Agate (ág-it): a fine-grained crystalline mineral that forms in cavities in volcanic rock. Agate is prized for its beautiful patterned colors, and its hardness makes it ideal for delicate carving.
2012 SUNY DELHI
STUDENT WRITING CONTEST WINNERS

First Place:
Basket Muzzle by Misty Touchette

Second Place:
Filial Piety by Jack Lye

Third Place:
Life Is by Zhi Li

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Basket Muzzle
Misty Touchette

It was the way he warily breezed in the door; that signature furtive glance over his shoulder told me he’s guilty of something. “Wait,” I say abruptly, hoping I’m dead wrong. He freezes and I grab his beard. “Well?” I ask Wuffers, holding his wiry black face critically. “What did you eat? You know what the vet said about this.” I peer into his mouth. Anything is ingestible, even if a veterinarian surgically removes it in lieu of the standard backyard deposits. Speaking of deposits, I envision my latest bank receipt being eaten by Wuffs. He follows my gaze to the door; it isn’t the deep gouges made by a persistent dog’s nails that I’m looking at. A wire basket muzzle hangs from its leather strap on a coat hook. I remember the vet handing the special order item to me, saying, “After everything he’s eaten, he needs to wear this when unsupervised. He might not make it next time.” I’m pretty sure what the vet meant was, “You must be out of money by now.” I’m also sure the vet considered three thousand dollars spent in the past several years plumbing items from Wuff’s maw enough to make his case, but a life in a muzzle?

I need evidence. “Don’t move,” I threaten. His body melds a little closer to his bed. My flashlight finds nothing in the yard; I move on. A neglected barn sheltering castoffs from someone else’s yesterday also holds snarled black plastic I kick around before picking up. The puzzle of a chewed item is never fun. A drum roll in my brain introduces a game-show host harrying me with a timer, tick-tick-tick: “If you can correctly
guess what Wuffers chewed you win one of today’s exciting prizes! Tom, fill our player in!”

“Well, our prizes range from the disenchantment of replacing an expensive household item, worry over missing pieces, and finally toxic substance education! Don’t forget his chance at death in the final round, especially if that rat on the package means poison!” I squelch the sensational imaginings and beg myself to not be this stupid. My thoughts are caged by should-haves. I beg myself to learn my lesson as I promised I would last time.

I sit next to my buddy, plastic scraps and phone in hand. With a sigh he ignores the evidence locked in a baggie. I palm tears away and push through the dialing. As my heart told me, and my brain muted, a short time later we are pilot and co-pilot driving to the emergency clinic. I try to lighten the situation. “Hey.” He doesn’t look; he’s too engrossed in the car ride. “Hey! W-what’s the outside of a tree called?” He barks, thumping his tail, and stands up excitedly before plummeting into the foot well as I turn to park. While he scrambles up, I resolve to buy him a dog seatbelt. And to take him hiking every weekend. Time is critical but I’m afraid to go in, afraid he may not come back out despite my hopeful plans. Something from within warns, “Desperate plans . . . desperate.”

The empty coat hook can’t seem to escape my notice. I look out the window. Wuffers sits there, wire basket lashed to his face. He doesn’t roam now. He never prowls the house or even asks to go out, knowing both mean the muzzle. He’s only himself when I take the damned thing off, which I do if he’s underfoot or penned in the mudroom. Watching him I think, “This feels like I lost you too, my boy.”
Animale 2
Misty Touchette
It all started when I was traveling home from a family reunion in my hometown of Coldstream, Scotland. Instead of flying back to my home, I decided to take a more scenic route and hike back. I lived in Selkirk, Scotland, which was about a five-day’s hike away. After my third day of hiking, I happened upon a tiny village. The village was so small that it wasn’t even on my map.

The town was very quaint; most of the buildings appeared to be at least forty years old. It was nestled in a valley where it regularly rained, and seemed to be eternally trapped inside a blanket of fog. It was almost midnight when I checked into the town’s only inn. The inn itself was nice for the most part, except for only one annoying rule the innkeeper had: no one was allowed to the inn’s only bathroom. People had to use the bathroom in the pub next door.

When I asked the innkeeper about it, he wouldn’t answer me. He just got this distant look on his face, and told me that it would be better if everyone just forgot what had happened.

I decided that whatever happened in there couldn’t have been as terrible as the old man was making it out to be. I asked around the town, hoping someone would be able to shed a little light on the matter. No one told me exactly what happened. Most just said something similar to what the senile old innkeeper told me: that it would be better if the event just faded from memory.

Looking back, I now know how foolish my decision was. After all, if the whole town is warning you not to do something,
it would probably be wise to listen to them. But I have this terrible habit, almost a sort of curse: I am a very nosey person. I used to get in trouble all the time when I was younger for spying on people and eavesdropping on their conversations.

But I had to know. At the time, I thought that the village people were just crazy, or that maybe they were suffering from a lack of oxygen. I decided to research the inn at the old library on the edge of town.

The library was in a sad state of disrepair. The front door was loose and made this horrible, squealing noise, like that of a newborn pig, whenever it was forced to open. The front steps leading up to the door were rotted, and the paint was starting to peel off the siding. The inside wasn’t fairing any better; there were cobwebs in all of the corners and a thick layer of dust covered every surface, like confectioner’s sugar on freshly baked pastries.

I entered the library and looked around. Judging from the amount of dust on all the surfaces and the lack of fresh air, I assumed that no one had set foot in the library for a while. I set down my laptop, which I had decided to bring with me when I left the inn this morning. Knowing the library was the only building in town where one could access the Internet, I had brought it with me in case the villagers didn’t want to talk. While I was setting up my laptop, I kept having this weird sensation, like when a little kid sneaks a cookie out of the jar before dinner. That feeling of knowing you’re doing something wrong, but you’re too stubborn to stop.

I ignored the feeling and continued with my investigation. I quickly found several articles that referenced this tiny village.
Mentioned in almost every article that I found was the year 1974, and the name Brian Ferguson. But when I tried to do a search for him, I came up empty-handed.

I shut down my laptop and tried my luck with the books in the library. Unfortunately, most were too old to be of any use. By now, the sun had already set and I could see that the restaurant on the other side of the village was closing up. I hurried back to my room at the inn and scribbled down the name, lest I forget it. I resolved to ask the innkeeper about it in the morning, and I wouldn’t leave the village until I had gotten a satisfactory answer.

A loud knock woke me from my sleep that night. I sat straight up in my bed, trying to sort through the sudden feelings of terror, surprise, and dizziness that accompanied my head rush from sitting up too fast. At first, I thought a bomb had gone off outside my door. Once my nausea subsided and I calmed down, I realized my first assumption was wrong. Getting up, I crossed the dark room to my door. I opened it, wondering who could be knocking at my door at this hour. I found no one, but as I was closing the door, my eye stopped on something that had been placed just outside it. It was a bouquet of flowers. Being that I was still half asleep, I didn’t think much of it at the time, and I went back to bed.

When I came out of my room late the next morning, the flowers were gone. Thinking nothing of it, I went looking for the innkeeper to ask him about the bathroom again. But he was nowhere to be found. Instead, I walked to the pub next door, hoping one of the drunks would be friendly enough to share their insight with me.
The pub was in better shape than the library, but not by much. I say it was better only because the door didn’t make that God-awful noise whenever it was opened, and the interior lacked the charming layer of dust that blanketed every surface in the library.

The only two people in the pub were the barkeep and a guy who appeared to be sleeping in a corner. The barkeep looked to be in his forties; doing some quick math, I figured he was old enough to remember what had happened. I walked up to the bar and asked him if he knew who this Brian Ferguson was. Surprisingly, he agreed to answer my questions, but only if we talked in the church that stood in the center of town. I agreed, excited that I would finally get answers at last.

As we walked to the church, the barkeep kept looking around, almost like he was afraid someone would see us together. When we entered the church, he locked the door behind us and spent at least five minutes running around the building looking out all of the windows to see if anyone had spotted us. Finally, satisfied that our actions had gone undetected, he sat down, making sure to grab a Bible first. He prayed for a good two minutes before he even looked at me. Not wanting to scare away the only person who was willing to talk to me, I sat impatiently, waiting for him to calm down.

Finally, with one last deep breath, he turned to me, indicating he was ready.

“What do you know of Brian Ferguson? Is there a connection between him and the boarded-up bathroom in the inn?” I asked, wanting to get this over with as soon as possible. I had already spent more time in this village than I originally had
wanted to, but I was too stubborn to leave just yet.

“Brian Ferguson was a normal guy for most of his life,” started the barkeep. His voice shook with terror when he spoke the name. “He ran a small woodworking operation out of his home. He was fine, until the day he lost his son. You see, his wife died while giving birth to their second child, who, sadly, also didn’t make it. So he devoted himself to looking after his son. That boy was the only reason he didn’t kill himself after he lost his wife and infant daughter.”

By now, his voice had lost its tremor and he spoke with ease, although he still clutched the Bible tightly to his chest.

“Brian took that boy everywhere with him; he never let him out of his sight. So it was a big step for him to hire a babysitter to watch over the kid when he left town. He asked the innkeeper’s daughter, Bridget, to watch the boy, knowing that she was trusted with the children of other villagers. And she did a fine job too. What happened wasn’t her fault.”

“What exactly happened?” I asked, wanting to get to the point.

“The boy wanted to go for a swim in the pool underneath the waterfall just east of the village.”

I knew the location well, having walked past the pool to get to the village some nights before.

“Bridget went with him, but had to return to the house to retrieve the lunch she had packed. Before she left, she made the boy promise that he wouldn’t go in the water when she wasn’t there.”

“So the boy broke his promise, went in the water, and drowned?” I asked, not seeing the connection to the bathroom.
The barkeep continued on, like I had never interrupted him. He had this distant look on his face; his eyes, however, were still filled with fright.

“Instead of going in the water, he tried to climb the waterfall. But he slipped on a wet rock right at the top and fell down. He bounced off a boulder overhanging the pool below before smashing his head on a rock hidden underneath the water’s surface. By the time Bridget returned, it was too late to do anything.”

“Brian returned later that night. Bridget’s father intercepted him at the edge of town and told him about the tragic accident. He immediately broke down and shut himself up in his house, accepting no visitors. His son’s death was the landslide that crushed his heart. And while no one knows exactly what happened, sometime during his isolation, he snapped.”

A sudden flash of lightning and a clap of thunder rang out as the barkeep paused for a breath. A storm had rolled in while he was telling me the story. I started to feel glad that I had stayed in town. I urged the barkeeper to continue talking. The change in weather seemed to bring the fear back into him; nevertheless, he continued.

“He spent six days shut inside his house, accepting no visitors. But on the sixth night, he left the house. He crept to the inn and peered into all of the windows until he found Bridget. Then, he entered the inn through a back entrance, making sure to keep quiet, fearful that he would draw the attention of Bridget’s father. He inched his way to the only bathroom in the inn, the place where he last saw Bridget. Silently he withdrew a hunting knife from a hidden sheath, and then he burst in on Bridget and
barricaded the entrance. Her screams were the wind that fanned his anger, making it burn even hotter. I ran to the inn, only to find Bridget’s father pounding furiously on the bathroom door, crying out his daughter’s name. I wish I could forget the sight that greeted us when we finally got into the bathroom.”

“Bridget’s body was lying in the bathtub, with blood from her injuries slowly streaming towards the drain. Brian had smashed her head against the side of the sink, splattering her blood across the walls. But that’s not all. As near as we could tell, once she was unconscious, he slit her throat, and she slowly bled to death.”

He stopped speaking and looked at me, trying to gauge my reaction. I’m sure that my face was as white as a sheet, and I started to feel nauseated. I’m normally good around blood, but just picturing what the bathroom must have looked like made me want to vomit.

The barkeep, having judged my reaction as adequate, continued with the story.

“Brian’s body was found the next morning. He had hung himself from a tree near the pool where his son had died. He was buried near his son, while poor Bridget was placed in her family’s cemetery. Ever since then, the bathroom has been locked. No one speaks of the event anymore, afraid that mentioning it will upset Bridget’s father. But that hasn’t stopped the rumors from spreading. Some people say that Bridget’s screams were so loud that they echoed on the surrounding mountains, while others say that if you peer into the bathroom window, you can still see her blood covering the wall.”

By now, the storm had passed. Storms in these parts
always pass quickly. I thanked the barkeep for his time, knowing how difficult it must have been for him to relive this nightmare. He told me that although it felt good to tell someone what happened, he thought it would be better to just forget about it.

I left that night. The small valley in which the village was situated suddenly started to make me feel trapped. I traveled by moonlight until I could walk no further, then I walked some more. My talk with the barkeep had left me feeling homesick. It is only now, as I sit safe in my home, that I remember the flowers placed outside the door of my room at the inn. Only now do I understand the significance behind them. They were placed there by Bridget’s spirit, they must have been. She was asking me a favor, pleading that when I left the tiny village I had stumbled upon so late at night, that I do one thing: forget her not.
Photograph
Kristen Quigley
Life Is
Zhi Li

It was a busy Sunday noon. Many people came to our convenience store and bought lunchboxes. There was an endless line of people waiting for me to check out their lunchboxes and heat them by microwave. They looked very bored and had complaints about my speed on the job, so I understood they wanted me to work as fast as I could. I was working like a busy bee. One customer ordered fried chicken. I hated that because I had to move to the kitchen and then pack the chicken while running. Then I thought, “What a man! Why do you want chicken at such a busy time?”

Suddenly I dropped the chicken. I felt stressed because I had to run back to the kitchen to pack a new one and the manager would admonish me again. He wasn’t angry with me, but like usual, he smiled at me and said, “Mr. Li, if you drop the fried chicken again, I think you should pay for it.”

“Yes, sir, I understand.”

I recognized that his smile was very cold. He raised both sides of his mouth, but his eyes glared at me. This was my life.

I have changed little by little since I made a mistake on my college entrance examination. I turned to the wrong section in the examination book. Instead of the section A test, which I had spent a whole year preparing for, I took the section C test and failed. That meant I did not satisfy the requirement for entering a university. What university we enter conditions our whole life’s career in Japan. Like most parents, this is why my parents had spent a lot of money to school me, but my test result meant everything turned into nothing. Although they got angry with me when they heard I
had failed to pass the examination, they were kind to me just like they had been before I took the exam. I felt all the more shame for their kindness because I knew their kindness came from what they had given up, which was having any hope for me.

Before I failed the examination, I never worried about my future very seriously. I just studied, played with my friends, and enjoyed my hobbies like other high school students. Now my mind became empty and depressed. I felt darkness creeping upon me little by little. The next entrance examination was not for another year. I could not imagine that I would take the entrance exam again because I didn’t have any more energy; moreover I didn’t want to spend more money cramming for the exam. I had never felt that hopeless. This was February 2009.

One month later, I decided to go to work. I did not feel comfortable in my home. Because this was the first time I had decided to work (until then I had only studied in school), my résumé was very simple. There was nothing to fill in for job experience or special qualifications. Also, there were no possibilities for me to choose desk work or full-time employment in a company because I had only graduated from normal high school. I was interviewed for several jobs, but I wasn’t able to get any of them. I still remember clearly my first job interview. The manager looked at my résumé and then gave me a wry smile. He said he would notify me about the outcome after a few days, but I didn’t hear from him. Finding work was much harder than I thought. I was shocked again. When I was in school, all students, including me, drew the same blueprint for the future: go to top universities and find employment at famous firms. Now I learned how hard it is to get a job. I was interviewed for at least 17 jobs before someone
finally hired me.

The work was a part-time job in a small 7-Eleven store. At first, I worked as a cashier. In Japan, cashiers have to package products in plastic shopping bags for customers and heat up box meals and serve fried chicken. I was required to package products as fast as possible because the manager ordered me to do that. For each customer, I only could take 20 seconds. It was very hard for me to achieve the goal. Sometimes I forgot to pack all of the products which customers bought because I was only focused on how to pack them faster. One time I forgot to put panty hose into the shopping bag for a female customer. After three hours, the manager came to me and said, “Thanks to you, a customer was angry with me. Why are you such a careless man?”

“Oh, I am sorry, sir. I am so sorry.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, but I said sorry automatically. It became my habit when meeting him.

“You forgot to pack all of the purchases and I went to her house with a cake for compensation. Remember, the situation is very serious. If you commit this mistake again, I will reduce your salary. Please remember.”

“I am so sorry, sir.”

I didn’t know anything else to say, but I understood why he was angry. The store also had a small kitchen for making fried chicken. If a customer ordered it, we used a pair of long chopsticks to grab the chicken and then pack it into a box. I wasn’t good at doing that, so I sometimes dropped chicken when I was serving it to customers. This was the most common reason why the manager was usually angry with me. I also met some difficult customers who picked fights with me. One day a middle-aged man came to the
store. He was short but had a big stomach like a balance ball and was wearing a pair of dirty blue jeans and a brown jacket. I noticed that he was strange at once. Except for the top of his bald head, his face was very red. Also, he was staggering around the store. I thought he must be drunk. There were two workers, including me, so I hoped he would not come to my spot. However, unfortunately he did after seizing two packaged rice balls and a plastic bottled apple juice. I didn’t look at him, but my neck drooped and I watched the products. I heard a loud voice come whirling through my hair.

“Hey, brother. Heat ‘em.”

“Sure, sir. Please wait a minute. The total cost is 450 yen.”

I put the two rice balls in the microwave. He threw down a thousand-yen bill on the counter. While I was ringing up the sale, he suddenly barked at me, “You are so slow. Do it fast.”

I really didn’t know what he expected me to do because I was working as fast as I could. I knew he was drunk, but I felt very angry. I didn’t say anything and I had to endure his abuse because the manager had told me that consumers were higher ranking than workers. The events didn’t end there. About ten minutes later, the man came back again. This time he opened his unsightly eyes and shouted to me, “You goddamn . . . this stupid. . . . The rice balls are cold!” He used all of the abuses in his vocabulary before he told me why he was so angry. Honestly, I knew the rice balls were not heated up enough, although I followed the directions. But I really wanted him to go away soon, so I didn’t heat them up again.

“I will heat them right now.”

I didn’t say “sorry” or “sir” because I hated him swearing at me.
“Of course, you stupid! You know, everyone can do your damned job, everyone! You’re nothing but mud!”

He emphasized “e.”

“Yeah, I know that, but I don’t want to hear it from someone like you!”

I said this, of course, to myself in my heart. I heard the sound “chin” from the microwave and it sounded like a bell from heaven because it meant I could pass the rice balls then let him go away.

“You are nothing, aren’t you?” he asked me while he was leaving, but I was thinking I wished those hot rice balls could burn him instead of my revenge.

After a few months, I realized I didn’t have a talent to do this work and quit. I realized I really didn’t have the skills needed to work, and I didn’t know why society was so difficult to live in. Many part-time jobs give workers very low salaries but require very high skills. I lost my self-confidence. I had never felt like this before, and I thought I couldn’t do anything but just stay home. But I also felt there was no room for me at home. My parents didn’t pay much attention to me. I assumed that they felt sad, too, and that they might not know how they should talk to me. However, I tried to stop worrying about what they thought. I started to eat dinner after they finished eating so I could avoid being with them. I tried to find a part-time job again, but there were few chances for a high school graduate to find a good job. It was July 2009.

Again I failed to pass interviews, but I finally got a job. This time, I worked as a cook in a chain restaurant called Watami Izakaya, which served many kinds of liquor and dishes eaten with liquor. My job was broiling meat, fish, and shellfish. The
environment was very strict. I didn’t know why, but there were many stern faces in the kitchen. The restaurant opened at 4:00 p.m. and closed at 3:00 a.m. the next morning. Other cooks were my seniors and had better skills than me. They always shouted at me because I couldn’t cook fast. The head chef’s name was Hayashi, a small, skinny man wearing a pair of silver glasses, but he was very powerful, at least to me. He was always mean to me because I was not able to cook fast. One Friday night, like usual, many customers came to our restaurant. The order machine on the table was busy printing order lists. After a half hour passed there were over twenty, so I really couldn’t cook each dish on time. While I was grilling a fish, I had to adjust the fire for yakitori. I was upset and started to fall behind making the food.

“Ooooi, Yamamotooo! You bastard!” (Yamamoto is my last name.) Hayashi had noticed I wasn’t able to deal with all the dishes.

“Yes, sir!”

“Hurry, hurry! Customers are waiting for you!” He approached me and asked, “You want to give up this job, huh?”

“No, sir. I want to do this job.” It felt like the army.

“Hey, your way of cutting fish is wrong! Tell me why?”

Suddenly I looked down at my eel and said innocently, “Well, I have learned how to cut it, and I am just doing it the same way.”

“Really? Tell me who taught you to do it this way. I will blame him.”

I had learned from Nishida, the only one person who was kind to me. He was a tall man with a butch haircut. I usually was soothed by his smile and his words of cheer. I wasn’t able to tell
Hayashi that Nishida was the person who taught me how to cut eels.

“I can change the way I do this, but is it necessary to announce the person’s name?” I encouraged myself to say that, then prepared to tolerate Hayashi’s loud voice.

“Of course. I have to teach him the correct way. That’s my responsibility. You know that.” Unexpectedly, he said this gently. It was correct and made sense.

“Well, sir, I may remember wrong so it is all my responsibility.”

He said nothing. There was silence for a moment. Then, “Yamamoto, I will show you how to work quickly. Watch!”

He started to do all of my work and commanded me to support him. I brought clean dishes from the dish washer and ingredients from the big refrigerators. It was also the first and last time he helped me. The clock came around to 3:30, time to close the house. A part of my job was taking out huge bags of garbage to the garbage space. They contained a lot of water so they were very heavy. I had to carry them one at a time upstairs to the garbage space outside. I hated this job. Not only was it heavy, but it also was smelly and dirty. Sometimes smelly dark yellow liquid from the bag spilled over my hand. When I reached the top of the stairs and was outside the door, I could see beautiful Orion and Sirius in the sky if the weather was clear. I usually lost hope for my future if the stars were shining brightly. Hollowness approached me and tried to be my friend at these times. I didn’t want to work there, but I didn’t have another choice. Could I find another job? I no longer wanted to hear, “We don’t want to hire you.” This was December in 2009.

Several months passed again. I felt I was the only one
who was left in the world. I began to feel that I didn’t want to meet anyone. I was ashamed of myself so I changed my phone number and email address so no one could contact me. I also felt that there was a great distance between me and my parents. I had never felt that before. My colorful world seemed turned into gray. I had been proud of myself because I was good at my studies, but I had lost that feeling. When I walked the streets, I felt people were laughing at me.

One day, I was on my way to work when I surprisingly met my junior high school teacher. I noticed a tall man in a black suit. His face looked like a beaver and was familiar to me. However, I didn’t realize he was my teacher until we were close to each other. I wanted to avoid him but it was too late.

“Oh! Yamamoto Kun! Aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am, Mr. Nishijima. I haven’t seen you in a long time. How are you?” I pretended to smile at him. He was my third-year junior high school homeroom and science teacher. He was a gentle man. When a girl who was bullied stopped coming to school, he had a class meeting to talk about the problem. I didn’t have so close a relationship with him, but he understood every student’s situation. When my father was sick and couldn’t go to work, he supported me to get academic aid.

“Well, yah, I am fine.” He didn’t look at me but instead at my white cook’s pants covered by oil. I wanted to escape from there soon.

“Do you like it?”

I immediately understood he was talking about my job. “No, there is no choice for me. I made. . .”

“All right. You don’t have to tell me the whole thing.
I just want to know if you like your job or not. I am happy to meet you again, but not to hear that you don’t like your work. I remember you told me you want to be an environmental scientist. I know you, so I believe you have the strength and ability to achieve that. It is not too late. You are still very young.”

His words surprised me and brought tears to my eyes. I could not believe he was being so kind to me. I secretly wiped away my tears. “Yes I agree with you. It is really nice to see you.”

“If there is anything you need, feel free to see me. You haven’t been back at school. Other teachers want to see you too. Come to school any time.”

At that time, I strongly believed that I could not spend my whole life as a part-time worker and that I must change my life. I didn’t mind that the other cooks shouted at me that night. I didn’t catch anything that Hayashi shouted at me. I started to study in the daytime.

Two years have passed since my darkness period of 2009. I strongly feel that I must study hard, which I have never felt before. I still don’t want to meet anyone, but I am trying to change myself. Mr. Nishijima’s words drove me to push forward. I wanted to change where I lived, so I went to Osaka. I felt good moving and seeing a different place. I started to work and study in a new place with hope. My life hasn’t changed so much; however, hope for the future gives me energy and power to restart my life again. I learned sadness and disappointment, but also to always keep hope alive and well.
This Mess is Art
Michael McKenna
Dinosaurs Above Evenden Long Ago
(after reading Robert Titus, the Catskill Geologist)
Kirby Olson

65 million years ago pterodactyls flew over Evenden
40 ft. leathery wing span
(Some claim pterosaurs still exist on outlying islands in Papua New Guinea.)

Today the wings of wasps crawl on my office window
Bees go about their business, & flies:
All of them all business.

An Ice Age glacier the size of Michigan covered this area 15,000 years ago.
Giant beaver conducted business in the rushes.
Mastodons roamed Greene and Delaware County.

Extinct rivers flowed through Delhi.
Streams trickling under the ice carved furrows:
Our roads follow these ancient bottoms.

The darkening of the sedges
On the edges of the meadows
Accompanies the coming of winter.

The bog is dead as ducks patrol.
The air overhead quivers with
Arrows of Canada geese.
Ice melting in Greenland
Uncovers blonde warriors:
The shriek of Viking blood.

The foliage from here to NYC covers the past
As students arrive on Rt. 28 & Rt. 10
To begin their futures in Culinary and Golf
Plumbing and Heating & sign up for Geography,
Botany and History.
Photograph
Abbey Osborn
I had locked myself in the bathroom wondering if my mom would give up on trying to beat me. My head was racing with thoughts, and I knew how hard my mom’s blows would hit. Last I saw her she had a spoon, the biggest spoon in the house. She was planning to hit me with it. I forgot why she was after me. All I knew was that she was trying to hurt me, and locking myself in the bathroom was the right thing to do.

Mom pounded on the door three times. Each time her hand hit the door the entire bathroom shook. The bathroom was small, so small that when you sat on the toilet you didn’t have any space to stretch your legs. With her constant pounding and screaming for me to get out I was starting to feel claustrophobic. I considered my options and realized I would have to leave the bathroom eventually, so I decided to bargain with her.

“Please don’t hit me, Mom, please please please.”

“You ruined my soup! I’m going to make you drink all of it!” she screamed back at me.

Then I remembered. I poured half a cup of salt into the soup pot. It didn’t seem like so much at the time. I was only trying to help out. But apparently half a cup of salt made the soup too salty to even taste.

“I’ll drink it, Mom. Put down the spoon,” I pleaded, knowing I couldn’t drink a whole pot of soup, even if it weren’t salted beyond belief. Drinking the soup seemed preferable to getting beaten. I tried explaining that normal six year olds don’t get beaten and continued to plead with her until she said, “For
every second you stay in there I’m going to beat you worse.”

I decided that leaving the bathroom immediately would get me the least amount of hits, so I left the bathroom and just accepted my fate. I don’t even remember the beating, but I remember that was the first time I tried to stand up against my mom, although my attempt failed miserably. Yelling and hitting was my mother’s answer for every wrong thing I did. She didn’t believe in timeouts like my school did. After this I didn’t dare defy my mom again, accepting my punishment whenever it was due.

When I grew older and attended middle school, my parents stopped hitting me altogether, but they still yelled and used harsh words on me. Then one day my mom decided that she wanted to exercise in a field at night and would bring me along. Mom would hang around other Asian ladies when they weren’t doing much in the field. These Asian ladies would also bring their kids with them to the park. One of the kids who looked my age and was the biggest of the group approached me.

“Hey, kid. What’s your name.” His tone of voice made it seem like a demand, not a question.

“Jack,” I answered. He seemed like the kind of kid that was a bully, so I asked him where his mom was. If his mom was there he wouldn’t dare do anything to me.

“My mom? She’s that fat bitch over there.”

I was stunned. No one talked about their parents like that. This kid wasn’t even scared of his mom. I thought his answer made him seem really cool.

Even though I was the new kid, most of the boys had accepted me. But that one guy who had approached me clearly
didn’t like me and made it a point to call me “kid” instead of my name. His name was Jackie; perhaps it was the similarity between our names that made him not like me. Week after week my mom and I continued to go to the park where the ladies would exercise and we kids would wrestle and swear about our parents. When we wrestled we agreed we wouldn’t hit each other, and I was pretty good at it.

One day I wrestled Jackie. I hadn’t done so before because I knew he didn’t like me and would try and embarrass me in front of everybody else. We grappled, and I got my arm around his neck and was winning when he punched me in the stomach. It hurt a lot, but I decided that it was an accident and continued. Then it happened again, and several times after that, I stopped completely.

“Don’t do that again,” I said, knowing he was picking on me and that school programs had informed me to tell an adult so they could stop the bullying as quickly as possible. I knew I couldn’t go to my mom without looking weak, so I decided to stop him by myself.

“Stop what?” he said mockingly and gave me his hardest punch yet.

I folded and sank to my knees while tears streamed down my cheeks. I turned my head away, not letting the other kids see my tears, but it didn’t stop them from laughing at my pain. I felt humiliated. Humiliation was the worst feeling for me, so I waited to catch my breath and stood up and faced Jackie. He had a huge smile which angered me even more. I kicked him as hard as I could in the shins and plowed my fist into his fat stomach. I didn’t feel like I had hurt him, but he looked winded. I thought to
myself, “I better hurt him really bad now or he’ll start swinging back.” I threw myself at him and knocked him down. I sat on top of him so he couldn’t get back up and started to rip his face off with punches. I lost track of time as I pounded away, then realized the kids around me were screaming and some of them had run off to get their parents. I stood up and tried to look as innocent as possible when our parents came over.

It was terrible. Jackie’s face was bruised and his arms were bleeding. I somehow had scratched up his arms in my attack. It honestly seemed to me that it looked much worse than it actually was. Jackie explained through sobs how I had attacked him, and parents gasped in disbelief. They didn’t know that Jackie had started the fight and I was right in defending my childhood honor. I helplessly tried to explain, but they would not listen.

“We’d better leave,” my mom said to me quietly.

I agreed. I didn’t care what the other parents thought. I beat the living daylights out of Jackie in front of all the kids and made him cry like a baby. As we walked home I wore a smile like the one Jackie had on after he hit me first.

“What the hell are you smiling about?” Mom was obviously upset.

I didn’t understand why she was upset. She should’ve been proud of me. I just beat up a kid bigger than myself. I did my best to explain my situation to her. After I did that I gave a thorough description of how I punched his face over and over. Then Mom’s arm shot up and her hand struck me across the face. She hit me so hard I couldn’t think properly for what seemed like a whole minute. The unfairness of my mom was too much for me
to handle and I was too angry to speak.

After a while my mom said, “Don’t you understand I can’t go back to that park and look at them in the face anymore? Don’t you understand that whatever you do represents me and my parenting abilities?”

“Oh,” I responded. I thought about that line. She used it all the time whenever I misbehaved, that I was a representation of her whenever I acted badly. If that were true I just made her look like the toughest mom in the park, but I decided to keep my smart comment to myself. I kept silent for the rest of the trip home and didn’t think much of her comment.

A week later I went to Sunday school; I had been going for a couple years at this point. I thought I’d try out Jackie’s line to sound really cool. During my conversation with a bunch of churchgoers my age I casually tossed out, “Yeah, my mom can be a real bitch sometimes.”

Everyone around me just stared at me. One guy went “Oooooooooo, I’m telling” and went to get someone. He returned soon after with a guy who I knew was older than me but not yet an adult. I was filled with relief because I had to face someone who didn’t have much authority in the church.

“Jack, why did you say something like that?” he said slowly and calmly.

Not wanting to apologize and not knowing what else to say I said, “Well, it’s true, that’s what she is.”

“Aside from the fact that you can’t swear in church, the bible tells us to respect our parents.”

I started to list things my mom did that I didn’t like, and he responded with things like “Your mother was pregnant with
you for nine months” and something about childbirth pains and ended with “Your mother loves you, Jack. She helps you in ways you don’t even recognize. You should at least give her some respect.” Then he walked away shaking his head.

A couple years later I graduated middle school and started my freshman year of high school. My mom decided to enroll me in an SAT preparatory class thinking it would improve my grades. Arguments with my mom were frequent and they were mostly shouting matches which I would lose because my Chinese vocabulary was limited to about a couple dozen words. One time I heard someone make a joke about arguments called “nothing fights”—fights started over nothing—and I thought it was funny because from the way he described them, they sounded very similar to what my mom and I would do.

My whole freshman year I worked as hard as I could and when my grades came in they were all 90s and above. I proudly showed my grades to my mom because my usual grades were failing or close to it. She too was impressed by my grades and said, “Well, it must’ve been that class I put you in.”

She was talking about my SAT class which I absolutely hated because I had no idea what was going on in that class and I would sit for six hours pretending to follow along. I tried to explain that the SATs were a test I was going to take years from then and they had nothing to do with my schoolwork.

“Well, then why did you grades suddenly go up from failing to good grades?” my mom said triumphantly.

I started to get upset and told her that she wasn’t appreciating my hard work. She responded that the class she had put me in made me a hard worker. We eventually started yelling
and I thought, “Oh great. It’s going to be a nothing fight.” I listed as many excuses as I could about why SAT prep was a complete waste of my time, including how it took away from me hanging out with my friends and other leisure activities.

“I’m always trying to help you. I’m only trying to help you and you don’t even know it,” she said when things calmed down a bit.

“You’re always trying to help, but you’re only hurting me and you don’t even know it,” I responded, trying to make her realize she was wrong. After this argument I remembered what the guy at church had said to me about her trying to help me without me recognizing it.

At one point one of these fights got so bad that my mom tried to hit me. Feeling I was way too old to be hit anymore, I shoved her away. When I screamed at her I realized how weird and unnatural my voice sounded and wondered what my friends would think if they saw me this way. I decided that if I wanted to argue that it at least should be in a way that sounded civilized. I figured yelling would only cause more yelling.

Around that time I worked part time as a swimming instructor, and one day after sharing a particularly hard class of misbehaved kids with one of my coworkers, we went to the locker rooms to change. As we were changing my coworker turned to me and said, “These parents are way too easy on their kids, man. They let them do whatever the hell they want.”

“Those kids were probably born misbehaved,” I said, trying to make a joke.

“Nah. Both the kids and the parents are to blame. These parents don’t know shit about raising children.” He continued
to rant on about how these parents should beat their kids and be really strict with them, tossing out a swear word here and there.

It all seemed really funny to me because I remembered that my mom used to hit me but that didn’t stop me from being a knucklehead. Every once in a while when we had to teach a group of rowdy kids my coworkers would complain about how their parents weren’t doing such a good job, and I would stay quiet, feeling troubled by their words. I eventually resolved to be nicer and more polite when my parents were around, taking seriously what my mom had said years ago about me being a representation of her. I still felt that it was a little unfair, though, being born into a Chinese family where they thought that the way children acted reflected on their parents.

The fights between my mom and me lessened, but one day we had a pretty nasty fight where I don’t remember what we were arguing about, just that I ended the argument by saying I would sleep on the street. Shaking in anger, I went out the door without grabbing anything. She came out the door a few seconds after me saying something. I ignored her, thinking she was trying to get me to go back in the building. But when she caught up to me she simply gave me my keys and phone, saying I had forgotten them in my rush to leave the house.

I walked around for a half hour, and when my thoughts calmed down I decided that she had done that because she genuinely cared about me. I returned home soon after and tried to apologize, but the words wouldn’t come out.

The next day I happened to be loafing around in my mother’s workplace, which was a barber shop. One of her customers complained that his haircut looked bad. He said
something about having given clear instructions on what he wanted and how my mom couldn’t cut hair. I stood watching the customer continue on his little rampage about my mom’s abilities while she stayed silent.

“You aren’t getting any tips from me. I can’t believe people these days can be so incompetent,” the customer half yelled. Tips were the majority of my mom’s income, and I felt pained watching my mom stay silent as the customer kept complaining about his shoddy haircut. As I watched I felt a rage similar to the time I fought with Jackie. I approached the customer to say something but decided against it. I probably would make the situation worse, I thought, so I stayed back.

My mind raced with thoughts such as “What right does a stranger have to lecture my mom like that?” I continued to sit and bubble with anger at this random person who dared to talk to my mother. This was when I remembered that just two days before I had had a pretty serious argument with my mother. I decided that if a stranger arguing with my mom seemed so wrong, her only son doing so was even worse. Later that day I decided to apologize to my mother for all the times I had argued with her. I don’t remember ever telling my mom that I loved her, and I never did things as simple as give her hugs, so this apology felt like a forced show of affection. It was unnatural, it was awkward, but it was the right thing to do.

“Mom, I’m sorry.”

She seemed taken aback by the sudden apology. “Sorry for what?” she asked, probably thinking I had done some wrong that she wasn’t aware of yet.

“I’m sorry because I know I haven’t been a good son, and
I wanted to let you know I’m sorry for the bad things I’ve done, and all the bad things I will do.”

My mother accepted my sudden apology, and from then on the arguments all but disappeared, and when they did happen they were civilized with no yelling.

My relationship with my mother has changed a lot for the better over the years. As I tried to be more a respectful person with my mom, my good behavior crossed over and became my normal behavior. Thanks to my resolution to make my mom proud, I have become a much better person. Though the change wasn’t a sudden one, the best changes take a long time, and are gradual works of progress.
Photograph
Joseph Damone
A man sits in his cell, his head in his hands. A sound escapes his throat; it is a cry, not for himself, but for humanity. He cries for his beautiful wife with that strawberry blond hair and his two young boys who exhibit their father’s exact nose. He would give anything to hear their sweet voices again, but all he was left with was the haunting echo of the bell.

The bell on the highest tower groans deafeningly in the infant grey morning. The sound slowly permeates the air, thick with moisture. It wakes those amid peaceful slumber and alerts all others in a conscious state while the dead sigh and moan from their tombs.

The man suddenly hears steps, loud thuds approaching his barred encasement. They grow louder and louder as the seconds tick by. With each pound on the hay-strewn floor, more stress builds in him. He jumps when the guard speaks.

“Your time has come, my friend.” He spits.

“Indeed it has,” the man replies.

The guard unlocks the heavy door with a clink. The man tries to get up, but his crumpled body wanes in strength.

“Move!” the guard bellows.

The door slams shut behind him; the first sound he heard coming into this place would be the last to leave him.

The chains tightly clasped on his wrists and ankles drag low, causing him to trip and the guard to chuckle. The life he once had inside of him was completely stolen from him by this guard and this prison.
The guard grips the man forcefully by his hair and heaves him towards the door outside. His wife and his two boys were there huddled below the scaffold. His boys had grown.

The man’s rights were read and his sentence reiterated for the last time. He looks up to see some sobbing faces and some twisted grins as the rope gnaws at his already contused neck. The bell sounds one last time and the floor falls. For an instant the man saw strawberry blond and then darkness.

His wife screams and begs for justice, but they think they have already achieved it. They cart his body away with the hundreds of other fathers, mothers, wives, and husbands. Away too goes the innocence in men and the blood of a man who only knew how to love.
Drawing
Rhonda Harrow-Engel
Drawing
Kaoru Odashima
The Cat and the Cages
Thomas Recinella

I find myself again in the dream, inside that house as dark and closed as a cave. I come to this house with my family, but I don’t know why. We stay for a while, yet time really doesn’t exist here. Or at least I don’t understand it. I don’t realize that we are visiting the dark-haired girl, the one in the picture that my mother will cry over in a few years. I spend my time playing with the kids that live here. Or playing with the cat; its eerie haunting wail will become a familiar sound to me throughout the following years and serve as a conduit of time travel for a day far into my future. A future which none of these kids will ever have.

My dream often starts the same way. I look up at a child imprisoned behind the fat, square bars of a cell on wheels. He stares back at me through large eyes set inside an immense pale head streaked with blue and light gray veins. Thin wisps of light-colored hair barely cover his scalp, but I am not scared. He smiles, and I can see that he is happy to play with me. He shares his prison with a dirty white cat; its bluish and grey tints match the veins that stand out in bas relief on the boy’s own head. The cat is stiff and rigid, but when squeezed makes a quick squawk and then emits an eerie wail. The sides of the cat expand as it exhales through a hidden hole, a lament for the children that dwell in this murky dream world. Voicing its sorrow for them is the only time the cat shows any sign of life. The boy likes to squeeze the cat. It seems to make him happy. I like it, too.

I wonder why the little boy in my dream and the others are all in cages. They must have been bad, very bad. Maybe their
parents are mad at them for having big heads. I realize that they are different than me and much older. But during the visits, I only know that I like to play with the children in this dark, warm house. My mother talks with the lady that lives here. They seem far removed yet I know they are there. The lady is ever so nice to me and always serves me lemonade. Perhaps she is the grandma of these kids. My very young mind can consider no other option. She is not their mommy, so she must be their grandma. But I don’t understand why they are always at her house. Where are their parents? Why do they stay in cages?

I am in the room playing with the cat, but my sisters and brothers are somewhere else. They are always with me here but never next to me. I just know they are here without knowing how I know. The boy in the cage wants the cat back. Again, I don’t know how I know that. I just do. The cat stares ahead, never moving or blinking, its intentions unknown. I walk towards the cage to hand the cat back to the boy. I have to extend my arms and stand on my tiptoes, but even then I am not close enough to his outstretched hands. He reaches over the bars to grab the cat, leans over the top of his small prison, and our eyes lock. I hold his gaze briefly. His bloodshot eyes, his red face, and swollen head normally would scare me. But not in the dream world. In this moment I read all his anguish, his longing to be where I am. It is only a brief moment, but it will stay in my mind forever, buried deep. It will become one of the layers of life’s memories, like a fossil or dinosaur bone embedded in ancient granite forgotten by time and the rest of the world, waiting to be freed by a paleontologist a millennium after it found its way into the ground. Meeting the boy’s eyes will become a snapshot in my
mind that will return far down the road. Then I will understand the true meaning of the look in his eyes. I will be able to put words to it decades later, words that at the moment I just don’t know. Like the scientist digging for the fossil, I will free this image and finally solve its puzzle. For a long time this dream reoccurs, but as I grow older, it moves further from my life. Eventually I forget it completely, until the cat brings it all back, and I see the cages again.

One day as I was moving some clutter in my dad’s house, I stopped by the family room and began speaking to my oldest sister who was visiting. At that moment, she was rummaging through the closet and out fell a rubber toy cat. I immediately recognized the white cat with its tint of blue and grey. When squeezed it made that same mournful sound. I remembered playing with it often as a child. My sister stood up, still holding the cat, and peered intently at it. From my squatting position, half way in and out of the closet, I asked her for the cat as I wanted to squeeze it for old time's sake. She looked at me with a soft smile on her face, sighed, and gave the cat a few rubs as if it was real.

“You loved this cat when you were little,” she said, almost wistfully.

My sister handed it down to me and must have squeezed it because it made its low, drawn-out wail. Just as I heard the sound and I touched the cat, coming down to me from slightly above, its odor of old rubber hit me like a baseball bat, knocked my mind back in time. In addition, no sooner had the cat emitted its low, mournful wail than I was hurled back in time. I was no longer a twenty year old in my dad’s brick ranch in
suburban Livonia. I was instead a tiny child in the old wooden house immersed in my dream. Gone were my sister and the old junk she was sorting. There in front of me was the child with his large head reaching for the cat, his eyes looking down at me, in synch with the anguish of the cat’s song. Like a funeral dirge it wailed, lamenting the horrific fate of the children of the house. It was very vivid, and I would swear I was there again, but only for a second. I must have stepped back, recoiling in shock at my stark vision because my sister jumped and was startled. I explained to her what had just happened, and as I talked she looked at me in astonishment, tears welling in her eyes, not a common sight for my tough older sister and godmother. “You’re giving me goose bumps,” she exclaimed, holding her arm up to show me.

My brother, who was also there participating in the transfer of odds and ends across the house, came over to investigate the hullabaloo. As I continued talking he, too, looked at me in utter disbelief. I detailed playing with the children with big heads, their weird square bars on the cages, and the old grandmother who watched them all and had given me lemonade. They both just looked at me astonished. When I was finished, I informed them that I had often dreamt about these same things. My brother asked, “You remember that? How can you remember that? You were so little.” I explained to them that I had always thought it was a dream until now, when I realized that I had in fact experienced it.

They explained to me that what I remembered was going to Rockwood, Michigan to visit our sister. She was very sick with encephalitis, and when I was born, my parents finally
had to put her into a home. They just could not take care of her at home anymore. Feeding her through a tube in her throat with seven little kids running all over was no longer an option. The old grandmother was a wealthy nurse named Ms. Miller who had decided to spend her life and her money taking care of severely sick children whose families either abandoned them or could not care for them anymore. She was the only one who would care for our sister at the time. No other nursing home would take her. The children I remember were kids who had a different form of encephalitis than my sister had. Their heads swelled up. They had been abandoned there by their families. What I remember as small individual prisons were in fact old hospital cribs.

I do remember knowing later in my childhood that my sister was in a home in Rockwood, but I never connected this fact with my dreams. Apparently we loved the toy cat so much that Ms. Miller gave it to us at some point, probably when my parents moved our sister to be closer to the family, the start of a journey of nursing homes for her and many adventures for me. Although I played with the cat a great deal throughout my childhood, it never had the effect it did the day we were cleaning our home. All of the elements were in place that day. I had not seen it in a long time, I had not smelled it in a long time, and coupled with that was how my sister handed it to me. Working a ton of hours and going to school full time (which equaled little sleep) also triggered my memory.

I regret that I don’t have more vivid images of Ms. Miller to honor her memory. She was certainly an angel to many children. I am sure that God has a special place for her and others like her in heaven. One of her rewards is never again hearing the
lamenting wail of the rubber cat as it sings its song of sorrow for its tiny charges whose lives were worth so much more than their small prisons could indicate.

My oldest sister ended up with the cat, and after her death in 1999, my other sister inherited it. I am not certain what my sister’s kids think about that cat, or even if they have ever heard its mournful cry. But what I know for sure is that when and if it is squeezed again, it will sing its dirge of sorrow for the children of the Rockwood House. It will never forsake them as they were its primary reason for existence. I am equally certain that whoever may possess it in the future, they will have no idea what that toy cat has seen. They will not know of the misery, the sorrow, and the pain, but also the shining light, love, and selfless, heroic deeds of an old “grandmother” who gave so much of herself and still served me lemonade as I played with the wailing cat and the children of the cages in my murky, distant “dreams.”
Photograph
Joseph Damone
Politically Correctable
Miriam A. Sharick

Gracia, what made me think of you yesterday while I was picking black raspberries? And what made me remember that you had a birthday this week? I vaguely remember acknowledging your 19th birthday that first summer we had an apartment together (with a third person). I have a stronger memory of the party for your 20th birthday the next summer, when we had another apartment together (with another third person). I bought you a big stuffed owl. You loved owls. It cost me $12, which was really more than I could afford, but it was worth it to me when your face lit up as you unwrapped it. I also met your friend Julie T-- at that party. It’s a wonder I can remember anything from that evening.

Gracia W-- started at Cornell with me, in the same dormitory corridor. Her father taught physics at the college, so she was really smart, but she had some deep psychological issues related to the death of her older brother in a skiing accident in the Alps the previous winter. She was still so sad all the time that she couldn’t deal with classes and studying, and she withdrew after less than a month. We had already become friendly, and we became close after she moved back home, got a waitress job, and tried to prepare herself for going back to school. Gracia had acting talent and wanted to major in theater. That meant, then as now, that many of her associates on and off the stage were gay.

Back then I didn’t know what “being gay” meant, though I had numerous friends and acquaintances who were gay. An actor whom Gracia sometimes played opposite was said to be very good because he could play straight. My lab partner in freshman
biology, Daniel F--, invited me on a few decorous dates. My lab partner the next year in comparative vertebrate anatomy, Janice K--, was an officer in a modest campus club called the Student Homophiles League. Janice got me through comp anat, and I got her through German the year after. Danny had gone to high school near me on Long Island, and we knew kids in common. He appeared normal in all respects and was personable and polite, the sort of boy I could have brought home to meet my parents, especially since he was pre-med. Janice was from Texas. She was aggressively gay, but never made a move on me; we just enjoyed studying together. Janice openly disliked men and everything about the male power structure that she felt oppressed her. She was also pre-med.

When Janice became president of the Student Homophiles League, she had its name changed to the Gay Liberation Front and led the movement for gays to come out of the closet. I hadn’t known Danny was gay until I saw him giving out leaflets on the steps of the student union, ironically nicknamed the Straight, for that first rally. “Why are you doing this?” I asked him. “Well, somebody has to do it,” he replied matter-of-factly. As I walked into the Straight, reading the leaflet, I suddenly realized why, indeed, he was doing this. So that’s why he kept me at arm’s length. Because of these and other friendships, someone in GLF gave me a T-shirt, the last one off the first run. It was lavender with four interlocking navy-blue sex symbols. The blue didn’t print correctly, so the shirt was unsalable.

Gracia and her theatrical friends hung out at a bar in Ithaca that was becoming known as a gay bar. This gal Julie hung out on the fringe of Gracia’s crowd. She was a slow, shy, unsophisticated
townie. I don’t remember what she did—she wasn’t in theater—but I remember her looks. Julie had a placid fat face framed in a fair Beatles haircut. The rest of her was, to put it bluntly, built like a tank. Gracia was always nice to her, and for Gracias’s sake so was I. Gracia tried to go to college again after her 20th birthday, at NYU this time. She had acquired a serious boyfriend named Ted that summer, and Julie told me later that fall, while I was taking German and hanging out with Janice, that Gracia missed Ted too much to stay in New York. But she had her old issues as well. She dropped out of college again, moved into Julie’s apartment instead of home, got her waitress job back, and tried to find a new handle on her life. By this time I also had an apartment off campus with two roommates, Donna F-- and Debbie R--. Debbie decided she didn’t want to room with us the next year, so that spring Donna and I began looking for a third roommate. My first choice, naturally, was Gracia. But Gracia was going to try college yet again, at Wells, I think, not far from Ted and her parents. Gracia said Julie would need someplace new to live, so I invited her over one evening to meet Donna and talk about moving in with us.

Donna’s dismay at Julie’s unprepossessing appearance must have been immediately obvious to Julie. The groaning and sagging of our living room couch when Julie sat down didn’t increase Julie’s comfort level either. I served tea and cookies, and we began talking about what we were all looking for. The rent was reasonable, parking was nearby, our pad was near where Julie worked, she didn’t mind having Debbie’s room, she’d be glad to share the cooking and the phone bill and the housework. Then Julie dropped a bombshell. She said, “I have to tell you something. I don’t go out with boys.” If Donna looked dismayed before, she

For the next two weeks, Donna walked around the apartment looking haunted. I reminded her that we had to get a lease for Julie to sign, but she kept brushing me off. Gracia called me at the end of the first week to tell me how thrilled Julie was to have her living arrangement settled and asked me when we were going to sign. Soon, I was sure, I told her; Donna was waiting for something or other. By the end of the second week Donna couldn’t put me off any longer. When I pressed her about Julie’s lease, she finally said, “I can’t do it. I can’t live with her. I’d be walking around all the time in a ski jacket. And I can’t stand that she would bring girls here.” “We had an agreement,” I reminded her. “We shook on it.” “I can’t do it!” she cried. “I’ll move out if she moves in!” “Okay, Donna, I’ll back you up on this,” I said, “but you have to call her and tell her yourself.” Donna called Julie almost at once, telling her everything she had just said to me (except the bit about the ski jacket), apologizing, crying as she hung up. “That was the hardest thing I ever had to do,” she sobbed. I remembered the breakup with her fiancé last fall and said nothing except that now we had to find a roommate again.

I felt bad about this. I looked Julie up in her favorite bar to apologize to her, but she turned away from me with tears in
her eyes and refused to talk to me. Gracia’s reaction was harsher. “How could you have been so cruel?” she yelled at me. “Look, I’m sorry,” I replied. “It’s not what I wanted. I was stuck with it.” “I don’t believe you,” she snapped. “I don’t think you ever wanted Julie to live with you. What you did was unforgivable.” And Gracia, too, turned her back on me and never spoke to me again. I was just angry about the whole incident. The only reference I can remember to it occurred some months later, when Donna remarked in disgust over the habits of our new roommate that Julie would have been a better choice after all. I had completely forgotten about her comment, until just now.

Janice and Danny both went to medical school, Danny to Arizona, Janice home to Houston. I can imagine Danny very happy in clinical practice, laughingly brushing his hair out of his brown eyes, wearing a white coat and a stethoscope, specializing in the then-new field of men’s health. I can even see him running a storefront clinic in San Francisco as a pro bono service for AIDS patients, addicts, and other needy, neglected men. I’m sure Danny’s parents accepted him. I’m also sure he found a committed, loving partner who would have protected him from the scourge of AIDS. Danny would have made a wonderful daddy, but the times weren’t yet right for him to adopt. I don’t have to know how his life turned out.

I can’t imagine that sort of happiness for Janice. I’m sure she muttered and cursed her way through her medical training, trying to suppress her hostility towards her male instructors, classmates, and colleagues. Her relationship with her parents must have been tense, and I’m not sure she could sustain a long-term commitment to a partner. I’m positive she didn’t end up in clinical
practice. I can picture her in a lab coat, boyishly slim, focused, demanding in her hot-damn way, through a career of running research trials for a large drug company. I hope she found it satisfying. I don’t need to know.

Most of all, I hope Gracia found peace and meaning in her life. I hope she received counseling for what would now be called PTSD; she was hurting in her own way as much as the returning Vietnam veterans of the time who were increasingly showing up at Cornell and behaving unpredictably. I hope she married Ted, or someone equally worthy, and had children, not to please her parents, who would desperately have wanted this, but because she thought she needed a family to feel complete. And I hope she finally finished a degree in something—not theater; psychology would have suited her better. I can imagine her helping others as she would have been helped, perhaps talking someone off a window ledge. I hope she never had to be talked down herself. I don’t want to know.

I appreciated the sympathetic reputation towards the emerging campus gay community that I’d gained and wore my Gay Lib T-shirt until it fell apart, years later, at which time I reluctantly discarded it. I wish now I had cut the blue-ringed logo out of the shirt, patched it, and sewed it onto another garment. After reading the first draft of this story, I went to a T-shirt shop and had one custom printed. Why didn’t I think of this decades ago? Why did I think of it just this week?

Happy 60th birthday, Gracia.
Drawing
Rhonda Harrow-Engel
Crossing the Tracks
Michael McKenna

I had read the stories in Reader’s Digest—inspiring yet cautionary tales of boys like me whose arms had been ripped from their bodies and then surgically reattached after playing around trains. These stories haunted me, whose childhood was lived in the shadow of a busy B&O railyard, a barrier that seemed as uncrossable as the Alps or Himalayas, dividing my neighborhood of prolific Catholics in brick row houses from the ragged bums reputed to live in plywood shacks on the other side of the tracks.

I played baseball on the gritty coal-dust plain with Pinky, Speedy, Tricky Rick and the rest of the gang as the trains rolled back and forth groaning and screeching, the crash of their constant coupling reverberating along the line, threatening mutilation and death. When we lacked a regulation ball, we would fashion one from softened tar we found in inky pools nearby. Sometimes play was suspended and even the thunder and screams of the trains drowned out by a low-altitude fly-over of Blue Angels out of Dover Air Base. Sometimes, when baseball bored us, we set field fires in the parched summer grass and ran away before the fire trucks arrived.
Sometimes our quest for adventures led us to a nameless creek that flowed through some woods. There we waded in the sandy stream catching crayfish and minnows and amusing ourselves with railroad flares that burned like white-hot rockets in our hands even under water. One hot summer day I saw a veil of vines draping a tree explode into flames, and helped put out the fire by filling my boots with creek water and pouring it on the blaze. Eventually we found that the creek flowed through a large tunnel that ran under the railroad tracks, but the water mysteriously deepened there, making wading impossible, and we were still no closer to traversing that barrier.

One bitter winter, though, we made a discovery: the water in the tunnel had begun to freeze, and we saw how the ice extended the narrow concrete shelf that ran at water level along one wall, and how it just might be possible to hug that wall and make one’s way to the far side of the tracks. We studied the problem for several days, weighed the possibilities, the pros and cons and possible repercussions, then one blinding afternoon, lined up single file and began to creep into the darkness, one foot on the muddy ledge, the other on the fragile ice, toward the forbidden light.
Hints of Autumn

Katie Hamm
It was a time before kids, pets, mortgages, and marriage. I was working as a professional freelance musician in New York City. I had plenty of work and the future looked promising. I should have been totally optimistic and happy. But the music world is a highly competitive environment, and I was under enormous pressure almost all the time. I often felt like the weight of the world was on my shoulders. My live-in girlfriend and future wife, Eloise, was going to college and working as a coat-check girl while doing various singing and acting jobs on the side. We were renting a tiny studio apartment on West Tenth Street in the West Village. It was confining, dark, and oppressive. Life was not exactly a living hell, but it was far from paradise. I knew I needed to find a way to feel more positive, expand my horizons, find more meaning, experience more beauty, and breathe more freely. I needed a way to do a deep dive into the best of what life had to offer.

Given what both Eloise and I were feeling and needing, a vacation seemed like the perfect prescription—just what the doctor ordered. We decided on a scuba-diving trip. I already had a scuba certification that I got while working on a cruise ship with The Mamas & The Papas. Eloise did not have her certification but would complete her training before our trip while she was working on a show in Seattle. I called a travel agent (this was before you could Google and book online), and he suggested Bonaire in the southwest Caribbean. He said it was known as a diver’s paradise. All I needed was a credit card to book it. I whipped out the plastic, and we were in.
In a few weeks we dragged ourselves to the airport at five a.m., went through the almost non-existent security check (remember, this was 1988), went to the gate, and waited for the jet to start boarding. After a few-hour delay and a five-hour flight, we arrived at The Flamingo International Airport in Bonaire.

When we deplaned it was warm and dry and we saw goats and donkeys roaming free around the fields near the airport. We saw divi divi trees and flamingos and people were speaking Dutch, English, Papiamento (the local language), and Spanish. I heard a crazy kind of music that was called Tumba. It was a mix of African drum music, Calypso, and European marching bands with a little Salsa thrown in for good measure—great music to move and groove to, and we were on our way.

A bus picked us up and after a five-minute drive, we arrived at the hotel. As I got off the bus, I noticed a long line of disgruntled divers waiting to check in. We got on line and waited and waited and finally got to the front of the line. The Bonairian front-desk manager, whose name tag said Rita, greeted us with a tired scowl. She informed us that our studio apartment with an ocean view was not available as the hotel was overbooked. Needless to say, I was angry. I could not believe it. After arguing for a few minutes, I finally agreed to go to the room they had available and deal with it in the morning.

When we got to the room we were horrified. It smelled musty, the furniture was old and beat up, and the beds were what I call camel beds. They were so soft that we would wake up in the morning with our backs hunched like a camel. The final insult was the view of the parking lot. The only thing that separated this from Dayton, Ohio was the smattering of palm trees.
After a fitful night with little sleep I marched my way over to the office of the hotel general manager ready for battle. I was promptly escorted in, and I told him my story. That’s when everything changed from a nightmare to a dream come true.

He apologized for my inconvenience and told me he was sending a bellman over to pick up our bags and take them to our deluxe ocean-view room. “If anything else goes wrong, please contact me right away,” he said. We moved to our new room, and it was everything we expected.

But the room was not why we traveled to Bonaire. We wanted to do some world-class scuba diving, and we proceeded to get our gear in order and head down to the dock. There we had a dive orientation and a “check-out” dive because the resort wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing so you didn’t get killed on the first day. I guess it’s an insurance thing.

We met on the dock with Pasquale, an Italian dive instructor that worked at the resort. He checked us in, looked at our c cards (scuba certifications cards), fitted us with scuba gear, and we were off to our check-out dive. We geared up, jumped in the water, and Pasqual gave us the signal to submerge (a thumbs down). We both responded with the OK sign and we all descended.

What I experienced next started a change in my life. The schools of fish, mountains of coral, and the freedom of weightlessness were breathtaking and intoxicating. The water ranged from a light blue to a deep dark blue depending on our depth. The sand was a clean white color. Life vibrated everywhere.

We found shipwrecks to explore. I viewed giant green moray eels free swimming through the water column and large silver barracudas hunting smaller fish. The night dives were like
traveling to another planet. I could hear the voice of Jacques Cousteau in my head with his thick French accent discussing various underwater phenomena.

During the rest of the trip Eloise and I did three or four dives per day. We loved the time we spent in the water, but we also knew there were risks. We made sure to spend enough time on dry land to “offgass” the nitrogen we were accumulating in our blood. The accumulation of nitrogen in the blood from breathing air under pressure turns into bubbles. This is called “the bends” or decompression sickness. Fortunately, Bonaire offers many other activities in addition to the diving.

The terrestrial Bonaire is also a paradise. The desert landscape is filled with goats, domestic dog packs, and iguanas. The local people are lovely and a joy to be around. The food is terrific (iguanas do taste just like chicken). We have made many lifelong friends that live on Bonaire or are visitors. The island is the glue that keeps us in touch when we are not on the island together.

When we woke up on the final morning of our trip to Bonaire, looking at the sun rising over the ocean from the terrace of our room with a view, we were filled with mixed emotions. We were exhilarated by all we’d done and seen that week, but so sad to be leaving. On our way to the airport, a flock of flamingos flew overhead as the sun continued rising, becoming a bright orange ball in the sky. I asked my future wife Eloise “Do I have to go home?” and a tear came to my eye. I then started trying to figure out how I could get back to Bonaire as soon as possible. Fortunately, I’ve been able to spend the last two decades visiting the island three or four times a year, often staying at the same hotel. I’ve
even become friends with the grumpy front-desk manager, Rita. Everything about Bonaire, from the water to the people to the food to the beauty, keeps calling me back.

On our last trip to Bonaire my 12-year-old daughter Montana was introduced to diving and earned her junior scuba certification. This was a great moment in my life. I hope that my daughter will fall in love with Bonaire and diving just as my wife Eloise and I have.

My relationship with Bonaire and diving has become nothing less than a love affair with a place and a way of life. Like any love affair, it has its challenges and issues, and making it work demands care and attention. Finding the time and money to make regular trips back there can be daunting. But finding that time and money has become essential to my health and well being, vital to my peace of mind, and a fundamental part of maintaining a positive outlook. No matter how hellish my life might seem at any given moment, I know I have truly found paradise. Now, as seems to be the case every year, I just have to find the ways and means to get back there again. Paradise beckons.
Photograph
Kristen Quigley
Photograph
Joseph Damone
Wide Open Spaces
Jeanette DeFreese

Years ago when you were four years old, you would spend your day just swimming in your pool in the side yard, the Florida sun beating down on your dark black hair. You didn’t have a care in the world, and the wind loved to tickle your nose as it blew to the north. You spend most of your day outside playing in dirt, catching tree frogs and chasing lizards around the yard.

You believe that since you’re just about to turn five you will be able to do a handstand in the pool by yourself. You try and try but it just doesn’t work. Your mom jumps in the pool; the rippling of the water splashes you in the face and it’s on. You go into a frenzy trying to splash your mom back, but get so tired you go limp. You find an inner tube, jump on, and try to catch your breath.

Your mom always kept a watchful eye. She would sit out in the sun for hours as the sun blessed her with a radiant tan, her skin glistening from the baby oil she drenched herself in hours before. She would lie there for hours, and all you could think about was how beautiful she was and how you wanted to be like her. She would be in the sun drinking her signature drink, a piña colada, as she dreamed of living on a far-off island where everything would be perfect.

She was always working hard to make sure you had everything, so did your father. Sometimes he would even take you to work to show you off to his friends. He would tell them, “This girl right here is the hardest little worker you will ever
see,” and it was the truth. He worked as a sand blaster in the hot summer sun, and he never let you know how much he struggled paying the bills. You were taught that nothing is free and that you have to work hard to get the things you want.

Your father was always doing something with his hands, whether it be fixing the lawn mower or taking an engine apart and putting it back together. You always wanted to be at your father’s side doing as he did. You were the peas to his carrots. Wherever he went you would follow just for the chance of learning something new. You were at that stage of your life where knowledge was the ultimate treat.

Outside is where all get-togethers happened. It is where you fell off your bike for the first time, skinned your knee rollerblading, and were bitten by fire ants. You learned so much from being outside, such as what bugs you could pick up and which to leave alone. You also find that snakes like to hide in the garden your mom tends every day. The snakes didn’t really like to be bothered so you’d move on to disturbing some other animal’s home. Not to be malicious, but to observe their way of life.

One day you peer through the window to find that it is winter. During the winter months you would spend hours in the window looking and wondering when it would be warm again. When could you go swimming again?

The sun was your friend and made you feel alive. It’s like when you’re riding down a hill really fast in a car and you have that moment where it’s hard to catch your breath. Nature becomes a part of you and you a part of it. You love the feel of the breeze flowing through your hair and making it dance upon

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your shoulders.

There would be days when you would just sit and observe everything around you. You feel a connection with nature unlike any you have with a person. You watched as the wind tickled the leaves, their laughter silent but still present. The grass was a place of the unknown, where bugs would go and just disappear. When the hurricanes came you felt a feeling of uneasiness. You felt helpless against the hurricanes’ wrath. You ask your dad, “Why can’t I fix the trees like you fix my bike?” He looks you in the eye and says, “It’s hard to fix living things once they have been broken.”

Your life seemed to revolve around being outside, entertaining yourself with the simplest things that only you understood. Like the time you took your mom’s cigarettes, cut them up, put them back in the pack and told her Bigfoot ate them. While she didn’t find this funny at all, you knew in the back of your mind that you just wanted her to stop smoking because it was bad…at least that’s what they said at school.

After school one day you find it very amusing that your kindergarten teacher sent you home with locks of your hair in a bag. You had been experimenting with scissors and, oops, a new hair style emerged. To your surprise your mom isn’t even mad; she is befuddled by why the teacher sent you home with the hair. What was it supposed to be, evidence? There was a mutual agreement that you wouldn’t do it again, and you both thought the teacher was being ridiculous.

Days at school were comical; you were the smartest kid in class and the teacher was just eating it up. When it came time for recess, though, it was a different story. You weren’t able to
keep up with most of the kids because you had asthma, and you couldn’t understand the doctor’s mumbo jumbo about why you couldn’t play what other kids were playing. You have two best friends that stick by your side no matter what. Christina is your rock, and James is the one that will jump in a huge puddle and doesn’t have a care in the world. Though you never know when things are going to change.

One day your mom decides she wants to move up North where your aunts and uncles live, and you have no say in the matter. You pack up your clothes, only what you can carry, and in the next moment you’re on a Greyhound bus headed to New York. For reasons you don’t know, you left your dad behind. Now it was you, your mom, and your little sister. “We have each other and that’s all that matters,” your mom would say. You’re heartbroken. You left a place where you were happy, and nothing seems to make sense anymore.

As you grow up, things change; the world outside is not what it used to be. Your friends change, and you don’t feel yourself anymore. You feel like an empty shell. Your only escape is writing and drawing. You don’t live in one place for too long, so there’s no use making friends anymore.

You begin to see changes in your mom you don’t like. It’s your tenth birthday, and your mom can barely hold your birthday cake up for you to blow out the candles. This is the last time you would celebrate your birthday. Your mom’s health is slowly deteriorating, but she tries to put on a smile because it is her wedding day. The night slowly declines, and she is taken to the hospital. She gets tests done. Weeks go by and the tests results are devastating: she has a disease called multiple sclerosis.
The doctors don’t know how she got the disease and they don’t know how to treat it either. You feel insignificant; all you care about is taking care of your mom. Not even a year after your mom was married, your stepfather leaves and doesn’t come back. It’s all up to you now; you have to be a grown up. Goodbye, childhood.

You continue moving from place to place, but today is your first day of high school and you actually make friends. You are doing well in school, everything is going smoothly, and things are not so hectic. Your mom’s doctor says her treatment is promising but he doesn’t know how bad the damage is. Your mom is on and off medication constantly; she forgets to take her medication or she just refuses to.

It is very apparent that there is something wrong with her: she is sickly looking, can’t keep food down, and you feel helpless. Once you think you’re going to stay where you’ve been living, your mom says you’re moving again. You hope this is the last time. You once again drift from classroom to classroom and speak to no one. There’s no use making friend’s because you’ll end up moving again.

It’s your senior year and you’ve lived in the same place for almost two years, surprising based on your record of moving. The new doctor your mom has been seeing ran some tests and the results show that her disease isn’t getting worse, but the damage that has been done could still prevent her from walking and taking care of herself.

You look at your mom with tears in your eyes, wondering why this had to happen to her. She is an amazing mother and she is losing all the abilities you take for granted. You think back to
when you asked your father “Why I can’t fix the trees?” and his answer echoes through your head: “It’s hard to fix living things once they have been broken.” You think all your life you’re indestructible, but the truth is you’re only as tough as what you reveal to the world. You are like a tree in the path of a hurricane, helpless in the face of the damaging wind, but able to grow new branches and deepen your roots.

The day you left to go to college you looked into your mother’s eyes and told her you loved her and that it’s your turn to face the world. You visit, but it’s not the same. You’re left with a feeling of regret, but you push through. Your mom understands. You turn towards the door and walk out.

Your mom still struggles with her everyday life, but you know she does it for you. She lives to watch you grow and change, she is there to listen, and most of all love you unconditionally. You never realized that your parents were teaching you the essentials of life. You are a strong individual, no one can break you, and you’ve made it through the storm. There may be rain and thunder along the way, but you know everything will be okay.
Photograph
Abbey Osborn
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Joseph Damone is a General Studies major from Andes, New York.

Jeanette DeFreese’s “Wide Open Spaces” is a reflection of her childhood, and she hopes that this story can help others feel they are not alone in their struggles.

Janine Geiger is a Veterinary Science major from Elmira, New York. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in film and television production from New York University, and worked at NBC News for over four years before deciding to head back upstate to pursue her dream of working with animals at SUNY Delhi. While she misses New York City, she is excited to have the opportunity to explore another of her passions.

Katie Hamm was born in the small town of Potsdam, New York, where she took multiple photography courses in high school. Since then, photography has been a passion of hers.

Rhonda Harrow-Engel was born and raised in New York City. She received a B.A. from Bard College and studied for a year in Italy at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art in Rome. She is an adjunct instructor at SUNY Delhi and has taught Art Appreciation, Freehand Drawing, and Ceramics at the college since 1993.

Samantha Ispay is a Veterinary Science major from Blue Point, New York.

Laurel Huff is a Veterinary Science major from Brewerton, New York.

Zhi Li is from Fukuoka, a city in southern Japan. He is a Business major focusing on accounting and finance.
Jack Lye is currently enrolled in the SUNY Delhi Veterinary Science Technology program. He is also on the College swim team, and is a lifeguard and swimming instructor.

Michael McKenna is an English professor at SUNY Delhi and lives in Oneonta, New York.

Briana Naccarato is a Travel and Tourism major from Huntington, Long Island, who hopes to travel the world for free. She enjoys reading mystery novels, world news, and manga. This summer she will be working for Beaches resort in Turks and Caicos.

Kaoru Odashima is a Business major from Japan.

Kirby Olson is an English professor at SUNY Delhi. His poems have appeared in *South Dakota Review, Partisan Review, Poetry East, Cortland Review*, and many other publications.

Abbey Osborn is from Saugerties, New York, and is an Adventure Recreation major.

Kristen Quigley is a Veterinary Science major from Davenport, New York.

Thomas Recinella is Director of the Culinary Arts Program at SUNY Delhi.

Madison Schulte is a General Studies major from Jefferson, New York.

Krista Scimeca is a Veterinary Science major from Lincoln Park, New Jersey.

Alexandra Semeraro is a senior in the Culinary Arts BBA program, and this is her first submission to *Agate*. 
Miriam A. Sharick has been a part-time Biology instructor at SUNY Delhi for some 17 years. She lives near Stamford with her husband of 35 years, Bill, and they have two grown children and a daughter-in-law.

Misty Touchette is a Senior Lab Animal Tech, originally from Montana and now living in New York. She is the mother of three (beautiful, wonderful, extraordinary, fabulous) children and she enjoys spinning yarn in her free time.

Mark Wake is the Assistant Director of Counseling at SUNY Delhi.