i do th@?  
jst askN %-)

:-#

“Megan?”  
“Yes mom?”  
“What’s this rope doing under your bed?”  
“Umm...it’s for school.”  
“Planning on tying up your teachers?”  
“Haha.”  
“Well what’s it for?”  
“For...a science experiment.”  
“Well, pick it up please and put it in your bag. I don’t want your stuff lying around everywhere.”  
“OK mom.”

:-/

mom fownd d rope  
omg ru ok?  
yeh itz ok  
w@ DdU sA?  
z twas 4 skool  
G1 - u cUd tak it b2 hardware CT  
noooo i cnt do dat paul wl tink i’m % - )  
no he won’t  
i cnt rach IL l%k despo L cn u?  
y? me?  
coz yr nt a frayD c@ lk me =^.^=



ok IL tak it bk 4U aftr skool  
tnx IL cum ovr 2 yr plce @ 5 xx

>:-(<

“Don’t forget it’s dad’s night tonight.”  
“Do I have to go?”  
“Of course you do. Why?”  
“I was going to Rachel’s place. We were going to hang online.”  
“You’re going to hang yourselves online?”  
“What? Mom! I can’t believe you just said that!”  
“Sorry darling. Poor joke.”  
“Haha.”

:~!

ey rach 4got Ive 2C dad 2nite - cnt cum over - wl txt u l8r

(<\_>)

Rachel Keys @nokey1d i lu ll bt actions spk loudR thN wrds  
#2012TaughtMe

((H))

ey rach i’m finly@ hom - howd u go @ hardware CT?

:~S

rach, u der? txtme

w^

ey rach jst saw yr tweet - ru ok?

{:-/

rach?

\m/<(^\_^)>\m/

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“I’m glad you came.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“I thought my friend Rachel might be here too. You haven’t seen her, have you?”

“No”

“OK...look this might sound a bit random but...did you see Rachel yesterday?”

“No”

“You didn’t?”

“No. Why?”

“She didn’t come in to Hardware City while you were working?”

“No. Come on. I haven’t seen her. Why?”

“No reason.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Sure. Of course. It’s all good. Just wondering..”

“So, do you want to go out for a smoke?”

“No. I’ve got to go.”

“But you only just got here.”

“Yeah I know. Sorry. I thought I’d see Rachel but I think I’ll just go to her house.”

“OK. Well, I guess I’ll see you sometime ...”

“Yeah. Sure. Bye.”

???

Rach wotz ^? y? ddnt u cum 2 d mal? whr r u?

:\*(

You have one unheard message Megan. It's mom. Call me as soon as you get this message.

/:(

Rach dis aint funE NEmor - im getN worid plz txt

:O

ans me!!!

>:-@

RACH?

## THE MISSION

*By Christopher Ray*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION, 2013

I WAS OUT THE front door and down the front walk before my mother could say anything. I didn't look back, but I imagined her standing on the porch shaking her head. When I hit the curb I was in full stride running as fast I could. At the corner I cut through the Ledbetter's lawn so close to the house their stupid dog started barking.

I shifted down at Larsen Street because the light was red—nothing left, nothing right—I cranked it back up as I crossed the street. Now I was running across from “The Alamo”. Not the real Alamo, of course. It was the portable at Ben Dobson Elementary, but we called it the Alamo ever since Miguel re-created our favorite battle

there using half the 5th grade class.

Two houses later I left the sidewalk. Now I was running along the path through “rocket city”. This was really the vacant lot between Miguel’s house and the school playground we converted into Cape Canaveral. There were roads and rocket towers all over. I ran right past the newest launch pad we finished last week. At the back of the lot I jumped onto the cement wall, grabbed the top of the fence and dropped down into Miguel’s back yard.

I ran across a path etched deep in the bare dirt, jumped the short step onto the porch and opened the back door without knocking. Miguel’s older brother was standing at the kitchen sink. He turned around as I hurried past and I heard him say “What the...”, but before he could finish, I was in the living room. The TV was on and there was Miguel—lying face down on the rug.

I stood there panting and tried to decide what to do next. I am not sure why, but what I noticed was the bottom of Miguel’s shoes. He always wore slip-on Keds. And what I noticed about them was the completely smooth soles, no tread at all. No wonder he didn’t like playing baseball. The other thing I noticed was how long his hair had become. Miguel always wore his black hair longer than the rest of us—we mostly favored crew cuts—but now his was almost as long as a girl’s.

No question Miguel was different. Miguel was the only person I knew who didn’t have a father. His father had died in some kind of accident. I didn’t know anyone who only had a mother and I had never known anyone who died. But Miguel’s father had died. We spent a lot of time together and we talked about every subject imaginable, but we never talked about his dad. And his mother worked; she was almost never at the house when I was there. My father worked at General Dynamics, but of course my mother didn’t work. Who would stay home and take care of my baby brother? Miguel often had to take a break from our missions to take care of his younger brother.

Miguel’s family was Catholic, but they never went to church. We

were Baptists and we went to church twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday. My dad said that you could tell what someone really believed by how they spent their time. I guess that is true. Miguel spent a lot of time building rockets and re-creating famous battles.

When we studied the Texas War for Independence Miguel told me our teacher didn't really know anything about the Alamo and was actually wrong about some things she told us. This was a new thing to me. Not so much that adults might be wrong, but thinking it was one thing and saying it was another. Last summer I helped him stage the battle of the Alamo at the school. Miguel played the role of Col. William Travis. I remember telling my dad about this and he thought it was very funny that the part of Travis was played by a Mexican. I guess I hadn't really thought about it.

Last year Miguel became very interested in astronomy. Of course he built his own telescope. He even ground the mirrors which is not exactly easy to do. Then there was the space program. All of us were space nuts, but with Miguel it was different. It was like it became part of his life.

Starting with the later Gemini missions, Miguel created a "shadow" astronaut corp. For each mission he assigned the roles of the astronauts, the flight director and someone to be CAP COM—Capsule Communications. I was CAP COM for this flight and that meant I was an astronaut as well—only an astronaut was good enough to talk to other astronauts while they were in space.

Tonight the living room was set up for our mission the way we left it on Tuesday afternoon. There were cards on the coffee table for FLIGHT and CAP COM. Three chairs from the kitchen were set up to the left of the TV with small tables in front of each one labeled with the names of Grissom, White and Chaffee. On a table next to the TV was the "Resource Center" which held Revell models of the Saturn V, the Apollo Command Service Module, several notebooks and our Estes version of Apollo One.

Mission control was just part of the plan. Since this was a space flight, there would be an actual launch. We planned to launch our model the same day as the real thing if we could. And each mission

required we keep a mission notebook with as much information about our role as we could assemble from newspaper clippings, stuff sent from NASA and notes we had taken from TV or library books or magazines.

Miguel still hadn't moved since I got there. I realized I had to say something, so I called his name, "Miguel?"

He rolled over, got up, sat on the couch and said, "They're gone."

I said, "You don't think they could have used the escape rocket?"

Miguel, 'No way, wouldn't have done any good, would only help if the booster were on fire. This fire was in the capsule. They're dead."

Eventually CBS came on with a special news report officially announcing that all three Apollo 1 astronauts had been killed in a fire that broke out during a training exercise just hours ago. The special didn't go into any detail about what happened, it was mostly just telling about the lives of the three astronauts. Stuff we knew.

At 9:30 Miguel said, "Go home, we will get everyone tomorrow and go over it.

As it turned out it was more than a week before we got the whole team together. Miguel surprised me when he said we could have the team meeting on the following Saturday because his mother usually didn't want kids around on Saturday morning. I spent the time collecting every photo or news story I could find and pasting them into my notebook. On Friday, Newsweek and Time came out and there was finally some real information. That afternoon I gathered up all my space stuff and sat on my bed to add the new pictures to my notebook. Before I met Miguel I kept a scrapbook with news clippings of Mercury and Gemini flights. Now I had a "Mission Book" for each launch. I flipped through the Mercury and Gemini flights. One picture showed Ed White's spacewalk. He floated in space attached to the Gemini 3 capsule by a thin cable that looked a little like a garden hose. Nothing but blue earth below him and black space beyond.

When I arrived at Miguel's on Saturday morning the room was

already set up. There were placards on the coffee table for FLIGHT and CAP COM and Miguel sat in his seat at the far end of the couch. There were the three kitchen chairs to the left of the TV for the three astronauts: Grissom, White, and Chaffee.

I sat down at my seat, placed my notebook on the coffee table and opened it. The first page was a NASA picture. It showed the three astronauts in their space suits standing in front of the Saturn V gantry. Time Magazine printed the same picture on the cover that week. Ed White stood in the middle and Grissom and Chaffee looked very small on either side of him. What I noticed that morning was these yellow rubber boot covers the three astronauts were wearing. They were designed to keep dust or dirt from getting in the capsule. Even the smallest foreign object in the weightlessness of space might cause a problem. The astronauts would have removed them before entering the capsule.

I looked up when Miguel spoke.

“We are not going to make it to the moon by end of the decade,” he said.

I didn’t understand why he would say this. I had read the same stuff he had read, but I didn’t get this.

I replied, “Sure we will. There are already three more command modules and it won’t take long to get the backup ready.”

“But we don’t know why this happened?”

“So?”

“So, I don’t think people want to see astronauts die on TV.”

When Franky, Stephen, and Kyle arrived, they took their seats in the kitchen chairs, but didn’t say anything.

Miguel had prepared a kind of script from the Time article that outlined what had happened in a step by step manner. It was pretty quiet after the part where Grissom said, “Fire! We’ve got a fire in the cockpit!”

When we finished the script Miguel went over to the first chair and ripped Grissom’s name card off the TV tray. He placed it in the mission notebook. He shut the book and said, “Gus Grissom, Command Pilot—deceased.”



He did the same for Edward White. When Miguel got to Roger Chaffee's seat, Kyle started crying. Which is exactly what I would have expected of Kyle and exactly why we only let him be Chaffee instead of Grissom or White. But Miguel just ignored him, tore off the name card and said:

"Roger Chaffee, Pilot, deceased."

Miguel wasn't done yet. He led us out to rocket city and the pad we had built for our Apollo 1 launch. Somehow he had rigged the model with black powder. I wanted to say something because I was thinking of all the time and the money we had put into making that model. Couldn't we still fly it? Wouldn't that be a good tribute? But Miguel always knew the right thing to do so I kept my mouth shut.

Miguel let Franky light the fuse and the five of us watched as a flame crawled along the ground up the side of the rocket and then the entire upper part of it went up in a flash. The smell reminded me of the time I lit off a whole pack of Black Cats on the 4th of July. A small puff of smoke drifted away a few feet above the ground.

We stared at the gantry which was blackened on the side where the rocket had burned. Miguel signaled to me and I fired a blank gun three times. It was supposed to be a 21-gun salute, but we only had three blanks.

We walked back to Miguel's house.

That was the last time the Apollo One mission team was all together in one place. At school Miguel wouldn't even talk to Franky or Stephen or Kyle. Miguel still master minded some missions, but he never again named astronaut crews.

On Sundays I got up at 4 a.m. so I would have time to get my paper route done and get cleaned up for church. The papers were bigger thanks to all the advertising and I would sit and fold the papers before loading my bag because it made the ride a lot more fun. Rolling them as you pedaled could be done, but it was much more work. One good thing about Sunday was I didn't need to go

down to the 7-11 and wait on the sidewalk because the route manager would drop the bundles in my front yard.

The part I liked most was sitting out front under our dim porch light waiting for Mr. Hansen and his green Malibu. There were no cars, there were no people, it sort of felt like I was the only one left alive on earth.

I would sit there on the cold cement porch with my back against the rough bricks of the house, look out at the night sky lit by the moon and the stars and sometimes I would go into a kind of trance. Not really awake but not quite asleep. And sometimes I would have this feeling, I know it sounds crazy, but it would seem like my soul left my body and floated out there in the sky looking down on everything and everyone, even me. It made me think of those big box kites I flew before I met Miguel. I could see myself as a kite flying up high in a warm wind, but somehow my body was still down there holding on to the string. This Sunday as I sat there and thought about the three dead astronauts it seemed like my soul was floating further out than usual. And this morning it felt like the kite string was very thin, just a thread that might break at any moment and allow the kite to float free and drift far, far away.

## BENEATH THE SURFACE

*By Robert Birchard*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION II, 2013

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION I, 2012

**S**AMMY WAS SURE he understood the small town where he lived. Seventeen years old, he waited unmoving in the hallway outside the high school gymnasium, ready to step forward when Ken appeared. He knew that saying “Hi” wouldn’t be enough; Sammy needed to enthrall him—that’s how important it was for their happiness. He was nervous so he prepared for this event by reciting his litany. He found this affirmation necessary a couple times a day, even on days of ordinary magnitude.

He started: White-tailed deer in the back yard, raccoons on the porch, brown bears in the garbage dump and 1000 people keeping up on their neighbors’ affairs—the interpenetrating activity of a

small town. People are especially interested in me; I have to be careful.

Sammy's concentration was disturbed by boys from the Auto Club dashing past, making sounds of downshifting into a turn, then accelerating into a straightaway, pretending to skid on the snow that was falling outside, even though the school hallway was dry. They do all this on purpose, he thought; everyone knew he didn't like noise. So cover your ears but don't change the expression on your face.

Allegheny River town, he mumbled, able to hear his own voice better now. Mostly peaceful on the surface, unless you're Seneca repatriated from up at Buffalo, who have the idea that they're natives. Apart from them, it's all white. If everyone were a little more varied, there'd be less pressure.

Sammy executed a 90 degree right turn and glanced up and down the hall.

Oil. It's still here, must have been a lot of it. The state's most lucrative natural resource, discovered under a kitchen garden in 1875; fourth grade I learned that. Those oil wells produced the town's gentry. Eighty years later there's still a small refinery. When the wind blows right, you know this fact.

The Auto Boys were gone. Sammy dropped his hands but he had become upset; he grasped one hand with the other, squeezing first the right, then the left, over and over. He needed another turn, so he made it.

He hurried on: Oh, Ken! Not 'Kenny'; don't call him 'Kenny.' Just moved here and he likes this town, but I want him to see it through my eyes. My eyes see so much more. After graduation, we'll move in together, I'll teach English, he'll coach all the high school sports and teach Civics and Hygiene.

Sammy's image of it all was dreamy. It included a Labrador Retriever and occasionally an adopted orphan boy. But at the center of the dream was Ken. Sammy himself was cute enough—small, thin, with pale freckled skin, copper hair, verdigris eyes—but Ken was the tight end on the football team and an Eagle Scout. Ken

had the muscular torso of the Archangel Gabriel and beautiful, long eyelashes.

Sammy opened the door to the gym just a crack and peeked in. No Ken. He leaned against the wall lockers. 90 degrees more. He winced at the next part.

Logging is still big.

Sammy balled up his right hand, pushed it up to his mouth and bit hard in the usual place. In 1948, when Sammy was seven, his father had been killed in a logging accident. Sammy couldn't do his litany without remembering—his mother at the door, the policeman with his hat off and Ma'am, there's been an accident. May I come in?

Sammy's mother never recovered from the death. As Sammy entered his teen years and began responding less to his surroundings and more to his voices and visions, she also withdrew. Just after his fifteenth birthday he found her in the back yard. Because it was obvious she had been dead for hours, he didn't go for help until he had cut her down and pulled her inside and up onto the couch. Sammy refused to live with anyone else in town and no one forced him. The vice-president of the local bank gave him money every week out of his parents' insurance funds. He continued to get excellent grades at school. He kept the house and lawn tidy.

So Sammy had to get through this part of his recitation every time, even the vague, uneasy image, in the mirror of the townspeople, that he was strange. He couldn't get rid of the bad things, but he had been able to add Ken. After a minute when he was done with his hand, his mood flipped and he soared.

Ken will give me his class ring. I'll be ringed by him. I'll be pinned.

Sammy smiled, hugging himself and rocking back and forth. Ringed, pinned, ringed, pinned. Taken and molded, melded.

It was a song and he sang it over and over. He would have kept going until he was exhausted but some girls from the cheerleading squad walked past. Although they did not make eye contact with him, it was just as bad for Sammy as remembering his parents.

One of the girls, Lilith, was Ken's steady.

Lilith. She makes out like a goddess, but I see what no one else sees. Just beneath the surface, crouched, slippery, black and taloned. Satan himself is going after Ken and he is using Lilith to get him.

Sammy had to save him.

"Ken."

The football player looked up. The cheerleaders had gone and Sammy's patience was rewarded.

"Huh?"

"I'm Sammy." He started with something simple. "We're in English together. Do you like to travel?"

Ken stopped and he appeared to search for a reply. "English?"

"I sit in the back corner. Behind you."

"Travel?" A moment passed. Then Ken gave a weak smile. "Oh, yeah, you're always waving your hand. You're really good at English, I know. Didn't know you travelled, too,"

"I'm good at English because I was born here."

"Well, yeah, but it's the same language for me. I'm from Ohio. English there, and a few Canadian Frenchies. I only speak English."

Sammy was rocking again. "Do you like to travel?"

"Like where I came from? It was OK. This town has a better football team. But I've never really travelled. Ohio, Pennsylvania. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, really OK. You're an Eagle Scout. I'll be an Eagle Scout soon."

"Uh-huh."

"You're the new tight end."

Ken dropped his books into his locker as if giving up. "Yup, you got me nailed, Sammy. English-speaking Eagle Scout football player. I'm Catholic, too. Do unto others and all that. What's your thing?" He grinned.

"I see things, I hear things. I gather information. I filter and sort

it.”

“Information?” Ken put a heavy emphasis on the third syllable, as if he might have misunderstood.

Sammy rattled off, “I know where the next oil well should be drilled. The time it would take to evacuate everyone if the Kinzua Dam were to fail catastrophically, and the number of people who would drown. How many of our teachers are committing adultery. What people are thinking about me.” All this information was unknown to anyone else so Sammy knew he had Ken’s attention now.

“Uh-huh.” Ken put his hands in the pockets of his sweat pants and adjusted himself while he thought. “Me, I do best at physical stuff. Lilith says I think with my hands.” Ken’s eyes searched up and down the hallway. Lilith wasn’t there.

Sammy decided to tell him the truth about Lilith later on, so he just said, “You have wonderful hands, Ken.”

“Yeah, OK. Hey, buddy, I gotta go do laps.” He gestured out a window. “Even in December weather like this. Thanks for saying ‘Hi.’ We’ll talk again.” He ran into the gymnasium and shouted at his team, “OK, maggots, put your cleats on and let’s run!”

Sammy hummed and thought, I’ll send him a thank you note for today and tell him to start wearing his Eagle Scout kerchief when he plays a game.

The alarm went off as the team charged outside through the emergency exit from the locker room. Normally the noise upset Sammy, but now it was filled with Ken.

Two days later at school, Sammy stood reading in the doorway of the Advanced Placement room when Ken came up behind him. The football player was rolling his shoulders forward and back and twisting his neck from side to side as he did before a game.

“Sammy! Hey, let’s talk. In here, this room’s empty.”

Sammy jumped and whirled around but when he saw who it was, his face lit up. “Third period, this room is always empty. Last year it was Geometry, the year before, Algebra. It’s a four year cycle, but no one signed up for Algebra II except me. Trig’s a lost cause.

It's a really small school, mostly logger kids and farmer kids." His explanation tumbled out.

Ken closed the door. "The note you mailed. A uniform, they're kind of all alike, you know that. And Coach wouldn't like the neck thing."

"Neckerchief." Ken was darker today, Sammy thought. Make him feel better. "I've been going to your games, Ken, I've seen you energize the team. They'll follow you anywhere, right past Coach."

"And my brothers saw the letter. They thought it was from Lilith. I told them to go to hell, but..."

Sammy narrowed his eyes and focused a hazy, shaded spot of wall just above Ken's shoulder. Was it Lilith? He blinked his eyes a few times to test his idea.

"Sammy? What's wrong?"

He stopped blinking. Reassure him. "You can always talk with me, Ken, I see and hear what other people miss. I'm an ultra-wide receiver. I can help you." He cupped one hand behind his ear to demonstrate, in case Ken didn't get it. "I sense the undertone, the nuance. I know the deep things." He forced himself to look Ken in the eyes and not make any turns, though this meant he might be looking into Lilith's eyes as well, which was certainly dangerous.

Judging by the rigid muscles of his face, Ken didn't seem to be reassured. "Sammy, what are you talking about? Do you want to talk about scouts? Merit badges? Are you sick? Do you have a fever?"

"I'm fine. I have nearly all the merit badges." This was not true, but Sammy didn't want to get off track.

"All right. We're gonna be OK, but no more notes. Only girls send notes. Look, Buddy, I want to be friends. But we're guys, right?" The football player made a sound like a laugh, opened the door and walked away.

Sammy stayed in the room. The wall shadow had disappeared. Lilith must have followed Ken, he thought. Putting his hand into his pocket, he found the dirty cotton sock he had taken from Ken's gym bag earlier in the day. It was still damp with sweat. He pressed



it against his leg for comfort, but he had to say his litany again.

That night Sammy laid the sock on his pillow and pretended Ken was in bed with him.

There was a paper due Friday in the boy's English class, on Shakespeare. Ken had worried out loud about it because he needed to practice all week with the football team and didn't have time to write. Sammy had been watching the team scrimmage and run new plays; he had a hiding place under the metal bleachers and it was from this vantage point that he saw his next move.

I'll write Ken's paper. Get it to him without anyone else knowing.

The following day Sammy couldn't see anyone in the Junior Class hallway so he slipped the paper into Ken's locker. After he poked it in, he leaned against the metal, shut his eyes and put his nose to the air vent.

Delicious. His team jacket. Sneakers. Old scarf that he never washes.

Sammy took hold of the lock to steady himself.

He wraps his arms around me, I run my hands up his sides and feel the soft hair underneath his arms. He holds me, just holds me. He has a rich aroma like damp forest soil.

Sammy breathed him in. He was sure that Ken would change soon, though of course they would have to be discreet. Glances in the hallway, walks in the snow, a hideaway in the woods.

Lost in his thoughts, Sammy didn't hear the angry voices until they were right behind him.

"What's this, Sammy?" It was Ken.

The boy couldn't open his eyes right away. When he did, he pivoted unevenly. "Oh, hello Ken. Hi guys."

"What the hell, Sammy?" Two linebackers were with Ken and one of them said, "He was trying to steal your stuff."

"No, I was giving him a paper..."

"He's lying to you, Ken. It's obvious he was stealing. You need to teach him a lesson."

Ken's face was red but he hesitated.

The other football player said, "We're gonna hurt you, pansy."

Ken had been staring at the floor but now he looked up. "Jesus, Sammy, I don't get it, why do you do these things?" Then, "OK, guys, it's just him, he's a little out there."

Sammy didn't move. Ken looked around, shifted from one foot to another and said, "Go on, Sammy. You should go."

But the linebackers blocked Sammy's path. "No way! He was ripping you off, Ken." They pushed Sammy against the wall and the edge of the locker air vent sliced the skin on the back of his head.

With more heat, Ken said, "Skip it, for God's sake. You're each twice his size."

They leered. "Oh, do you like him, Ken? Are you gonna be his big strong man?"

Sammy was crying softly but when he began to shuffle away, someone tripped him; he landed on the floor in the midst of the football players and didn't try to move again.

Stepping over Sammy, Ken placed one foot against him and nudged him to safety. Now it was his team mates who were pressed against the wall. In a trembling voice he said, "You stupid jerks. You know Lilith and I are together. You're nothing but bullies. But I won't let you bully my friend."

The linebackers glanced at each other, looking offended but staying silent. After a minute, Sammy sat up and held his handkerchief to the back of his head. Ken helped him stand. "Go see the nurse, dammit; she'll bandage it for you."

Sammy inched down the hall. It wasn't the way he had imagined it happening, but it was good. Ken was definitely on his side now.

Ken turned back to Sammy's attackers. "You tell anyone about this or do anything to him, I'll break your f\*\*\*ing arms." Then he swept off, away from them and Sammy.

Main Street was decorated for Christmas. There was a foot of snow that at night took on faint pastel colors from holiday lights in the store windows. People crowded the sidewalks, strolling up and

down the six-block business center even after they had spent all their money. At the largest intersection was a Christmas tree and a crèche. For a couple hours every night, the plastic figurines were replaced by real people and real animals.

After the hallway incident, Sammy spent three days in the house. When he ran out of food, he waited for dark and headed for Kroger's on Main Street. There had been a dry snow during the day but now the temperature rose to near freezing and the air was damp, with uncertain gusts of wind from every direction.

Sammy had almost reached at the supermarket when he spotted Ken and Lilith. They were outside the jewelry store. When Lilith went inside, Ken stood looking into the window.

Sammy approached. "Ken."

The football player turned with a big smile on his face. "Hey, Sammy, how are you? Fabulous decorations, huh? I love Christmas."

"Ken, I..." Sammy stopped. In the cold, the cut on his scalp began to throb.

"Hope your head's better. Most kids who play sports aren't that stupid, but a few are." He turned his eyes back to the store display as he continued. "Buddy, you're gonna hear this sooner or later so I'll tell you now. You can guess, it's about me and Lilith. We're kind of engaged. I'm giving her my ring. You'll still be my friend, though. OK? You can be friends with both of us." Ken was speaking more softly than usual.

Sammy froze for a few moments, then leaned his head against the plate glass. The display was sparkling and bright and it gave him a headache, so he closed his eyes. Light coming through his eyelids made a red scrim. Incised against it were sharp, black shapes. They flew, they cackled, they danced. When Sammy tried to push them away, they were spongy to his touch. They smelled of rotted flesh, so bad that Sammy gagged. There was flapping and Lilith hurled herself toward him, grew to enormous size, then faded around the back of his brain as if she had got inside.

The snow was turning to sleet and through all his hallucinations, Sammy could hear people hurrying home. He sensed Ken move

a little. "Don't!" Sammy said, though he wasn't sure if he spoke it out loud. He reeled and steadied himself on the window glass. Opening his eyes, he seized Ken's arm and spit out, "Don't! She'll hurt you." Ken drew back, so Sammy said it louder, pleading now. "She'll hurt you. Help me! Please, stay with me! I need you."

Ken yanked his arm away and Sammy almost fell. Lilith emerged from the store, her voice mingling with the sound of bells; she opened a box and showed Ken her purchase.

He, Sammy, had failed. Lilith had won. He couldn't stay but as he staggered off, he saw Ken fasten the new necklace around his girlfriend's neck, his ring now dangling from it.

It was the river that stopped Sammy's wandering. The storm had picked up and sleet was falling hard. He took off his jacket, lurched sideways against a tree and stooped to untie his shoelaces and pull off his shoes. The wind howled down the river, twisting voices into a vortex around him. Sammy screamed back. Then holding his hands to his ears, he set his face back to the river and edged forward. When both his feet were in the water, he felt himself begin to separate from the town and the storm.

The water is burning cold but Ken is hot, he's burning up the weak parts of me.

Sammy had a new litany and from long practice, his own voice began to override the others.

Another step, up to my knees; the current is starting to pull.

Go further. To my waist and the cleansing really begins. I must be immolated in his fire.

To my chest. I am suffused with him, bursting into flame. To my neck. To my chin. To my lips and over. Soon it will be over.

Beneath the surface, all the voices died away. He drifted a long time alone, surfacing for a few seconds, then sinking and hitting rocks along the bottom of the river. When his pounding heart slowed to a few beats per minute, Sammy felt Ken fill him and he sank into his boyfriend's love.

## THE CRESTING WATERS...OR MILDRED LEARNS TO SWIM

*By Jennifer Fliss*

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION II, 2013

CERTIFICATE PROGRAM IN LITERARY FICTION I, 2012

“M<sub>A</sub>’AM, YOU’RE GONNA need to leave the premises,” the man at the door—a boy really—is saying while the storm begins its assault. The wind whips around the small old Cape Cod. Rain pelts the boy and the house, growing angrier by the minute.

“No, it’s okay, son, I’ll be fine,” Mildred says as she returns to the kitchen sink and wipes her mug dry. She makes sure she gets every last drop of water before placing it in the rusty drying rack. The mug reads *Elderica House, A Place For You* in generic white cursive. Also in the drying rack is a single wineglass, speckled, but clean. She motions for the young man to step inside. The house smells of burnt coffee with the vaguely herbal notes of marijuana.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Steve,” he answers as he closes the door behind him, loose leaves and rogue raindrops follow and settle on the laminate. His hair is scraggly and his bright orange safety vest exaggerates the redness of his acne. Beneath the ruddiness, the boy’s chin is barely present and his eyes are runny and small, but his cheekbones are high and friendly. He looks like Walter.

“You look hungry. Are you hungry Steve? Why don’t you have a seat,” she points to a chair at the kitchen table and pulls a triangular chocolate bar from a drawer where there are several more, a lighter that is out of fuel, and green leafy crumbs.

“Ma’am, I can’t. We have to evacuate the area. The storm is real close. A surge is expected. This whole area could be under water in...uh...I don’t know...real soon.”

“I know the dangers of the area son. We’ve had storms. We’ve had flooding,” Mildred scolds. “You’ve still got some time yet.”

“I’m not sure about that. I don’t...I um...” Steve stammers.

“Have a seat,” she points again with a wooden spoon. “I won’t keep you long.”

“Ma’am I’ve got orders to -”

“Sit!” He sits. She brings him a mug of coffee—this one reading “World’s Best Aunt”—that she has just brewed. She pours some for herself in the newly cleaned old age home mug. The shutters awaken, thrashing the clapboard house. Steve stands, alarmed.

“Oh, that happens if it even *thinks* about raining,” she says. “Walter was supposed to hammer them back in. Toblerone?”

“Walter?” Steve asks. “Your son?”

“No. Not my son,” she says choosing to leave the question in the air. “So Steve, you’re married.” It was not a question and she nods to his hand, where a thin gold wedding band clutches his finger. She breaks off a triangle of chocolate and hands it to him. She no longer wears hers.

“A year and a half,” he says.

“A year and a half,” she repeats.

“Actually, one year, eight months, four days,” he corrects.

“Well, *that* is a marriage still in its infancy. I just love Toblerone. It used to be harder to find. When Walter and I would go up to Canada we’d stock up at those stores. You know...Duty Free?” she says and motions to the yellow Toblerone bag on the counter. She joins Steve at the table. The lights flicker and threaten to go out.

“I’ve got a generator,” she says. “So, now tell me about your bride.”

“We really have to go,” Steve says as he starts to edge his chair back.

“Is there any flooding yet?” Mildred asks pointing outside.

“No, but—”

“Right, there’s still time yet,” Mildred interrupts.

“Well, I guess just a minute or two.”

“Go on then,” Mildred says as she takes a seat and bites into the chocolate. “Your wife.”

“I uh...I’m married to her. I love her. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Mildred repeats. “And?”

“And uh...there’s Carina. That’s our little girl.”

“That’s a pretty name,” Mildred says.

“It means caring,” Steve says, turning the band on his finger. It comes off easily and he rolls it around his fingers.

“You love your baby so much, don’t you? How about your wife?” Mildred asks. “Well, uh. She’s really nice.”

“Nice. Nice!?! Really young man. Those lilies are *nice*. What’s wrong then?”

“Nothing.”

“Pardon my language, but, like hell,” Mildred chirps.

“It’s just hard on her. Y’know. The baby keeps her awake and I...I have this job that keeps me gone all the time. It’s new, y’know?” he says.

“New?”

“My job. It’s only my third week. Kind of crazy right? That this big storm comes around.” Outside, the rain is hammering the siding and the roof, quickly ping ping, like bullets. The lights falter again.

Steve thrusts his seat back. "Come on. This just isn't safe. You know it's not. Let's go," he says and starts to get up. "Ma'am—"

"Mildred," she corrects and places her hand on his knee, keeping him at the table. She nudges his cup of coffee, encouraging him to drink, plying him with chocolate.

"Mildred, I'm sorry but I am supposed to get you and everyone else out of their houses. It's...like, you know, my first big...event. And everyone else already left."

"The Shiffs next door?" Mildred asks.

"Green house?"

"Mhm."

"Yeah, they left."

"Wisners?" she asks.

"Which house?"

"Brick one across the way. Newlyweds, you know. Everyone's got their problems son," Mildred says.

"Yes, they're gone too. Mildred, you're the only one left on the block. Maybe in the whole neighborhood. It's just you. By yourself. You're not safe."

"Steve. I have no intention of leaving. You go right on ahead without me. Tell your boss I wasn't here. Here, take this." She hands him a full chocolate bar from her drawer stash. "It'll be a long night. You'll get hungry. And finish your coffee. I hope you don't mind me saying, but it looks like you need it." Steve sips and winces.

"I know. Most people don't like it. What I really liked was Chock Full o' Nuts. Remember?"

"I—"

"No, No. Of course you don't. You're just a young thing. You could be my grandson."

"Where are they? Your grandkids?"

"Oh, it was just me and Walter. Steve, I'm not going without you. I told you that. So you should go on now," Mildred says and goes to the sink to clean her now empty mug. The shutters grow more aggressive. "Go on to your wife and daughter."



“Ma’am. Mildred. I won’t leave without you.”

“How much time do you think we have?” she asks.

“Not sure. Hour? Half hour? Maybe less. I don’t really know.”

Steve guesses.

Mildred thinks for a moment. “Oh! We’re still good for a while. Like the storm back in ’85. Everyone was a fright but it turned out just fine. Evacuated the whole town for nothing. But I’ll be quick so you can go on with your work.”

“I told you I won’t—”

“Then maybe I’ll go with you. All right?”

Sheets of water drive against the glass. The twitching shadows of trees maraud against the linoleum floor in the dim light. The wind howls at the door, huffing and puffing to be let in. Inside, it’s warm and calm.

Steve seems to think about it. “Okay,” he mutters.

“Do you swim Steve?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I never liked to swim. Never learned. Was too scared as a child when my Pa wanted to give me lessons. Nicholas and Warren—those were my brothers—they took to water like fish. Scaly slimy things, they were. Not me, I just sat with my mother helping her knit or reading books all those summers on the beach. Didn’t bother me none. So there I am eighty years old and Walter—fully aware of my, well...my...phobia—surprises me for my birthday with a bottle of Pinot Grigio and a rowboat!”

The whipping shutters intensify. They strike in cadence with the steadily falling rain. A wail from an ambulance or fire truck in the distance cries out.

“It’s getting worse. Listen to that,” Steve says.

“Oh, just another minute,” she reaches for his mug and takes it to the sink. Then Steve is behind her and carefully takes her elbow.

“Come on Mildred. Let’s go,” he says. But she shakes him off. Reaches for another Toblerone. Unwraps it. Hands him half; a dainty chocolate triangle.

“So, there it was. The man I’d been with for nearly sixty years

making a present of my worst fear. 'No way,' I told him. 'Worst present ever,' I said—and let me tell you this Steve, he was very good at giving utterly ridiculous gifts. He once got me some hard-to-find replacement bobbin for a sewing machine. I have never owned a sewing machine in my life! Valentine's Day after Valentine's Day of romance novels. Hate 'em. Give me a mystery or thriller any day. And those covers! Eventually it became a joke between us. Here, let me show you something." Mildred leads Steve into the hallway near the stairs. At least thirty small wooden frames line the walls in neat rows. There are so many they sweep down the hall and up to the second floor landing. Each filled with a romance novel cover; shiny half-dressed men with long blond hair and obscene muscles stroke women with robust cleavage, titles like *Her Rocky Mountain Protector*, *Champagne for Charlotte*, and *Love and Other Cures*.

"Now this is something you miss out on with all those electronic books these days!" Mildred laughs.

"That is something I haven't ever seen before," he says. Just then the lights shudder and the power goes out with an electric gasp. "That means it's time to go," Steve says. "Are you ready?" He reaches out for Mildred, grasping at air. The wind bellows. The rain pounds. In the dark, it is almost soothing.

"Oh Steve, I told you I was going to stay. You go on." Her voice has moved further away, back towards the kitchen.

"But you said—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I simply can't. Please pardon an old lady wanting to tell her story. Sometimes there are stories worth hearing but there are never people to listen to them." Mildred feels her way along the wall, following the familiar path, counting the frames with her fingertips.

"Mildred?" he calls, but only the storm responds, an intruder threatening at the door. Then a roar and the electricity winks back.

"Generator," she says as she greets him in the hallway. She hands him one of the romance novel frames, *The Hardness of Love*. "Here," Mildred says, "one of our favorites." She takes a seat on the bottom

step and continues. A thin pond of water is forming on the old wood beneath her feet.

“So there Walter is. A bottle of wine in one hand, a huge wooden oar in the other and a stupid grin. ‘Surprise!’ he yelled. Surprise indeed! And then he went on to explain how much work he had done to get the boat from Andy Little down the way and the wine was a such and such vintage. And isn’t it a great night and the stars are out, and on and on. It was so sweet. Then he pulled out a giant Toblerone. One of those king-sized ones. *That*, he’d gotten right. He’d gone to so much trouble. Steven, have you ever done marijuana?”

Steve stutters. “Uh, well, I—”

“It’s okay son, Walter and I would do it all the time when we were younger. Smoke down, as you kids call it.”

“Smoke up,” Steve corrects.

“We’d sit in the pool out back and smoke up and snack on Toblerone and Walter would read the stars. Of course, he had no idea what he was talking about. ‘That’s the big dipper,’ he’d say and then point to Orion’s belt.”

“You have a pool? But I thought you didn’t—”

“We had it emptied when we bought the house. It was a big hit with the neighborhood kids. Though I’m sure they would’ve preferred it filled. So anyway, my birthday. Walter looked so proud of himself. So, well, I went ahead and did it. He put the moldy life vest over my head. And off we went on the lake. Further and further we went out. Occasionally one of those power boat monstrosities whizzed by, obnoxiously setting our little boat and my heart into convulsions. My fingers went numb and I ached from clutching the sides of the boat. I think at that point Walter knew enough not to rock the boat, literally. ‘Okay Walter, that was great, now let’s go back,’ I told him. He just smiled his wicked little smile—he *was* devilishly handsome. He looked a little like you, actually. All shaggy hair and squinty eyes. He said he had a surprise. As if this adventure wasn’t enough of a surprise!

“Then we could hear the motor of another one of those bully

boats nearing. I braced myself. It was getting closer. Closer than any of the others before it. Closer and then closer and before I could even see it, our boat went under and I was tossed out. Oh! I have never been so scared in my life. I went under briefly, though long enough to think I would never surface. But then was buoyed up by my vest. That stinking life vest. The stinking life vest that Walter gave me. I knew that Walter didn't swim too well himself. To waste the life vest on me, when he was just as useless as me."

Steve's walkie talkie crackles to life with admonishments and orders, spit through the electronic waves. He lowers the volume. Steve leans in to hear Mildred through the storm battering the house.

"I floundered around a little then stopped. I floated there calling for Walter. And then I heard him. 'Marco!' is what he was shouting. Can you believe it? I returned with 'Polo!' thinking he would draw nearer. Until I couldn't hear the 'Marco' anymore. I tried and tried to reach him. But I couldn't really tell where he was. I finally made my way to the shore and stood looking for him. If I tried to find a phone, I could've missed him, you understand. I scanned the water. I think I might have seen the splashing of water in the distance, but who knows. I don't know how long I stood there at the shore. Useless. And then I went wailing up the hill to the nearby restaurant to call 911. Of course, it was too late.

"And so I was ready for this Steve, you understand? I was planning on it," Mildred says into the darkening room. It seemed the generator was losing power. "This time, I can save him," she says looking out a window. The wind whistles through a crack between the window and the sill. A crash comes from the other room, glass breaks.

"I'm so sorry," Steve says.

"I am ready to go now. I didn't know where or when. But I knew—" Mildred trails off. Another window blows out upstairs. "Now please," Mildred says as she stands. "Go on." She turns to go upstairs, taking each step deliberately. She knows it will be her last time. The voice in Steve's walkie talkie grows more insistent. This

time, he turns it up.

“All hands must evacuate and meet search and rescue in ten minutes, at nine-oh-five, at the corner of 3rd and Beach,” fizzles the voice.

Steve hollers up the stairs. “Mildred! Please! You promised!”

She turns. “Yes, I know. And I’m sorry son. But I’ve made other promises.”

“Well I won’t go then. I’ll stay right here. With you,” Steve says.

“You will do no such thing. You will go back to your family. They need you.”

“But —

“Son, I’m an old woman. It’s okay.”

“Ma’am.”

“Mildred.”

“Mildred. Please,” he says. Mildred nods and as she walks up the stairs, she wipes each of the frames clear of dust.

“Mildred!” Steve cries. She does not respond, but begins to sing. Off-key.

In her bedroom, with the wind spilling through a broken window, Mildred pours herself into the bathing suit, the black-brown lycra stretching at her midline, the v-neck drooping a little low, expressing her wilted cleavage and loose décolletage. She admires the woman in the mirror. Could that really be her? Not the same body she had at twenty, when she had met Walter. Not even the body she had at seventy. But not bad for eighty one, she surmises.

“Oof!” She cries as she steps backwards on the carpet, away from the old woman. On tiptoes, she walks to her bed and sits, struggling to access the bottom of her foot. She finally manages and sees the sparkle glint of glass. She takes a deep breath and pulls the shard out. A small thread of blood blooms and she cradles her foot. There she waits. She isn’t sure how long or exactly what she is waiting for. More glass explodes throughout the house. From the backyard, she hears the rasp sounds of metal being pulled or twisted. The pool ladder, she thinks.

After Walter died, Mildred would sit inside the empty pool in

the backyard smoking marijuana cigarettes. She'd sit for hours in the bottom staring up from the deep well with the ghost of love and pool parties. It had been years since she had smoked. Not since she and Walter were in their thirties. Then, Walter had been the one to get it. After Walter died, she wondered if she could get some herself. Turns out it is not hard for an old lady to obtain the drug as you might think. *For pain*, she had said. *For pain*, they said as they handed her the prescription. So in the weeks after Walter died, Mildred would sit in the empty pool, the tile cooling her back through her shirt, smoke pot and eat Toblerone and wonder how despite being in a pool, she was not, in fact floating. It was then she decided she would join Walter. Over a joint and exotic-seeming nougat filled chocolate, alone.

Then she hears it, faint, but distinct, "Marco!"

She goes out onto the upper landing. The storm is encroaching even further. The water is now asserting itself at the midway point up the stairs. It laps at the walls, discoloring the creamy floral wallpaper. Even in the murky dark, the shadow of the frame where the sun bleached the wallpaper around *The Hardness of Love* is visible. This is where the water reached, they will say, where the red roses have blushed harder and grown darker. This is how high.

She steps into the water and slowly eases her body into it. The water is surprisingly warm. "Polo!" She responds.

"Marco!" She hears the return in the distance, quiet, but familiar. She takes her first stroke. The water parts in the web of her fingers easily. It's not too difficult. In fact it feels pleasant, the water wrapping her up, warming her, making her feel protected; womb-like. A small whirlpool brews near where the coat rack once was, which is now missing. She can see two scarfs dancing in the water; her yellow rain jacket is stuck on the doorknob trying to escape.

The rain seems to have stopped, but the water keeps rising. Mildred treads water, pumping her legs in the metallic smelling water. "I'm coming," she says into the hypnotic eddy.

As if on cue, the front door cracks, the top half releases into the water and she watches the current pull it down the street. She

takes a gulp of the swirling water. It tastes like gasoline and salt. She pushes her way toward the half open door, pushing her scarves out of the way. This time, I've got you, she thinks.

"Marco!" She hears again. Swimming out into the lawn, which is now feet beneath her, she sees Steve. He is balancing in a small rowboat—not unlike Andy Little's—tied by thick rope to the light post, its bulb dead. The vessel is lightly tossed about, but he is young and a swimmer and he shouldn't have any problem should he become untethered. Does he see her? Mildred glides under the water. It is quieter down here. She breaks the surface closer to Steve's boat. He is searching the water with a flashlight. Other than that thin circle of light, it is dark. He doesn't see her. He picks a limp doll out of the water. He adds it to a pile in the boat of bloated pieces of paper, shoes, and books swollen with the storm.

"Mildred!" Steve cries at the house.

She treads the water watching Steve. From the torrent, he scoops up a pale yellow piece of paper. It's a Toblerone wrapper, devoid of its chocolate. He drops it into the pile but then seems to think twice and bends to retrieve it. Stuffing it in his pocket, he looks up at Mildred's house.

"Mildred!" He shouts again, his hands cup his lips like a bull-horn.

Mildred watches the young man who looks a lot like Walter as he tries desperately to save her life. Mildred once again hears "Marco!" But it is growing fainter. She doesn't have much longer. A decision has to be made. The water is smooth but the current is quick. Her nose is dripping and the cold is seeping into her bones. *I'm coming*, Mildred thinks, *just not right now*. Walter will be there when she is ready. Amidst the roiling water and the debris of lifetimes, she calls out to him. Steve's face is drenched in relief as he unties his boat, paddles through the mire, and rescues her.

## SANTIAGO BLUE

*By Roz Duavit Pasion*

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“**W**ORRY IS MISUSE of imagination. The only devils running around are the devils in our heart and that is where the battle should be fought.”—Gandhi. It was his ma’s favorite quote. He’d heard it countless times as admonition and affectionate chiding. She said he was too young to be thinking so hard about everything. Things had a way of working themselves out but you had to give them time.

Whitney Logan grew up in the receding shadow of World War II—the towheaded boy of a WASP and a roughneck—tanned by a constant sun that made the sky brilliant but reduced the plains around him to dust. Peach fuzz had just come in above his lip when



his father passed away. Too young to shave but old enough to feel responsible for his ma. The feeling defined his youth, followed him around the world and now beckoned him home. He'd served in the Air Force during Vietnam, lived and flown in Africa, attained the rank of captain with an international airline, yet Midland, Texas, remained a constant destination on his itinerary.

For the past forty years he'd managed regular visits—long weekends or short layovers—to check on her, to make sure she was fine. This time he was coming home to take her away.

He had no authority, no *carte blanche* bestowed by rank to impose his will. Life on the ground was more complicated than that. She was eighty-four and independent but she'd never been alone. Not until Harlan passed three months prior. He'd tried then to take her with him. She'd stood her ground; he needed to give her time.

From Hong Kong he'd flown overnight into LAX then picked up a Cessna 310 at Long Beach Airport. A tail wind propelled him home. Four hours later he landed on the strip next door to the house he'd grown up in. Harlan's air strip.

He turned off the ignition, unbuckled the shoulder harness; his shirt clung to his chest where the harness trapped his sweat. He unfolded himself out of the cockpit. His legs felt pocked with lead shot. Switch grass and coralberry invaded the clay air strip. Pushed straight through the hard pack of fifty years of takeoffs and landings. He'd made his first ascent into the sky from the spot he was standing on.

The hangar stood off to the side, a boxy, glorified metal shed. Light reflected off its faded yellow surfaces making it glow brighter than the sun. It was home base to Agro Air, Harlan Shepherd's crop dusting business. After his pa died, Harlan had taken him and his ma under his wing. His apprenticeship had started in this hangar. Sweeping floors then fueling up the planes.

A grimy film coated the window in the door—drifts of sand and dirt piled on its ledge. A sand roller must have blown through town. He remembered how those high winds would drag across

West Texas, lifting black clouds into the air that robbed the sky of all light. In its wake everything would be mired in dust. Whitney drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a swath through the pane. He peered into the half-light. Dust coated everything. Cobwebs stretched across the open rafters catching light from the overhead windows like spun silk.

One Saturday morning in April, 1960, when he was seventeen, he arrived at the hangar early. Harlan was spraying the Johnson field that morning. They were starting into the busy season. "Son, you can sweep later. Pull the Ag Cat onto the strip would'ya," Harlan called over his shoulder. Whitney was finally trading his broom for the stick and throttle. He wouldn't leave the ground that day but he was already flying. A "Whoop!" gathered in the middle of his chest. He wanted to throw his arms around Harlan. He wanted Harlan to pat him on the back and tell him he'd done good—that he'd proven he was responsible enough to be a pilot. What he got was a backwards glance and a knowing smile. It was enough.

The next day Harlan took him up in the trainer. He breathed in the clouds, nourished by their moisture. From up there, anything seemed possible. "Now listen here. We want the airplane to go exactly where we want it to go and the only way we can do that is by striving for exactitude in our airspeed, altitudes and positions. First. Last. Always." Harlan's words had guided Whitney through the jungles of Vietnam, the African bush and across the vast Pacific. He wished Harlan were here to advise him now.

The stenciled sign above the hangar doors, once bold enough to read from the main road a quarter mile away, was blistered and faded. AGRO AIR now read ACPO AIR. He rolled the hangar doors open; a silty plume billowed into the cornflower sky. The Cessna 172 trainer, the Grumman Ag Cat, and the Nash Metropolitan were lined up like soldiers at attention. Harlan had left it all to him. The business needed attending to. That's the reason he'd given his ma when he called to let her know he was coming home. He hoped that he'd given her enough time. Maybe she'd be ready to leave.

He moved deeper into the hangar. A dun colored, standard is-

sue, metal desk sat toward the back, its heft anchored in a blade of light. Foam bled through the cracked black naugahyde of the office chair where Harlan's weight had habitually rested. Whitney stood behind it, his hands placed on the backrest Harlan's shoulders width apart. He rolled the chair away from the desk making room to sit. One caster rattled, its movement out of sync with the four others that still contacted the concrete floor. His throat tightened in the hollow where tears begin. A flight log, ledgers, a coffee stained desk calendar, and the clip board were arranged squarely in front of him. A dozen pencils, the color of a school bus, stood eraser end up in an old soup can decorated with tissue paper—a gift he'd made for Harlan for Father's Day.

He picked up the clip board and studied the penciled schematic rendered in Harlan's meticulous hand. At the beginning of each season, no matter how many times they'd dusted a field, he and Harlan would drive out in the Nash and walk the acreage. Clip board in hand, Harlan would make detailed drawings of any new features to the landscape that were potential hazards: tension wires, power poles, wells, hedgers, fences. The diagram Whitney was looking at was of Harlan's own field. There was the main road, the airstrip, the trailer, the hangar, and their house next door. He could still see the faint indentations on the page, but the fence that had divided their property for decades had been carefully erased.

The only thing separating Harlan's acreage from their place was a five-foot cyclone fence that ran the length of the air strip. It had gotten nothing but uglier with time—rusty, sagging, barely able to hold itself up. Whitney dug some of the post holes himself. He and Harlan labored all day, hands blistering. Sweat drew muck to their skin like flies to dung. They took pickaxes to the baked topsoil, hammered through to the dark loam then swapped to augers and tunneled deeper. It felt like they were digging graves. Everything changed the day Rocket beelined across the strip as Ma taxied for takeoff. He promised to keep Rocket tied up in their yard while he was at school but Harlan didn't think that was fair to the dog. "Wasn't his fault, boy. Wasn't anybody's fault."

"I didn't mean for it to happen." Tears crept into Whitney's voice.

"It was an accident. Understand?" Harlan said, his voice as doleful as his tobacco colored eyes.

Forty-three years had passed since the accident. She hadn't flown since. Not as a pilot or a passenger. He imagined she would regain the clouds. Maybe it was his dream.

Ma's spine wasn't severed but two vertebrae in her lower back were fractured. Over and over, Whitney heard her castigate herself for neglecting to fasten her shoulder harness. She knew better. She'd flown in the war, for God's sake. She'd logged over two thousand flight hours.

Their family needed a living; Ma could learn to crop dust. She already knew how to fly. She'd ferried aircraft during World War II, as one of the original twenty-five aviatrixes that made up the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP).

Harlan scheduled a training flight with Ma after Whitney left for school. Whitney made her late. They'd argued. Ma didn't want him to go to school because he came home the day before with a bloody nose, split lip, scraped and swollen knuckles, torn jeans and shirt. While walking home, a gang of jocks from the football team cornered his best friend Emo. Called him a lazy Spic. Whitney stepped in. They were outnumbered.

"If I stay home, I can't go back," he argued. Her eyebrows pinched into a "V" and her lips pressed into a tight line. She brushed the hair away from his bruised eyes and looked inside him, then opened the front door and stepped out of his way.

By the time he pulled up to the main road he could hear the trainer's engine preparing to taxi. He turned and leaned his head out of the cab of his pickup to watch the takeoff. Instead he saw a black-and-white bolt of lightning flash across the strip. Rocket and the trainer were on a collision course. The plane swerved then flipped—its landing gear faced the sky. Rocket yelped then disappeared. Whitney jumped out of his truck and charged toward the scene. Arms pumping, lungs and legs burning, salt stinging his

lip from a mix of sweat and tears. He was yelling; he couldn't remember what. He couldn't see Rocket; he could smell fuel. Harlan yelled from the cockpit, "Call an ambulance!"

Whitney ran into the hangar, grabbed the phone off the wall and dialed the operator. "Help! My ma!...the Shepherd place. Send an ambulance!" He slammed the phone into the cradle and ran out to the plane. Rocket slunk around the hangar, a prairie dog dropped from his jaws. He sprinted to Whitney then circled the plane barking. Kneeling on the strip Whitney peered into the cockpit. Harlan was hanging upside down, still strapped into his seat. His ma's body was crumpled against the windscreen. Whitney reached in and put his hand in front of her nose and mouth to check if she was breathing. She moaned when his hand touched her face. Harlan was telling him she would be okay. "Take it easy, son. Your ma's a tough bird."

Finally the wail of a siren: closer, higher, louder, faster. Sobs jolted his body; he gulped for air. The medics worked with choreographed precision to get them out. Harlan was a little banged up, nothing serious. They stabilized Ma's neck and spine then eased her onto a stretcher.

He stayed at her side as they rushed her toward the ambulance. Rocket kept pace at his heel. People were shouting all around him. The siren's red light strobed. Her eyelids fluttered; she tried to sit up. He told her he was sorry. She said, "Shouldn't you be at school?"

He didn't make it to school that day or the next. On the third day she told him not to visit the hospital until he returned to class. He did as he was told hoping things would return to the way they'd been. They never did. They never talked about it. They didn't know how.

Beyond the cyclone fence the house rippled like a mirage in the perishing breeze. Its asbestos shingles the only green in an otherwise sunburnt landscape. The porch spanned the width of it's body. White curtains blinded the sash windows. The wicker swing hung still on its chains. Chopin's Nocturne Opus 9 Number 2 trickled

through chinks between the door and its framework then evaporated in the heat. Between him and that porch stretched a lifetime of unacknowledged emotions. Red dust kicked up around his feet with each step. The nocturne segued into Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

He was met at the base of the ramp that lead up to the porch by the stormy fortissimo of the sonata's last movement. He hoped it didn't foreshadow the tone of their visit. His mother's head craned in his direction through the top of the Dutch door. He could only see the undamaged parts of her. Remnants of her military training endured in her carriage: shoulders squared, chin high, gaze direct and full of mirth. The reality of her melded into his fondest childhood recollection.

It was "Career Day." Whitney was the only one in his fourth grade class that brought his ma. She'd worn her official flight uniform: a fitted Santiago blue Eisenhower jacket with the golden wings insignia on the left sleeve and shiny "hardware" all across the front, matching trousers, a light blue button down shirt, and a black tie. Her fine blond hair was pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, topped off with a baseball cap, the officers' shield pinned to the front and flight goggles. The parents were seated at the front of the classroom. Ma sat ramrod straight with her hands neatly folded in her lap while the fathers shifted their arms and legs trying to settle their bulk onto the miniature chairs. Beneath the cap her grey eyes danced from one child's face to another.

When it came time for her presentation she wrote out the number 60,000,000 on the blackboard. The zeroes looked like the loop-de-loops of a stunt plane's contrail. It was the number of miles flown by the WASPs. They'd ferried military aircraft of every type during the war to free up the male pilots for combat duty.

"There's nothing sweeter than being airborne," she told the class, "except the taste of a cloud."

Ma captivated everyone's attention, including the fathers who'd spent their lives as roughnecks drilling in the oil fields. A flurry of whispers swept through the classroom. His classmates squirmed

in their seats but never took their eyes off of her. Ma reached behind the teacher's desk and pulled out a tray piled high with white tufts of cotton candy. Everyone got a taste. For the rest of the day Whitney's classmates swarmed around him telling him how brave his ma was. How he was the luckiest boy at school. Did his ma miss the intrepid trailblazer as much as he did?

He studied the eighty-four year old woman standing in front of him in search of the aviatrix that gave him his first taste of the clouds. The only way to find her was to set her free.

"Where'd you wonder off to just now? Your head back in the clouds?" she said, maneuvering her walker to open the door.

"Whoa," he said, instinctively reaching out for her. She drew back and motioned him toward the swing. He sat next to her, took her hand and kissed her on the temple.

"Been at the hangar long?" she asked.

"You were playing the nocturne when I arrived."

"It's just like Harlan left it," she said.

"Different without him."

"You mean difficult." Her eyes narrowed.

"I meant...it must be lonely," he said.

"I was the one taking care of him, remember?" She slid her hand out from under his.

It was during their lunchtime ritual that she'd found Harlan the day he took "the long trip west," she'd told Whitney over the phone when she called with the news. She'd made his favorite, BLT on white bread, no crust—imagine. Like always, she rang the triangle on the porch to let him know she was coming. When he didn't open the hangar door she hollered, Are you deaf, man! She'd maneuvered her walker and gotten in without losing anything off the lunch tray. There he was, slumped in his chair behind his desk with his baseball cap covering his eyes. Looked like he could've been napping.

Her telling had been stoic as always. Whitney resented it. Harlan had held their family together like a vise grip. He deserved their tears. Without him how would they navigate the unspoken

territory? He took the first tentative step.

“Well, you don’t have anyone to take care of now,” he said.

“Been thinking of getting a dog. I’ve been too long without one.”

“A dog’s a lot to take on, Ma. Makes it hard to get away.”

“That’s not a problem for me.”

“Wouldn’t you like to get out of this dust bowl?” he ventured.

“Haven’t changed a bit. A grown man and you can’t stay put for a minute. I thought you came to take care of the business.”

“Not only business,” he said.

“And?”

“I thought we could fly somewhere together. Maybe Hawaii, you never visited while I was working. There’s a ranch on the Big Island. Waimea is paniolo country. Rolling green hills, cowboys and cattle. You might like it well enough to stay.”

“That’s sweet of you, dear. I like it here just fine.” She rose from the swing and steadied herself on the walker. He stood to help her. “I can manage.”

He walked behind her to the front door and looked over her head into the darkened interior. It took some time for his eyes to adjust before he could make out the familiar shapes that filled the room. The house was immaculate. He went over to the mahogany Baldwin upright. On top of the piano was a collection of framed photos: Ma sitting in the open cockpit her B-17 smiling and waving at the camera; Harlan posing next to his P-47 Thunderbolt in a leather bomber jacket and flight goggles; Aidan, his son, in dress blues at his graduation ceremony from the Air Force Academy; him and Rocket performing a walk around on the Ag Cat. Ma had taken the photo the day he’d made his first solo flight.

Whitney panned across his family history. There was a piece of it he had make right. He marched into her bedroom and headed straight for the closet. He knew it would be there. It was, hanging right inside of the door. Lapels pressed. Medals polished. He lifted the Santiago blue Eisenhower flight jacket off its hanger and went to find her. She was in the kitchen preparing sun tea. He hesitated at the threshold, stomach balled like a fist, words caught



like a bone in his throat. He held the jacket out to her as he approached.

“What’re you doing with that relic?”

“Ma, we have to go.”

“I’m not leaving.” Her left eyebrow arched into an exaggerated frown.

“You can do it,” he said holding the jacket open for her. Her arms trembled like hummingbird wings, light as air. “We have to.”

“That’s why you’ve been misusing your imagination all these years?”

“No worries, Ma. I’ve been saving your place in the sky.”

RED HOT POKER BANQUET BY BARBARA IERULLI  
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