Agate (á-g-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.
2010 SUNY DELHI
STUDENT WRITING CONTEST WINNERS

1st Place
Aggie Soltysiak, “My Day at the Circus, My Life as a Slave”

2nd Place
Justin D. Gill, “The Ticket”

3rd Place
Jackie Parslow, “Ruby Tuesday”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Heather Hilson for laying out this year’s Agate; to Patrick Flynn and the SUNY Delhi print shop; and to the Liberal Arts & Sciences Division for financial assistance.
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Notes on Contributors
The Grand and Glorious Newspaper brought with it some triumphant news this morning. Yes, most triumphant indeed, a testament to my skill, my guile, my cunning, my expertise at what it was that I did for a living.

There was, of course, other news—news of the mundane, unimportant kind, the sort of boring, everyday thing they put on the front page, like the date (November 5th, 1929) and something about America's stock market last week. Not that it really had any significance; it was just the drivel they were expected to put on the front page. The non-important material. But if you read further in, you would be sure to unearth the good, juicy stuff, the stories worth telling.

They saved my story for page Q21,374.

I was a respectable businessman who represented the cut-and-dry interests of a syndicate of transport companies of trains, airships, boats, and trucks.

And now, I’m sure you ask, “What could a man such as you do that is so skillful, so incredibly ingenious as to merit a place on a page like that?“

Well. My moment of prodigious fame was in a column on the aforementioned page that referenced a cataclysmic collapse of a rival company called McFinneganshire’s Jam and Preserve Reserves, Inc., on the stock market in Friday’s Stock Arena. (It hadn’t been reported yet, as the Friday noon edition of the paper is the last issued before the Monday morning edition, which is what I was reading. Damned printers’ unions. Damned unions in general—cookers’ unions, truckers’ unions, pilots’ unions—anything except a union that would affect my life in any positive way.)

This was perhaps some of the best news I could have had. As I said, I represented the interests of transport companies. It was actually my good self who had collected a large amount of their stock, circulated some rumours, and then suddenly sold my majority shares. This had sowed the seeds of their destruction, but only now did I truly know that my efforts to bolster my clients’ competition
had succeeded. And if McFinneganshire’s had gone out of business, the city’s supplies of Jams, Jellies, Preserves, and assorted gelatinous fruity comestibles would already be gone.

I was enthused about the defeat of said rival company because the transportation syndicate I represented would gain immense profits overnight, as they would immediately be contracted to haul said Jams, Jellies, Preserves, and assorted gelatinous fruity comestibles into the city.

I suddenly realized, with pleasure, that the jar of Jam I had in my suitcase must be about the only one left in the city. I’d placed it in there last Thursday in case I needed some more Jam one day . . . and I hadn’t, and here I was, on Monday, with Jam. The rest of the city had been without it since Friday.

I smiled to myself and drew the Captain Carleton’s™ Catfish Jam from my suitcase, thinking about how envious others might be if they could see me.

I quickly glanced up at a sound outside the compartment. A man, the conductor, was staring in at the glass—I hadn’t drawn the curtains, and I cursed myself for this. The conductor-man knocked on the glass quietly, smiling in a way that I knew to be hiding sadism and cruelty. We stared at each other for a few long moments—about half a second, at most—with my cool but somewhat frightened eyes staring back into his sunken grey sockets.

His mouth moved as he knocked again, uttering words I couldn’t understand, but knew what they were anyways—JAM.

They were after it—my Jam.

I knew it.

I then realized with a sudden thunderclap of fright that the entire city, without Jam or Jelly or Preserves for the entire weekend, could possibly be going into Jam withdrawal. And they’d be after my Jam, the only Jam left. I shook my head in fright, closing the curtains quickly.

He knocked at the door loudly. I didn’t answer. Nothing happened then. . . . Had he left me? Had he gone away? In defeat? For a battering ram?

I suddenly could hear more people. More voices, more feet, more indistinct moans of “Jam!”
They—the crowd surely swarming at my door—jerked at it. It didn’t open; I’d locked it.

The vagrants jerked it again, much stronger this time. I peeked through the curtains and there were perhaps six, all around, swarming at my compartment door, all mouthing what I knew to be the terrible words “Jam, Jam, Jam, give us your Jam!” with their desperate fish-months turned up in hungry frowns. I could see that they smeared their dirty faces against the glass, staring at me hungrily, voraciously. Oh, nothing could have made this nightmarish situation worse than it already was. They were insane, maniacal fiends, after me and my Jam!

Thinking very quickly, I devised a cunning strategy within five minutes, despite their constant knocking and then later attempts at opening the door with what I knew to be crowbars, hammers, picks, and even explosive devices.

I stood up and pulled the emergency brake, a convenient red cord hanging from the back wall with a plaque next to it that read “Pull to stop the train in an Emergency. Any insurance claims will be ignored if you do not stand against the frontward wall during this procedure.”

I rolled my eyes as I pulled.

*Insurance agents*, I thought with disgust. They had a union.

I did not stand against the frontward wall, but soon found myself against it anyway, top hat on the floor and Jam in my hands, still in one piece, while a hellish squealing of the train filled the air as the brakes did their job more than admirably.

I also think there may have been a coat hook embedded in my back; I’m not sure. I was rather numb in the spinal regions, after flying across the room from the emergency cord and hitting the opposite wall in a rather sound collision.

The Jam-hungry fiends we also thrown forward, to devil-knows-where.

I knew, however, that they’d be back.

Oh, wait. . . .

They already were back, bashing at the door, yelling at me, telling me, I knew, to surrender the Jam. I think they knew it was the last one left. I *know* they knew it was myself who’d personally crashed
McFinneganshire’s and left them without Jam, and that it was I who had the last jar of Jam in the city, albeit a bit old and perhaps salty.

I extricated myself from the wall, grabbed my suitcase, stuffed the jar inside it, closed it, and then placed my top hat on my head (as impolite as it was indoors), retrieved my umbrella, and opened the door on the exterior wall of the carriage with a decidedly forceful and desperate yank.

I glanced back at the door . . . and saw them, still prying the door open, almost through, and without another thought, I jumped out onto the gravel bed of the railroad tracks.

This put me into a bit of a sticky wicket.

You see, this train went through the city, and it was currently on a sort of elevated track or bridge that was about thirty feet above the streets, as it always did, truth be told. I had forgotten that this route of escape wasn’t particularly an expedient one.

But the Jam had to be saved.

I heard them break through the door, and I ran toward the back of the train, away as fast as I could, umbrella under the arm I was clutching my hat with, and suitcase in the other. My coat tails were flapping against my legs rather embarrassingly.

I cringed. I knew the entire city could see me up here, running like a raving lunatic, not at all the decent businessman I truly was. Not the gentleman. I, however, decided it more expedient to run for my life and save my Jam rather than appear dignified as these Jam addicts bore down upon my body and rived the flesh from my bones while feasting on my Jam.

They were out on the track now, chasing after me. I needed not to look at their dreadful faces to see the words on their mouths—“Jam, Jam, give us the Jam!”

I redoubled my efforts at running, and soon managed to outstrip them, as sluggish as they were for being in Jam withdrawal. Poor devils. I chuckled. They could never catch a man in his prime, so independent of Jams and Jellies.

They soon stopped chasing me entirely, as I had suspected they would. Given this, I soon slowed to a dignified walk along the line, enjoying the view of the great sprawling city this lofty transit system afforded me. This, I thought as I walked over a bridge that
arched over a busy street, is certainly not so bad as I thought it would be.

Whatever charitable thoughts I had towards my high position were immediately dispelled by what I saw below me after a certain shout turned my head.

I was immediately dismayed and took a step back.

There was a crowd—a horde, it seemed—of hungry people staring up at me from the street. Trucks were stopped on the other side of the bridge I was on, with people standing around them as well. But what caught my fevered attention was that all these people were staring with their mouths gaping—there were the same ones from the train, and then there were bluecoats next to them, and then there were simply normally dressed fiends—and all were looking up, all at me, and all wanted the same thing. The Jam I carried in my briefcase.

The bluecoats pointed up. “Get down from there!” they bellowed. “Give these men what they want!”

I shrunk away from the edge even more.

“Give them what they ask, man!” they yelled. “And no one will be further inconvenienced!”

I had no time to respond—not that I would have, anyway—as someone nearby moaned out, “The train!”

Ah, yes. The train was coming towards me, the same way the other one had come originally. I should have thought of that.

But these people knew that if I was hit, the Jam would be destroyed, and they couldn’t have it. They were worried about the Jam, not me—oh, the pitiable and inhumane mind of an addict. It is such a tragedy to see one so consumed by something such as Jam.

They all went pale. “Man, get down from there, the train’s coming!” the bluecoat howled again. “Get down, don’t be a fool!”

The train had appeared, a great and baleful white light in the center of a dark and crouching mass, quickly bearing down on me, screeching along the tracks in a hellish blaze of smoke, steam, and fire.

I chanced a glance over to it, and then looked back at their forlorn and despairing faces. I smiled at them, pitying them, but taking pleasure in my success—the fact that they could not have it! I laughed, screaming down, “You’ll never have it!”
They all took a step back. “Get down, sir! This is not a time to be petty!” the desperate bluecoat howled.

I glanced at the rapidly closing train, almost on top of me, and then laughed again and cried aloud, “You’ll never get it, you fiends! Never! I’ve bested you!” And thus, turning around, wielding my umbrella in my hand, I flung myself into space from the opposite side of the bridge, the train screaming past me, just a few feet away from my coattails. Everyone gasped as the train raged past with a whoosh and a whistle, the psychotic murderous red glow of its sparks and smoke lighting up the dark surrounding buildings and the large amounts of steam that it spewed out, obscuring the world in a reddish-grey wreath of steam.

The umbrella, I’m quite sorry to say, didn’t quite survive the first few seconds of my fall. It turned inside out, much to my dismay. Further to my dismay, my hat fell off, and even further to my already prodigious dismay, I began to fall as well, down through the steamy gloom. Gravity could be somewhat inconveniencing at times . . . and it didn’t even have a union.

Funny, that.

I’m not entirely sure what happened next, but I awoke with a dashed sore back and a general feeling of unease.

Billingson—the proprietor of one of my truck transportation clients—was staring down at me quizzically. “Ah, what exactly are you doing?”

I looked around. I was in the back of a truck, quite possibly a truck that belonged to him. The canvas above me was ripped, and through that rip I could see the edge of the bridge I had leapt from, the train cars still rushing by. I could also see my top hat sitting on the top of this truck, just as dandy as ever. I was lying on what appeared to be a crate stuffed with straw.

“I’m . . . er . . .,” I stammered, and then I recalled. “They’re after the Jam, Billings!” I cried, grasping him by the arms.

“What the deviled blazes are you talking about, man?” he asked again, as quizzically as before, leaning away from me a little bit. Rude, he was.

“I have the last jar of bloody Jam in the city; McFinneganshire’s collapsed on Friday night, didn’t you hear? There’s
no Jam in the city except my jar, and they’re after me for it!”

Billings dug into the straw I was lying on, pulling out a small jar of Marmalade. “We’re the delivery trucks, mate. Your plan worked, you know; we were contracted for it.” He smiled a bit, patting my shoulder. “But why the devil did you think they wanted your Jam?”

“What?” I blustered. “Why else would they be running after me like that, invading my compartment in the carriage? Of course they were after my Jam.”

“Don’t be daft. They said that the conductor was just checking your ticket. And when you didn’t open the door, he. . . .” His voice trailed off as he spoke.

I realized that the ticket was in the palm of my glove.
A Whole in a Wall
Martin A. Christiansen

A “whole” in a wall—
not a “hole”
as in something one might see through
or pass through
or hang a door in—

But rather a “whole” in the wall of a life
as in the solidity of a single unit
a “oneness” of being
inseparable—
uncompromised—
unified—

The kind of thing one dreams of—
when thinking of a relationship
with a partner
when thinking of the strength of the ice
upon which one is walking
when thinking of the sound produced
by various players
at an irreproducible music session—

Where the “whole” of the music
is far greater than just the sum of its parts
where the “whole” of the music
is a color that is unseeable—
indiscernible—
invisible—

And yet it is brighter and more luscious
than any single choice on the color wheel
than any single flower picked for one’s true love
than any single statement one might randomly
or unrandomly make
Each of those single things can never be brilliant alone
One is just a player
Another is simply a voice
The third a fiddle-dee-dee
Or a thunderous bottom-end
and others—all assembled
for a simple purpose in their presence—
which unifies them
to be the reason they ARE a place in time
at each of those times in that place

And each of them is just that
—an “each”—
but the “whole” is far greater
than just the sum of the parts

And so it is with “wholeness”
that hanging a door in a hole in a wall
is a single thing

But the bond between men
that makes them the players
that makes them unite in common endeavors
that makes them willing to hang a door
in a hole in a wall—
also makes them all a “whole”

* * *

How fortunate we are—
many men would secretly kill
to have the “wholeness”
we so lightly cast about in this camaraderie

Let’s hang a door in a wall
In My Mother’s Hand
Marsha Stock

I startle, catching my breath, when I see Mom’s writing on the end of a box of Kodachrome slides or a scrap of paper. Suddenly she is alive again, in the next room or town, about to hang a plastic grocery bag containing a can of corn on the garage door: a notice that she stopped by. In her hands the kid gloves she loved and hardly ever got to wear. On this scrap of paper I find “3 years in WAVES with no original chic chapeaux then eight years plus 3 children left the urge but not the nerve to splurge.” With that ditty she won a hat designed especially for her by Lilly Dache on the Gary Moore TV show in 1954. After she died I found the hat all tucked away in a closet. I still cannot find a single picture of her wearing it.
Ready for Flight Photograph
Melissa Kasprzak
I sit here alone but never by myself. There are always people around. Nurses, doctors, physical therapists, and the always changing population of this Godforsaken place. They call it a “nursing home,” but when I hear that second word I laugh. This is not my home. It is a bed, meals, and frequent washing. This is not a home; it is a place that facilitates “comfortable” death. As though death could be made comfortable. Not a home.

A lot of the people here won’t live to see spring. I find it strange that so many people die while the ground is too hard to bury them. I think they see the white snow-covered world outside through blurry eyes and think it’s “the light.” Dumb asses.

I am what they call a long-termer. I was put here because I forgot the damn stove was on a few times. Big deal. The kitchen got a little singed, that’s all. So what if my memory isn’t what it used to be? No one really needs to know the date, do they? And so what if I don’t remember all my grandchildren’s names? There’s so many of them I usually just shout a name into the crowd and see who answers.

I remember the important things, though. Important to me, that is. I still remember my mother. The way she moved, smelled, the sound of her voice. I remember her in the kitchen when I was small, teaching me the difference between pancakes and waffles; she always took the time to teach me the little things. I remember the time we went to the fair; she spent $5.00 of money we couldn’t really spare just to win me a silly toy giraffe from the sweaty man with a beard behind the counter. I remember how she declined as the cancer ate away at her lungs, slowly suffocating her. God, it’s gotta be 30 years since she passed. I’ll join her eventually.

Oh! It must be time for me to do something. This nurse is awfully young. She can’t be long out of college. I don’t think I’ve seen her before, I’m certain I would remember that crimson hair. Kids these days don’t know when to stop with the hair dye. I wonder where we’re going. Oh. I see. Boring. We’re at my room. It must be time for me to try and take a shit. I suppose I should really try this time. They’ve been threatening an enema. I hate those. They sure do care.
a lot about shit here. At home I went when I had to and if I had to. Now? Now I’m on a schedule. If I don’t go every couple of days, they figure something’s wrong with me. Well, that’s not entirely wrong, but they can’t cure old age. Hmmm. I guess I did have to go. The nurse looks rather disgusted.

The most fun I have in here is seeing how grossed out I can make the nurses and escaping. The escapes are always entertaining. I’ve made it all the way to the gas station before and that’s about half a mile down the road. I think next time I’m going to try to make it as far as the liquor store. It’s a little farther, but if I can get down to the lobby when the nurses change shifts, I should have at last an hour and a half before they notice and another 15 minutes, at least, before they find me. Oh, the hell I raised as a child. I get a glimpse into the wonderful past every time I escape.

But they always bring me back and tell me that I shouldn’t do that, how dangerous it is, yadda yadda yadda. I am 85 years old and they talk to me like I am 5 years old. I don’t get it. Why can’t they understand what it’s like for me? Why can’t they see the 25-year-old me living inside this broken and battered shell? I am still the person that I was when I was young.

I hate that I am treated like a burden. Like I am no longer useful to anyone. My grandchildren come and visit me because my children force them to, not because they want to. Why should they come to see me at all if they don’t want to? It doesn’t make me feel better about being here. It just makes me sad. If they wanted to come see me, if they wanted my advice, that would make me happy. I want them to want to visit with me. But that’s not how society works anymore. That’s why these places can charge so damn much. People’s families will pay anything to not have an extra “burden.”

Anyway, I’ll get off my soapbox. I sure wish this guy next to me would be moved. Gassy bastard. But of course I won’t call for the nurse. They won’t pay any attention. I could be dying, but until it says it’s time for them to do something to me on their schedule they’ll pay no attention to me.

Oh well, never mind. It’s time for bed. I guess I finally get to retreat into the confines of sleep once again, only to wake up tomorrow morning to a powdered-egg breakfast and a fistful of meds.
The Old Factory Photograph
Christopher J. Harasta
How Does She Know
Devan Chirurgi

She fidgeted with her doll; it went on the table, to the empty space on her chair, then to her fuzzy black jacket pocket. She spoke with hesitation, not knowing what to say. She started talking in a soft voice about chocolate pudding pie and her dog. It was hard to pay attention to what she said because her eyes wouldn’t stop darting around; they fixed themselves everywhere around the room. Once every so often she glanced in my direction. Her comfort level dropped, so she wrote my name to kill some time and then crossed it out. Her left hand held her head up, looking away from me. Then she seemed calmer; her body language was a bit more difficult to read. Her red bangs swayed across the paper as she wrote. They must have gotten in the way so she tucked them to the side of her head. The man in a blue uniform with a utility belt asked her, “Do you remember who hurt Mommy?”

She kept her eyes on the paper and continued to doodle on the page. She didn’t answer but instead repeated, “Duck…duck…goose.”

I had to jump in because the officer looked at me and gave me the okay to persuade her to say something. “Baby, it’s okay to tell the man who you saw; we need to know what happened.”

She didn’t seem to acknowledge me, but only repeated, “Duck . . . duck . . . goose. Duck . . . duck . . . goose,” over and over again. While she went off on this tangent the officer on the other side of the table and I looked at each other with confusion. He put his thumb on his temple and the other four fingers on his forehead. He pushed his metal chair back and stood up. “I’ll be right back,” he said. The door opened violently and closed so loudly that it almost shattered the one-way mirror in the room.

I whispered in her ear, “Did you even see anything, honey bunny?”

“Duck . . . duck . . . goose. Duck . . . duck . . . goose,” she uttered again. I didn’t know what to do, so I grabbed her shoulders and cut her off. “Hey!” My fingers reached the back of her neck and could almost touch one another. “What does that mean?”
She looked at me with those full, innocent eyes and said, “Mommy is here, and she’s playing duck . . . duck . . . goose!” I held my tongue as she continued, “The man that left is a duck, Mommy says I’m a duck, and she tapped on your head and said you are the goose.”
Dark Christmas
Kirby Olson

Hovering over the Delaware River
Crows as boomerangs in the fog of firs
Coldness in the corridors at work
Cookies from the Christmas party
Flies crinkled around the plate
Twinkling lights illuminate their eyes.

From the 7th floor I see rusted cars trudge.
Wintry streets of Delhi
The red light at Main & Kingston changes
Police lights revolve
Citizen going too fast
Parking meters stick out ghostly tongues
To jeer as he goes past.

I hate Christmas.
There is no meaning
Except in the feeling
The children peeling gifts: squealing.
I’m not a particularly superstitious person, but for some reason, the number 23 has seemed important in my life for a long time. My husband and I were engaged on October 23. We were married on May 23. When we moved upstate, we lived on Route 23 and our phone number was 652-7236. OK, maybe that’s a stretch, but twenty-three is still in there. My mother’s birthday was December 23. She didn’t leave this earth on the 23rd of the month, but the number 23 did play a role in my life after her death.

Her wake was quite amazing. My dad, my nine brothers and sisters, and many of the 15 grandchildren were at the wake from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Over 400 people stopped by to comfort my dad and to talk about what my mother meant to them. It was a day full of tears and laughter and wonderful memories.

The day after the funeral, Mimi, my youngest sister, and I had flights out of Midway Airport that were scheduled to leave within minutes of each other. As I walked Mimi to her gate, I looked at the number. “Mimi,” I said, “this is a good sign. Your gate is B10 and your birthday is the tenth of December.” She looked a little further down the hallway to my gate. “And your gate is B15 and your birthday is December fifteenth. Another good sign!” As a fearful flyer, I am always grateful to grasp at whatever omen portends a good flight. We called our three sisters who had just dropped us off at Midway and told them about our gate numbers. My sister Jeanne thought of another coincidence, “And there are ten kids in our family and fifteen grandkids!”

Mimi and I hugged and cried as her flight began to board and I walked to my gate. For the first time, I looked at my flight number: 2323. I looked at my boarding pass: 23A. Wow, I thought. I guess my mom is still with me. Little did I know.

The flight was smooth and I landed in Albany on the kind of crisp, sunny March day that tells you in bold, bright terms that winter will end, and spring will return.

While I waited for the shuttle bus to the economy lot, I put
some singles in my pocket to tip the shuttle driver, and a $20 bill for the parking lot fee. A young man was driving the shuttle and I told him that I was parked at the farthest end of the economy lot. I noticed that he seemed to be in some discomfort. “I’m in a lot of pain,” he said. “Bleeding ulcers. I’m supposed to go to the doctor at 3 o’clock today, but I can’t leave my shift early. I’m on probation and I need this job. I’ll just have to miss my appointment and will probably end up in the emergency room tonight.”

My maternal instincts kicked into high gear. “Well, you can’t keep working if you’re in such terrible pain—you might be doing more damage. You need to talk to your supervisor and explain what’s going on.”

He thought for a minute. “Well,” he said, “maybe I will.” Then he told me that he had been under a lot of stress lately. His fiancée had ended their engagement and had broken his heart. His job was the one thing in his life that was giving him some focus and he didn’t want to lose it. He couldn’t afford to lose it. He said his fiancée had been the love of his life and he would never again find someone so perfect for him.

“Oh no,” I said, “you’re still young. You have your whole life ahead of you. I’m sure you’ll meet someone else someday. Just give yourself some time to heal from this loss. How old are you?”

“Twenty three,” he said.


He pulled into the farthest section of the economy lot, bringing me directly to my car. I reached into my pocket to get his $3 tip. I also pulled out the twenty and handed all the bills to him. “Here,” I said, “this is for you.”

“Oh no,” he protested, “I can’t take that. It’s too much!”

“I want you to have this. I just came from my mother’s funeral, and she would want me to do this. And if my mother were here, she’d tell you to go directly to your supervisor and explain that you have to leave early to get to the doctor. Hang in there. Things look pretty bleak right now, but they will get better.”

We were both crying as I got off the shuttle. I was filled with memories of my mother—buying a homeless person a cup of
soup, talking to strangers on trains and buses. She was a character, my mother, and like all of us, had many flaws, but she was always connected to the world in many ways. And she was always performing random acts of kindness. I felt the least I could do was perform one for her on my way home from her funeral.

As I drove toward the parking lot gate, I realized that my E-Z Pass would cover the parking fee. And it also occurred to me that I had just given the 23-year-old driver a $23 tip.

I started laughing and crying at the same time. I found myself singing Irish songs at the top of my lungs, although maybe not at the top of my singing ability. My mother had a beautiful soprano voice, and she would have been happy that I was singing “Danny Boy,” no matter how it sounded. I knew that. I was still singing when I realized I had missed my exit off of I-90. Oh well, I thought, I’ll just go down Route 30 and go past our old house. Then I realized that would take me to Route 23, instead of Route 10. Route 23. And that’s how I got home that day. On Route 23, with my mother leading the way along a string of twenty-threes. She was never one for subtlety.
Please
Bill Moyse

Don’t give me a shirt with no pocket
Better yet there’s a button to lock it
A place for a smoke, a pen, or a joke
Don’t give me a shirt with no pocket.
I remember it all so clearly. The lions roaring, begging to be released and saved from their inevitably fiery demise. The elephants and horses streaming by me as I stood there watching it all burn, watching the only home I’d ever really known go up in smoke and flames. I suppose I should have been afraid of the smoke, the flames, the animals stampeding past me. Afraid of being found out. But I was not afraid. I just stood there watching the chaos I had created. Yes, that I had created. Me, for once determining my own future. Having a say in what happens next. My performance name was The Phoenix, and here I am standing amongst these flames.

I was left as a child at the very circus I had begged my father to take me to see. I was never a wanted child; even at the age of five I knew that. I don’t even remember ever having a mother. But to be abandoned by my father whom I loved? That I never would have expected.

He left me during the fire jugglers; this too I remember all too clearly. It is ironic, I suppose: the two biggest changes in my life occurred with the presence of fire. He told me he was going to get me a snack and asked what I wanted, “Popcorn, Daddy!” I had replied foolishly and eagerly. I had never had popcorn before, but its smell was so tantalizing I knew it must be something to desire. He left me, told me he would be right back, told me to stay where I was, but never returned. I waited there patiently, watching the fire go round and round and up and down in the juggler’s capable hands. I watched the wonderful lady with her thousands of hula-hoops. I was amazed by the size and grandeur of the elephants that could sit on those tiny stools. I sat, still patiently, as that daring man walked inside the cage with lions that would surely rip him to shreds before my very eyes, and I was stunned when instead they submitted to him and did tricks at his beck and call. I scanned the crowds looking for my daddy when the circus was over, still in my seat. He had told me not to move.

Finally, everyone was gone. The clowns came back into the tent to clean it up a little before the next show, and I watched them sweep and pick up trash through a silent veil of tears until one of
them saw me. “Hey! What are you still doing here?” he shouted at me. “Where’s your parents at?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “Daddy went to get me popcorn.”

“Joey! Go get Linda! We’ve got a forgotten kid here!”

Forgotten was not the right word. Left. I was left there.

When I first met Linda she seemed nice enough. She asked me who brought me and where they went. Then she asked me if I was hungry. I told her Daddy left to get me popcorn. She just nodded and asked if I wanted some popcorn now. I nodded yes, trusting and unaware my daddy wasn’t ever coming back. She took me to her trailer, handed me some popcorn, and told me she was going to call my daddy and that I shouldn’t worry my “pretty little head.” Bullshit. She never called him. But what did I know? I was three fucking years old. I was perfectly content sitting in Linda’s trailer eating popcorn, still waiting for my daddy to come and get me.

It got late and I started to feel drowsy. I had finished my popcorn hours ago. Linda came back into the room and asked me if I was sleepy. I nodded my head yes again. Linda told me I was going to stay with her for a while and that I could have as much popcorn as I wanted. Well hell, if you were three years old wouldn’t that sound like a pretty decent plan to you? She took me over to her room and pulled out a cot. “This is where you get to sleep, sweetie.” She smiled and gestured to the cot. I deftly crawled into it and she covered me with the blanket. I was so tired, I fell asleep immediately.

I awoke to Linda’s alarm clock ringing. I sat up and looked around. It looked so different in daylight. At first I noticed the big things: the bed, the little closet, the door, the floor, the ceiling. Then I looked closer. There were clothes strewn everywhere, empty bottles piled on the floor, an overflowing ashtray on the nightstand. Next, the smell hit me. The stale, smoky air wafted up my nostrils and into my memory.

Linda stirred in the bed and looked over at me to see me sitting up staring at her and her habitat. I guess she seemed startled. Like she didn’t remember why there was a little girl sitting on a cot in her room. Then her face lit up with remembrance and excitement. “Well, good morning, sweetheart!” She smiled at me and lit a cigarette. “How would you like to learn some tricks like you saw at
the show yesterday?”

I all of a sudden was excited. I was going to learn how to do all of those wonderful things! I smiled as big as a little girl can and started to bounce around on my cot. Then my stomach grumbled loudly. “Oh dear! You must be hungry! What do you say to some breakfast? What’s your most favorite thing to eat for breakfast?” she asked me enthusiastically.

“I like pancakes and syrup, but Daddy never let me have any,” I told her. He didn’t ever let me have any. He made some for himself once and I snuck a bite while he was in the bathroom. But he never made me special food like that. He fed me when I started to cry from hunger. But not pancakes and syrup. Usually he fed me dry cereal and water. But that is really stretching my memory.

“Well then. We just won’t tell daddy then. OK?” She was looking at me, still smiling and smoking.

“OK,” I told her. She took me to her kitchen which, in Linda’s trailer, was all of one step outside her bedroom. She started making the forbidden food as I watched, amazed that she was going to give me pancakes without me even having to whimper.

After I had eaten my fill of pancakes, Linda took me outside to a smaller tent outside the big top. She asked me what my favorite part of the circus was. I told her I liked the fire jugglers. She smiled at me, “Well, how would you like to learn how to do that?”

I looked at her and nodded. It was the only thing I could think to do. I was going to learn how to juggle fire, just like I had seen at the show! Linda picked up a little ball. “Now,” she said, handing the ball to me, “let’s see how high up you can throw this ball.”

And that was how my training started. Every day we would wake up, Linda would feed me breakfast, and we would go out to that little tent and she taught me how to juggle. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? But I’ve left out a key part. If I ever so much as dropped a ball, she hit me. Not hard at first, but as I grew older and more talented, her strikes became more forceful. Once when I was seven or so, I was juggling eight balls and one fell. That was the worst Linda had ever hit me. It was late at night and she had just finished off the second half of her whiskey bottle. As that ball bounced off the ground once, twice—strike! She slapped me across the face, but I kept juggling
the remaining seven balls. She hit me again. This time a blow to the stomach. Another three balls fell. She kept hitting and balls kept falling until the last one and I both hit the floor. The ball bounced, but I lay in a crumpled heap without even the strength left to cry.

She forced me to perform. I was the main attraction. And I was good. I brought in more people than even Linda could have imagined. Everyone wanted to see the girl who could juggle fire. I could juggle up to fifteen flaming bowling pins at one time. I did it because I had to. I put on a good show for the drooling crowds because I had to. Because the consequences of not doing so were greater than I cared to test. I was a slave.

I hated Linda. I hated my daddy. I hated myself for not being able to do anything. Which brings me to why I set the circus on fire. I didn’t plan on the whole damn thing going up in a blaze; I just wanted Linda’s trailer to burn with her inside it. I had been planning it for days. I waited for her to drink herself to sleep, and then I turned the stove on with a pan of oil and a dishtowel sitting on top. I had figured that, if the cops came, they would assume she had started cooking something and passed out. What I hadn’t thought of was that Linda’s trailer was right next to a whole string of tents.

Not that I give a flying fuck that the whole damn thing caught. I’m just saying that it wasn’t my intention originally. So now I stood there watching it burn. My performance name was The Phoenix. I suppose am like a phoenix. I died the first time Linda hit me, my spirit broken; but now, through these flames, I . . . am . . . reborn.
What’s the Matter with Kansas? Not Much, Really
Miriam A. Sharick

In July of 2008, Bill and I drove to Manhattan, Kansas, to visit our daughter Sara, who was stationed at nearby Fort Riley. Sara was about to move to Arizona to receive captain’s training at Fort Huachuca, so I knew I was unlikely to come out that way again, and I wanted to make the most of my experience.

Driving around this country promised to be pleasant and beautiful. The route we chose took us through the rolling hills of New York’s Southern Tier, skirted south of Lake Erie through Pennsylvania, and picked up Interstate 70 in central Ohio. With minor departures, we stayed on I-70 through Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas right to Manhattan. I keep a life list of states I have visited, and I added Kansas, Missouri, and Indiana to this list, which now totals 34. I sort of keep a life list of biomes I’ve visited, and I can add “prairie” to this list now. I’m not sure whether the patches of hardwood forest dominated by sycamores in Indiana and Illinois count as part of the prairie or as part of the overall hardwood forest of east central North America. There is no forest like it where we live.

Dwight Eisenhower is revered everywhere in Kansas as a native son who made it big. The same is true of the status of Harry Truman in Missouri, with an important exception. President Eisenhower conceived the Interstate highway system. It was a brilliant idea in a life and a presidency filled with illustrious accomplishments that are finally receiving their due admiration. A stretch of I-70 in Kansas was the first Interstate roadbed to be laid in 1956, and we drove on it. It’s well built and well maintained. In fact, all the roads of the Midwestern states over which we traveled, and of Kansas in particular, were better built and better maintained than any major roads in New York. We can’t justify this by complaining to the world that our weather is worse than theirs and that our population is higher than theirs and that we can’t afford to build and maintain our transportation infrastructure efficiently.

Most of the aboriginal prairie has been lost: drained and plowed for agriculture, paved and built for business and communities. Skylines rise de novo out of the endless miles of corn
fields, wheat fields, and sunflower fields: Indianapolis, Topeka, Denver at the junction of the prairie with the Rockies. Belatedly but earnestly, all the Midwestern states are reestablishing wetlands and native grasses wherever possible, recreating habitat for hundreds of species of threatened small vertebrates. Kansas gets particularly high marks for its efforts and accomplishments.

I am embarrassed to admit how surprised I was at how beautiful the prairie is. It’s mostly low rolling hills, some lightly forested, others open, dissected by the forested courses of abundantly flowing rivers. I never thought of Kansas as a state of high water levels and high rainfall. But look at a map sometime and observe how Missouri River drainage covers the state. And look at the latitude too. We know, somehow, that Missouri is a hot and muggy place, perhaps because St. Louis gets bad press, perhaps because of its slavery heritage that we associate with a hot, muggy Deep South. But the Missouri River is the common border of Missouri and Kansas. Summer temperatures routinely stay in the 90s, thunderstorms are frequent and heavy, and winters are relatively mild, unlike the blizzards of the northern plains and mountain states. When we visited, ambient temperatures were in the 100s. Evenings cooled to the 80s. People sweat, drink water, smear on sunscreen, and just do what they do, heat wave or no.

We wondered about the possibility of tornadoes. Every community has sirens that sound the alert to take shelter when funnels are spotted. A tornado blasted through Manhattan a few weeks before our visit. Sara was home at the time and said there was no way anyone anywhere in the city could fail to hear the sirens. She took shelter in the bathroom of her apartment and watched the progress of the tornado through the city on her laptop. It did considerable damage to the K Sate campus and a few other places, but nobody died, none of the damage is irreparable, and her neighborhood was spared. As tornadoes go, it wasn’t the Big One. I don’t know how, or if, a Midwestern city is tornado-proofed the way some California cities are earthquake-proofed. I’m relieved Sara moved away, actually.

Those rolling hills are not tectonic, at least not in eastern Kansas. Layers of flint, chalk, and other sediments reveal that ancient
lakes and seas produced this gently eroded plateau, not unlike the much higher and much older delta of the Catskills. Marine invertebrates of the Paleozoic, giant reptiles of the Mesozoic, and herds of early Cenozoic mammals all left fossils. Kansas was never glaciated during the Ice Age; the elephants, camels, rhinos, and equines were not wooly. The lack of glaciers meant that no natural lakes were formed in the basins among the hills, though underground water resources are vast. If this was a flaw, the state has corrected it by constructing four huge artificial lakes, including Milford Lake outside of Manhattan, and an uncountable number of ponds for recreation and conservation. Everybody in Kansas seems to love being outdoors and to take advantage of these available resources. Furthermore, they protect their groundwater and do not build where they don’t think the available water will support community expansion. The construction booms in Manhattan and Fort Riley would not be taking place if there had not been detailed studies done on the water available for a greatly increased population.

You have to know whom you’re talking to if you bring up the topic of fossils. Kansas was nationally embarrassed when some religious fundamentalists hijacked the voice of the state school board and tried to force the teaching of “creation science.” The naturalist at the Milford Lake visitors’ center explained to me with some indignation and resentment that this stigma has never been removed, even though those school board members have been, long since; the Eastern media never bothered to report that. (I hadn’t known that either.) She had set up some beautiful educational dioramas of fossils found during the construction of Milford Lake and elsewhere around the state. Dates, however, were conspicuously lacking on the dioramas. The naturalist admitted that some visitors go out of their way to criticize any expression of science, and she didn’t want to give them an opening. That sort of ignorance isn’t confined to Kansas, Colorado, Arkansas, or Tennessee; every New York school district has dealt with it.

Fort Riley bustles like any American suburb, except for one obvious difference and one subtle one. The obvious difference is that almost every male wears the uniform. Unexpectedly large numbers of women also serve, including our own dashing captain. Everyone has
something to do, someplace to go, some aspect of a mission to carry out. The MPs at the checkpoints only appear to be standing around. The subtle difference is that everyone is young. We were the oldest people on the post; even the senior officers all retire before they’re 50. The youth of the G.I. population means that families with young children dominate non-military aspects of life. Elementary schools, daycare centers, playgrounds, picnic areas, several of each, burgeon with children. There is one middle school on the post; older teens go to high school in Manhattan and participate in sports, scouts, 4-H, bands, and other normal school and community activities. (There are 12 different 4-H clubs in Manhattan alone.) The kids are an American rainbow, of absolutely every size, color, and ethnicity. The American army could be the best integrated, most diverse, most receptive, most democratic community in the world.

Manhattan itself, as a college town, is diverse. At the county fair and rodeo, we saw mixed flocks of teenagers everywhere: boys and girls, white, black, Hispanic, and Asian, ranch kids, soldiers’ kids, professors’ kids, townies of every stratum, giggling and preening and posing like adolescents everywhere. (On the front lawn of an unassuming house on a quiet street, I saw a sign that read: Manhattan Jewish Center. Some of those goofy kids undoubtedly belonged to it.) Restaurants, shopping, and entertainment are readily available. At one restaurant, I had the very best steak dinner of my life. Manhattan looks like a great place to raise a family. It’s so wholesome. The rodeo participants themselves, locals and out-of-staters, were less diverse, tending toward cliché. The boys all seemed to be named Cody or Corey or Cade or Tyler. The girls all seemed to be named Kodi or Kori or Katie or Taylor. But could they rope and ride! Watching these fragile-looking children on their broncs and bulls, you can’t imagine how they overcome fear and pain and injury to go for the glory of toughness and skill. There’s even an event for the 4-year-old Codys and Koris: they cling with their fingers and feet to the fleece of a racing sheep. The inevitable fall is neither far nor painful. The winner was the tot who stayed on the longest.

Sara had no time off just because her parents were visiting, so we had to amuse ourselves during the working day. I intended to do some bird watching and wore my binoculars everywhere, but I
wanted most of all to go fishing. We got our non-resident licenses and a map of the 30 or so ponds on the post, plus a map of Milford Lake, and we fished. We fished in triple-degree heat, morning and afternoon, half a dozen ponds, several locations on the lake and near the dam, day after day, and caught, between the two of us, exactly nothing. Neither of us even had a bite. Damn few birds were flying in the heat either. I saw just two like birds, a single scissor-tailed flycatcher off post, and its abundant close relative the western kingbird. I could have spent all that time on the prairie, learning about it, learning the grasses, maybe finding fossils in the exposed rocks or looking for lizards or something more edifying than cast after empty cast. One soldier daddy and his little boy were catching sunfish in a shady spot on the lake. We fished there. Zip. Other soldiers were catching stripers below the Milford dam. We fished there. Zip. We cast where bass were jumping, where catfish were stirring up the bottom, where gar were prowling, where green herons and belted kingfishers were picking off the small fry; zip zip zip zip. I had looked forward to cooking a fish dinner for Bill and Sara. I refused to accept that it wasn’t going to happen. I persevered through the heat, through a flea attack near the lake (those bites itched for days), through sunburn and thirst and no bathrooms and muggy rain. I don’t know what those Kansas fish didn’t like about my Eastern lures, and I couldn’t change their smooth-cortex minds one scaly bit.

I enjoyed visiting Kansas. If I ever go back, I’d like to go a little farther west to see pronghorns and western meadowlarks and dickcissels. I’d like to stop in the Ozarks. I’d like to take in baseball games in St. Louis and Kansas City on the way. I’d like to visit Kansas’s other world-class university, KU in Lawrence, a couple of hours east of Manhattan. I’d like to visit the Brown vs. Board of Education monument in Topeka, the capital. I’d like to go north to Nebraska and south to Oklahoma and add two more states to my life list. I don’t think I could live happily ever after in the Midwest, but I’m impressed with the people who can. In cities, in nature, and on farms, the prairie can teach you how to achieve the blessings of security, comfort, and peace. You want your home to be like Kansas.
Apparatus Photograph
Christopher J. Harasta
There were two 5 and 10 cent stores in Oceanside. One was Woolworth's, which was located in the Great Lincoln Shopping Center right near Food Fair and next to National Shoes. Woolworth's featured a soda fountain decorated with lots of pictures of dancing hot dogs and ice cream, a record section, a pet department that usually had more goldfish floating belly-up in the overcrowded tank than actually swimming, and a somewhat strange store manager named Marty who used to walk around constantly talking to himself. Woolworth's was part of a national chain of stores, and looked exactly like the other Woolworth's located in several nearby towns. The ladies that worked there all wore the same green smocks with red letters on the back and front.

The other 5 and 10 cent store was known as Smiles. Even though it was a 5 and 10 cent store like Woolworth's, Smiles had no soda fountain, pet department, or record section. Like Woolworth's it did, however, have a wonderful toy section fully stocked with meticulously lined-up regiments of lead soldiers, cars and trucks of all sizes and descriptions, cap guns and holsters, dolls and carriages, and the latest in Davy Crockett gear and accessories carefully displayed on a child-sized mannequin near the cash register.

Like Woolworth's, Smiles had a main entrance in the front with a giant picture window that was thoughtfully and attractively decorated with the latest in kitchen gadgets, fabrics, and various other household necessities. More often than not, however, we would enter Smiles through the dingy brown metal rear door that opened up into the parking lot in back where our moms would park before going in to shop. Since Smiles was located several long blocks beyond the Great Lincoln Shopping Center, it was a store we never ventured to alone.

The ladies in Smiles didn't wear green smocks like they did in Woolworth's. They always welcomed parents with a friendly greeting, and offered kids a lollypop upon entry. They were quick to offer to help our moms find anything that they needed, and always suggested new products that would make things easier around the house and
usually featured a red tag that proudly stated “As Seen on TV.”

Aside from the lollipops, the main allure of Smiles was the toy section. It ran the entire length of the store, and its stock ran the gamut from inexpensive rubber toy cars and trucks all the way to the latest creations from Louis Marx, Hasbro, Mattel, and Remco. As our moms shopped, we would stare longingly at the selection with eyes wide open. One of the Smiles staff would always subtly saunter over and remind me not to touch anything, and to be good so that I could get the toys I wanted for Chanukah. If Billy Gannon was there, rather than saying Chanukah, she would always substitute the phrase “so that Santa will bring you the toys that you want for Christmas” after the “be good” part. I wondered how these ladies were equipped with such an accurate Jew-detecting device, since they always seemed to be able to match up the right kid with the religiously correct holiday.

Trips to Smiles always followed the same pattern until one fateful day when Billy Gannon and I were, for the first time ever, granted permission to walk all the way home from the Oceanside Theater by ourselves after our regular Saturday afternoon matinee. We had been carefully instructed numerous times on the art of always crossing with the light and not talking to strangers. This fact, coupled with the fact that we were now both 7 years olds and about to enter second grade in a month, earned us this very special privilege.

We carefully planned for this major adventure and rite of passage in our lives. We agreed to not spend all of our candy money at the Theater, so that on the way home we could stop at Smiles and each purchase three one-cent giant black licorice shoelaces. For whatever reason, these giant licorice shoelaces were deemed to be a non-parent-approved treat, and our plan was to take full advantage of the walk home to buy them for consumption before safely reaching our final destination.

Everything went fine. We were dropped off at the Theater, purchased our reduced allotment of candy, each saving three cents for the way home, and sat through several cartoons, some coming attractions, and the weekend feature *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers*. The walk home was uneventful. We successfully crossed Long Beach Road, the closest thing to an actual highway in Oceanside, we were not offered any candy or conversation by strangers and arrived at
Smiles.

Before going in we looked in the window, noticing the brand-new Steve Canyon Jet Helmet we’d seen advertised recently on TV. When we entered the store, somehow it just felt different. There was no friendly greeting, and no offer of the lollypop we had expected to have and an appetizer for our illicit treat. Both being big Steve Canyon fans, we went to take a closer look at the Jet Helmet.

“Can I help you boys?” the Smiles lady asked in a tone of voice we had not heard before. “No thank you,” Billy replied. “We just wanted to see what the Steve Canyon Jet Fighter Pilot Helmet looks like.” “Well,” she retorted, “you can look at it from outside through the window, and see it just fine from there!”

Even without knowing what it was called, we both realized that we were being given the bum’s rush. Thinking quickly I said, “And we want to buy some candy too.” We shuffled in a juvenile state of shock towards the candy counter and picked up six forbidden giant licorice shoelaces. Once we got them in our hands, we came to the realization that they weren’t really that giant after all. We paid for them and headed out the door, unsure of exactly what had just taken place, or why.

The entire incident was quickly forgotten about as we ate our licorice shoelaces and processed the movie we had just seen on the way home. We wondered could the army really protect us from invading aliens, and if the Martians really did come, would they venture as far as Oceanside, or just destroy New York City and Washington, D.C., like in the movies?

The next time we went to Smiles was with Billy’s mother, and we were, of course, offered a lollypop and warmly greeted by the same lady. She tried to sell Mrs. Gannon some kind of a kitchen tool that allowed you to both stir and taste the soup or stew at the same time. Mrs. Gannon was not interested, we looked at the toys, were reminded to behave due to the appropriate impending holidays, and left.

Our trips to the movies with the walking-home privilege became a regular thing. We were often joined by additional friends from the neighborhood who were able to negotiate the right to walk home based on the fact that Billy and I were allowed to. We soon
realized just how much fun it was to stop in Smiles and in a strange way felt empowered that our mere presence upset the Smiles lady so. We were still the same boys that came in with our mothers, but it was like she didn’t even know who we were, and treated us as if we were a bunch of juvenile delinquents, like the kind we heard so much about on television.

Slowly the truth about Smiles began to emerge. The giant licorice shoelaces were only half the size of those sold at the Red Store or Pasetti’s Candy Store because the Smiles lady cut them in half to double their profit. Most shocking of all, we realized that kids were treated totally different when they were alone than when they were with their parents. We even changed the name of the store amongst ourselves and called is Scowls.

It all came to a head one day when after the movies six of us stopped in to buy some candy. The sheer mass of our numbers made it impossible for the Smiles lady to follow us all around. She became exasperated and sternly ordered us all to leave immediately, asking us the rhetorical question, “Don’t you kids think I have anything better to do with my time than to follow you around the store?”

To which I replied, “Then I guess if we didn’t come in, you wouldn’t have a job,” and Billy Gannon chimed in, “And then maybe you’d have more time to cut the giant licorice shoelaces in half!”

Her threats to call all of our mothers were drowned out by our raucous laughter. We all knew very well that we would not be going back into Smiles again, either by ourselves or with our mothers, but any sadness caused by that realization was easily outweighed by the knowledge that we had, for the first times in our young lives, stood up to an adult who judged us and treated us so unfairly.

A few years later, Smiles closed its doors and became part of Vanella’s funeral parlor that had been built next door. To this very day whenever I go back to Oceanside and drive by where Smiles used to be, I still think about the Smiles lady, and wonder how anyone so sour and nasty could have ever worked in a place that had such a happy name.
Untitled Drawing
Nastassja Blasette
My eyes open. The red numbers on my alarm clock are hazy: 5:49. I groan. My head pounds in response. Slowly, very slowly, I roll myself out of bed. My stomach lurches in protest as I leave my warm mattress and stumble blindly through my apartment and into the bathroom.

The toilet seat is cold, further aggravating my stomach. I sigh, letting my head rest on my hands, my elbows resting on my knees. I stay seated like this long after the diluted alcohol has pumped itself out of my body. “I’m not going to drink today.” The thought sends my mind into a half-drunken frenzy; the devil on my shoulder starts scrambling for excuses to shut the angel up. “Why today? It’s Friday. Wait until next week.” And that’s all it takes to make the angel quiet.

I close my eyes, slowly drifting back to sleep. I am taken to a place far away from my cold bathroom. I am going back in time. I am now five years old, standing in my back yard, looking up at you. You smile at me and hand me your empty beer can. I place it into the garbage bag after removing the tab. The five cents go into the garbage can; the sticky beer tab goes into my jewelry box. I collect the tabs on a chain then wear it on my neck.

“Now I can keep you with me always.” But the chain is sticky and starts to leave a rash. I don’t want to take it off but mom makes me. She scrubs soap in all of my abrasions. She is washing you away, I think, as I start to cry. My mother gets angry and starts to scrub harder.

“Perez!” my mother yells. “Come and get your daughter, she’s being a fucking brat.” Her hand grabs my hand and passes it into yours.

My tears stop flowing as you wipe them away. “Daddy,” I cry, “Mommy took my necklace away!” You wrap your safe arms around me and lift me up onto your shoulders. I am taller than everyone now, but I don’t like this. I want to be the same height as you so I lower my head to your cheek. Finally I can see life through your eyes.

I jerk myself awake as I start to fall off the toilet, so I decide that for now I should leave you behind and go back to bed.
Goodnight I say to the reflection in the mirror before I turn off the light. I stumble back through my apartment and into my no-longer-warm bed. I sleep for a few more hours before my alarm goes off, annoying my brain. I grumble and moan as I get up and start tearing through a pile of clothes in search of my uniform. Where is my tie? Where are my keys? Shoes, shoes, shoes, ah ha, found them. I get into my car and my radio starts playing Stevie Wonder without any invitation. I shut it off quickly, cutting Stevie off before the background singers even get a chance to start.

I pull my car into the parking lot wishing that I could black out now instead of last night. I hate this place. Ever since I accepted my “promotion” my job has been sucking more energy out of me than it’s worth. I try to black out the obese woman glaring at me from the other side of the counter. “Excuse me,” she says, “but these fries are disgusting.” I put on my best smile and give her the freshest fries. Still not good enough, she rolls her eyes as she waddles back to her table. My days are filled with fat, bitchy, middle-class housewives stuffing cholesterol into their little brats’ mouths, unreliable coworkers that never want to work on the weekends, and leaky bathroom toilets. What the hell am I, a plumber? Go plunge it and call the maintenance guy. By the end of my shift I am sprinting into my car. Another nine-hour shift with no break. Not like it matters; my paycheck still won’t be enough. It never is.

When I walk into my apartment my stomach is growling so I go into the kitchen in search of some food. I open my cupboards: empty. I open my fridge: empty. I open my freezer: ice, Vodka, berries, and this will be my dinner. My hands shake as I pull the ice out of the freezer and bash it against the counter. I throw all of the ingredients into a cup and shake it up, letting the sugar fizz out onto my hands.

Glass in hand I go to my closet and see what I have to work with. Leggings, scarves, shirts that show too much cleavage and shirts that show off too many of the rolls that are starting to appear on my abdomen despite my new diet of Vodka, water, and sugar. I pull out one of the few tee shirts I own. It is boring and bland. I set my drink down and pick up a pair of scissors; snip, snip, and the shirt is transformed into something a little edgier. I throw the shirt on and
grab a pair of jeans. Picking my drink back up I take a look in the mirror. I have no makeup on and I look pale and timid, like a girl sipping her mother’s champagne while she isn’t looking.

I take some time out to erase the little girl from my face. I grab some black eye liner and lay it on thick, followed with purple eyelids and red mascara. I take the red wand and drag it down under my bottom lashes. I want to look like the Virgin Mary crying blood over her baby Jesus. Instead, I look like Marilyn Manson let me borrow his makeup artist. I trade the jeans for a short skirt and some fishnet stockings; I mess up my hair. Smearing red lipstick on, I wink at myself in the mirror. No more little girl. I feel superior with my stockings and high heels; superior to what, I don’t know.

You used to make me feel superior too. When I was little and you would come to school with me, I was so proud to have you hold my hand. You were like no other father, and I was like no other daughter. Our dark skin set us apart from everyone. When you were next to me people stared as if we were intimidating to them. For me, that was everything, just being with you and no one else. I don’t want to look into the mirror anymore because it makes me think about you. I don’t want to think about you anymore because it makes me sad. My sense of superiority is gone.

I take a sip from my drink as I go towards the phone. I grab the phone, but before I get a chance to dial any numbers it rings. My heart skips with excitement. Someone is calling me first, proof that I am loved.

“Hello,” I say in a raspy voice, consequence of a two-week drinking binge. “Jess?” My heart drops. It’s just my mother. She fills my head with stories about people I don’t know and people I know longer care to know. Her boyfriend got a full-time job, “Isn’t that great?” Her boss gave her some fruits and vegetables and did I want her to bring some over? I wait for her to stop talking about her deadbeat boyfriend. She doesn’t. I wait for her to ask me how my day was. She doesn’t. After ten minutes I can’t take anymore of her voice droning away in my ear and I cut her off, not even bothering to think of a good excuse for hanging up. I ignore the hurt tone in her voice as she tells me she loves me. Any guilt I feel I gulp down with the last of my drink. She’ll call back tomorrow. She always does.
I go back to the freezer and take out the vodka, chugging it straight. Why bother diluting the sweet burn? I take out my shot glass just as my sister walks through the door.

"Hey, honey," I say, flashing her my sweetest smile. She is two years younger than me and still has all of the potential I used to have. She smiles back and walks past me into the bathroom. I listen as she tells me about her day at work, how her boss doesn’t think it’s a good idea that she move in with me, how her boss’s wife thinks that our mother is crazy, and in the middle of it she glares at me for pouring out two shots. I try to offer her a little bit of salvation but she hands it back. So I continue to listen as she continues to talk. I throw my head back, taking two shots instead of one.

I think about when my sister and I were both little as she tells more about her day. When we were younger she used to sleep walk. The doctors said they were night terrors and that she would grow out of them. Eventually she did, but I never forgot how scared she looked when she had bad dreams. My mother slept with her new boyfriend and could never hear her screaming, but I always did. I always went to her because she was my baby sister and it was my job to protect her from whatever terrible monsters were chasing her. I liked the way she looked when she finally fell back asleep. She looked like an angel, and she was. She was my angel, she is my angel. Only now she chases my monsters away at night. I haven’t gone to the doctor’s to ask them about the demons that chase me around. I doubt they’ll say I’ll grow out of it.

I pour myself a third shot, when the door opens and my new boyfriend walks in. He is too scrawny. When he gets excited his big eyes bulge out of his skeletal face. He glares at the bottle and asks how many I’ve had. I don’t glare and I don’t stop pouring. Addicts have no right to tell addicts what to do. Besides, everybody has that one thing that takes them to wherever it is they need to be. If they don’t have one it’s only because they haven’t found it yet. I don’t pay much attention to his snide comments to my drunken tales because I like this kid, maybe I even love him. It wouldn’t be the first time. He broke my heart once; it has long since been glued back together.

"Hey, baby," I say with a sudden burst of energy, “take a shot with me.” He won’t and I know it. He won’t even kiss me. He hates
vodka that much.

The three of us are bored so we go to a friend's house to watch a local band. I pack up my bottle and some sturdier shot glasses and head out to the car. My sister drives me, because I refuse to drive.

“Drinking and driving are against my rules,” I say to her as we pull away. I laugh because “Having my 16-year-old sister drive my drunk ass around” isn’t. She doesn’t seem amused. When we get there my boyfriend kisses me, Scope and vomit. I take a shot to wash it down. No more kisses for tonight.

My sister watches us both with a mixed expression on her face. I don’t want to hear her thoughts, but she tells me even though I turn away. “You know, Jess, you’re starting to drink a lot.” Oh God, I think, here it comes, the big speech. The one you hear at the end of movies. The one that makes you start to choke up. But in real life when these life-changing speeches are directed at you they just sound corny and annoying. I don’t want to hear it and I tell her so. “I’m sure you don’t,” she says, “but you’re turning into our fucking dad.” The words don’t cut as much as the look on her face. I know that I should say something, anything is better than the silence climaxing into some false hope that I might change. Instead I laugh and go to pour another shot. My hands aren’t shaky now. Now they are just drunk and sloppy. I spill vodka as I try to put it into my shot glass. I’m not going to say anything because there is nothing to say. She gives up and ignores me for the rest of the night.

My drunken state of mind weaves me through the past and the present. My drunken state of balance weaves me through the people. The easy flow of life is my favorite thing about being drunk. Never with any other drug do I feel this comfortable with myself. I have already convinced myself that I’m not drunk at all, only a little buzzed. I could believe it too, but when I close my eyes everything starts to spin.

I want to be alone so I lock myself away in the bathroom downstairs. I go over to the mirror and see if I can see your face staring back at me. I don’t, but I pretend anyway.

“Hey, Dad,” I say to my reflection. You don’t answer me and I start to feel sad. I sit down on the toilet and close my eyes. “Next week is my birthday, yours and mine. I’m going to go to the cemetery
to see you. I know it’s been a while but I kept you with me this whole time.” Still no answer, so I say goodnight to my reflection before turning out the light. I leave the bathroom, throwing my empty can in the trash and putting the tab into my pocket. Five cents goes into the garbage can, sticky beer tab goes into my jewelry box. I look at the folded aluminum in my hand. It’s thin and malleable, its purpose to open a beer can. No, I thought its purpose is to open up salvation, yours and mine. I bend the aluminum until it snaps. I pick up the two pieces, and then I break them each in half again. I start to break the halves into quarters and then the quarters into eighths. I scoop the pieces into my hand and throw them in the trash, removing your chain from around my neck.

I go back upstairs, weaving in and out of the present and the past and around friends and through strangers. We are all in a small bedroom filled with people smoking cigarettes. The smoke offers the perfect excuse for my slightly prolonged absence.

“I needed to get some fresh air,” I say to someone who notices. “You nicotine addicts are going to kill me.” I don’t see my sister and I find out she left with someone while I was downstairs. I guess I’ll be staying here tonight. I make my way to the bed, which has been turned into a couch due to the lack of furniture. Someone brought their own vodka, imported from New Zealand. I look at my own bottle, now almost empty. The owner of the bottle pours me a shot. “Hey, no need to finish yours off,” he says, “I’ve got plenty for everyone.” I pause, placing my hand to my neck, feeling old scars. “No thanks, I’ve had enough for the night.” Finally I can see life through my eyes.
Breach Photograph
Christopher J. Harasta
At Church
Heather Johnson

I notice scuffs on the doorjamb from years of coming and going.
I notice the musty smell of ancient texts mixed
with the scent of lemon Pledge. I notice ownerless jackets
keeping vigil on coat racks. I notice familiar faces and smile.
I notice the roughness of work-worn hands as I grasp them in
greeting.
With a smile, I’m asked, “How was your week?”
I notice the stooped backs of the gray-haired, leaning
on canes, labored breathing from the effort of walking.
They smile as they hand me a gem of wisdom.
I notice the children, unruly. Nails yellowed, in need
of clipping, hair matted and dull. They seek me out for a hug,
a stick of gum, toothless smiles my reward.
I notice the young preacher, handsome and kind.
He brings a word, weary blue eyes smile in my direction.
I notice the music, the ritual, the prayers. I notice the burdens
that compel one to come; seeking peace, searching
a remedy to life’s guilt and pain.
I notice with pretense we don our Sunday best and hide
behind plastic masks of smiling happy faces.
His Last Day
Bill Moyse

“What is essential is invisible to the eye.”—The Little Prince

On his last day I stopped in to see him as I had done once a week for the last couple of years. This was the third room he had been in since coming here, and this one he had all to himself. The first room he shared with an ornery old guy who had his TV volume so loud you could barely hear to have a conversation. The second room he shared with a nice old Navy vet, but he finally got his own room which looked out over a mowed grassy space and then to the hills, with the power lines zigzagging up and over the other side of Route 10. I had been here yesterday but he was sleeping, so I just sat for a while, looking at him and listening to the oxygen machine, thinking that the end must be near. Then I left, walking the gauntlet of old men and women in wheelchairs, saying hello to them or simply nodding as I went. On this, his last day, he just lay there gasping for air, his chest rising and falling, mouth open, eyes closed, a mere shadow of the man I once knew.

Louie was a dairy farmer. He and his brother had been farming on Irish Hill since the ‘40s. I met Louie and his wife Dorothy not long after building a house nearby for my family. Neighbors would stop in at milking time to get milk, and some would stay and visit. I liked to stop by and watch them milk the cows in the evening. They milked a herd of Holsteins, and I would help them by dumping the milk into the dumping station and help with the feeding and chores. The barn was a pleasant place, earthy, white, and full of sounds and smells as the cows rattled their stanchions while eating their feed. When Louie learned I was a carpenter he would find some work for me to do each summer. I roofed the house and barn, replaced rotten barn beams, knocked out block walls and replaced them, all kinds of things, some necessary, some not so much. He was one of the nicest men I have ever met in my life. He was gentle, friendly, and honest, and I never heard him say a bad word about anyone. Every day, morning and evening, he milked the cows, and in between he made hay and did the chores and a hundred other things.
that farmers do. He rarely left the farm except for the few years that he served in the Pacific with the Army in WW II. The farm was the hub of the hill and the gathering place for many social events during the year from summer cookouts to Christmas parties.

But time went on and one day his wife Dorothy died and took some of Louie with her. Their love was the deepest kind, the old-fashioned kind, the kind we don’t see much anymore. It ran through them and through their whole way of life. Oh, he went on, but things were never the same—the cows were gone and the house was empty and one day was just like another. I had moved to town but I would always stop and see him when I was on the hill, and he still had projects for me to do around the house and barn. Years of milking had worn out his joints, arthritis moved into his hands, and he really couldn’t stay at home by himself anymore, so he went to Countryside and lived in his room. He was okay with it and never complained, and when I visited we would always talk about what was new on the hill. I enjoyed the visits and faithfully went every week to see him. I went because he was my friend, because he was always good to me and my family, because he was a veteran, and because of the special, kind person he was. But I watched his health deteriorate over time until there was little to say, so I would just sit, look around the room, and remember how it used to be.

But here’s the thing, and I know this may sound strange, but on his last day as I sat there in his room, listening to the oxygen machine and watching him struggle with every breath, I knew that he was already gone and that what was left there was just the shell. Oh, he was still breathing, but he was gone. I have never been so sure of anything in my whole life, and although I was sad and teary, I was happy for him as well. Maybe he would get to be with his beloved Dorothy again, and maybe there would be cows to milk. Who knows. But this I do know, he was done with this life. I looked around the room once more, at the pictures, cards, and that little round needlepoint that hung on the wall, reminders of a simple, peaceful life. Standing over him, I touched his shoulder one more time, said goodbye, and went home to wait for the call.
Eternal Peace *Photograph*
Melissa Kasprzak
It's the Hallway
Maureen C. McKenna

“Every closed door reveals an open one.” . . . it’s the hallway that is hell.

Thank you, hell’s hallway
Ah, so much am I enjoying the journey
That this time I may even learn
It’s playing in the tourney
That matters,
Not whose record is shattered
But whose confidence and hope
Can be saved from tatters
By the hurricane winds of time,
And that each and every one
Of us is sublime.
A Second Chance
Heather Johnson

There are plenty of jokes circling that poke fun at getting older. Many of them center on memory loss. “Old-timers disease,” they call it, and laugh. While I might give a polite smile in return for their jest, I secretly disagree with their assessment. For me aging has brought on a new acuteness to my memory. I often find myself strolling down memory lane, revisiting all the people and events that have changed me. Today is no exception. Despite the hubbub in my usually quiet home, despite all the voices and hurried preparations, I have retreated to a place of quiet contemplation. My mind is conscious that the events I am about to enjoy today, and a thousand like them that have already enriched my life, might never have been. I could have destroyed them all those years ago had I made a different choice and had I not been visited by fate in the form of an elderly woman.

I was twenty-three years old when I met her. I had embraced the independence of adulthood and was enjoying life, living with a boyfriend in our own apartment. I had been working as a certified nurse’s assistant at the Riverside Skilled Nursing Facility for close to two years. Though at first I had been reluctant to work in this capacity, the job had slowly begun to grow on me. Besides, the pay was fairly good for a person with no college degree and it included health benefits. My parents had always stressed the importance of finding a job that included benefits.

I had been successful at keeping myself aloof from my patients, religiously going about my duties and avoiding any thoughts that these were people who had lived real lives. I had told myself, “This is just a job. Don’t allow yourself to get emotionally involved with these people; they are just going to die soon anyway.” My resolve was challenged the day she moved into the empty room on my unit. She was a tiny slip of a woman, sitting in a wheelchair with a handmade quilt tucked in around her lap, red brocade slippers peeking out from where her feet could barely touch the floor. She was clearly of Asian descent. Her wizened hair, grey and thin, only served to accentuate her frailty. It was her eyes that struck me the most: large
brown eyes, clear and sharp, that reflected a spirit of determination and strength. I was instantly drawn to her with an intense curiosity and inquisitiveness. Over the next months of caring for her, I would come to learn of a softness and kindness that had been wrought not only through great trials, but by an unusually developed character of selflessness. This discovery slowly tore down all the defenses I had built around my work. I found myself enjoying the most unlikely of friendships with an extraordinary woman whose perspective on motherhood would change my own.

I spent many of my breaks in her room and would often stop in to say good-bye at the end of my shift. She told me her stories: her immigration to California, her struggles to learn English, the racial prejudices she’d endured. I found comfort and strength in her presence and enjoyed her quiet and unassuming nature. I had not had a relationship like this before. There had always been a measure of tension with my parents, an unspoken expectation that I had failed to meet. My boyfriend was often too preoccupied with other things to be bothered with deep conversation. When I discovered that I was pregnant, she was naturally the first I thought to confide in.

When I told her my news and that I was contemplating an abortion, she sighed and patted my hand. “Honey,” she said, “let me tell you about my Danielle.”

There was nothing unique or exceptional about her story. She had been a typical mother, devoted to raising her child. She had experienced the ordinary events of infancy and childhood, milestones like walking and first words, toothless grins, chubby arms squeezing her neck, sounds of laughter. She had walked through first days of school, skinned knees, piano recitals, and first dates. She had weathered her daughter’s disappointments at being told no and her restless and rebellious adolescent spirit. Many of her memories were of their times together in the park. It had started when Danielle was a child. The park had been a wonderful place to enjoy the outdoors. Danielle had been particularly drawn toward the lake and loved to bring the crusts of bread cut from her peanut butter sandwiches to share with the ducks. As a teenager, whenever she was working through a difficulty with her friends or more often with her mother, the park was where she could be found, sitting on a bench
overlooking the lake. The park had been the last place they had spent time together. Danielle was in her first semester of college and had come home for a weekend break. She was full of excitement and had so much to share with her mother. They had decided to make a day of it, bring a picnic lunch to the park and allow Danielle to speak of her new fervor for life. My friend felt like her daughter was coming back to her. This day they were no longer parent and child, butting heads over one thing or another, they were now conversing as adults. She could actually envision becoming friends with her daughter. She began to look forward to the years ahead with anticipation: a college graduation, maybe a wedding, a grandchild or two. Her hopes, however, were not to be. Before the semester had ended, Danielle had contracted a severe case of bacterial meningitis and just as quickly as she had become sick, she was gone.

She wheeled over to her nightstand and pulled out a picture. I saw the beautiful face of a young woman staring back at me. In the background ducks were swimming on a lake of glass. “What I wouldn’t give for another day to see her smile,” my friend said.

I kissed her on the cheek before I left her room. She took hold of my hand. “Think long and hard before you make your decision. Being a mother is something you will never regret becoming, and though sometimes difficult, it will bring you the greatest joys.”

As I drove home, her story and words struck a chord deep within my heart. She had painted such a vivid picture of motherhood, with all its joys and pains, that for the first time since discovering I was pregnant, I was excited. The child growing within me was calling out to be loved. I made the decision then and there to become a mother.

Today, as I sit at my vanity, her words have rung true. My daughter has filled my life with such joys. She has grown into a lovely young woman. She and I have become friends and now she has the adoration and devotion of a loving man. I heard the knock on my door. “Mama, are you ready? It’s almost time to go,” she said.

It was her wedding day, and I wouldn’t have missed this moment for the world. I looked into the radiant eyes of my daughter. “I’m coming, my darling Danielle.”
Likeness Photograph
Christopher J. Harasta
On a brisk September morning, I drove hunched up toward the windshield with my coffee in one hand and a cigarette and the steering wheel in the other. I was trying to catch what little heat came from my not-so-functional defrost. The drive was a desolate thirty-five miles with only five residents in between my home and the town where I worked. I used this as my thinking time. I was going to start a new position at the slaughterhouse where most of the local population was employed. I would be leaving the kill floor and heading down to the handling yards. As I drove down the long, flat, straight road, my mind drifted in and out of what to expect. The sky was becoming lighter and lighter as I drove on. I noticed the beauty of that morning’s sunrise unfold as the world around me started to awaken. All too soon, my nose was struck by the not-so-pleasant smell of cooking offal, the parts used for pet food. I could always smell the slaughterhouse before I could see it. I turned into the parking lot across from the factory, and after parking, I sat on the hood of my car. I wanted to warm my rear and have one last smoke before heading in. I sat looking at the dismal, broken brick castle, a huge structure, four or five stories tall. It looked more like an old corrections facility with its high chain-link fence, barbed wired across the top. Neither weather nor time had been kind to the building.

As my co-workers and I entered the building single file, we walked past our laundry bins and grabbed our clothes bags. With our clean white uniforms in tow, everyone trudged up the dimly lit staircase to the locker room on the top floor. As we changed, the usual small talk about families, games, hunting, and fishing commenced. After dressing, I put on my knee-high rubber boots. At this point, I would usually sling my knife scabbard around my waist. But today was different. One of the guys noticed my hesitation and said, “Off to the holding pens today, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I replied nervously.

“Have fun with that; you’re in for a treat,” he answered.

This made my stomach muscles tighten. What was I in for?
My boss approached me and told me to wait in the washroom next to the kill floor. He would come and get me after the line was running smoothly. I stood and watched as the deconstruction of the hogs began. They were hung by their back legs from gambles that were moved by a conveyor chain. After being gambled, they were lined up one by one. The conveyor would space them out evenly and start moving them toward a torch machine, a stainless steel box with both ends open. When the pigs entered, a switch was tripped. Two burners roared to life—whooooofffff! It sounded as if the gates of hell had opened, and Satan himself stood there laughing. The conveyor chain carried the pigs through quickly, causing most of their hair to singe off. The next station functioned as a car wash minus the soap. Pressured water jets, giant rotating brushes, and swooshing felt belts turned the pigs out clean, hairless, and white. I stood in amazement at the other end and watched them come out looking very much like stretched-out human bodies hanging there. I had many nightmares after witnessing this.

I was snapped out of my reverie by my boss’s gruff voice.

“Mike, come over here. I need to set you up with your equipment.”

He measured my inseam, disappeared into the equipment storage room, and quickly returned with a pair of rubber chaps. Next he handed me a slapper, a short hard wooden handle attached to a three-foot-long piece of heavy canvas.

My boss asked, “What do you think?” as I looked at myself in the wall mirror.

“I look like something out of European fetish porn.”

He laughed and said, “Yup, now follow me.”

As we headed across the kill floor, I got several wolf whistles from men and women alike. A warm flush came over my body as I realized I was leaving my friends.

The boss and I entered a part of the floor I had never been to before. It was not well lit and very hot and humid. This was where the scalding tanks were. As we walked along the giant tanks, snouts, feet, heads, and tails were bobbing up and down. It was like an underwater merry-go-round or a giant kettle of pig soup. When we got to the end of the tank where the pigs entered, a long, narrow set of wet
stone steps stood along the wall. To the side was a six-foot-wide wet stone slide, which went all the way to the bottom step. A strip of red gelatinized blood ran from top to bottom in the center of the slide. As I carefully walked down the steps, some of the pigs kicked and shook silently. I watched as their life force was drained from their slit necks. The boss quickly skirted me around the sticking area and out to the holding yards. As I entered the holding area, I became painfully aware that I had not put my ear protection in. As the squeals and chatter made by the pigs was deafening, I quickly rectified the problem. The second thing I noticed was the overwhelming smell. Although the floors were cleaned and washed twice a day, 5,000 plus pigs leave a hell of a mess. As we slopped our way down along the main aisle, I was introduced to my new co-workers. They were not the friendliest bunch (at first), as they had their “ways” and did not appreciate newcomers.

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into months, I was slowly accepted by my co-workers more. I learned that the pigs are very stubborn, especially when they sense danger. I was taught to use whatever means were necessary to get the herd of pigs from point A to point B. Everyone turned a blind eye when it came to these tactics, which is why they did not like newcomers. I saw pigs get beat bloody, shocked with electrical rods, pushed and dragged with machinery. Whatever it took was the motto. When winter blew into Huron, South Dakota, new horrors emerged. On certain bone-chilling days the temperature never got above 10 degrees. People would pack the pigs in a semi trailer so tightly they could not move. The unlucky animals next to the trailer walls with openings froze to the metal. After all the other pigs were emptied out, some poor soul would have to go in and unstuck these pigs with warm water. Usually the pigs could not walk after this and were dragged to their doom. I have seen people cut and pry pigs off the walls while they were still alive, leaving large chunks of meat and fat still frozen to the sides of the trailer. As I worked with the pigs, I started to notice things about them. Their eyes are different colors. Their long eyelashes would make any woman envious. Above all each pig has a personality and is intelligent.

One day while having lunch, I struck up a conversation with
the USDA vet that was one of the inspectors at the factory. He was telling me about a project for collecting blood. I thought the only way to make use of the pigs’ blood was to send it to the dog food section of the plant. It is illegal to sell it in the U.S. When he told me that if the blood is properly collected, the plasma can be extracted and used in the medical field, I thought he was pulling my leg, but later I found out it was true.
Rural Decay

Photograph

Christopher J. Harasta
I do believe the adage that says “only the good die young.” That doesn’t mean that I think only the bad die old, but the evidence exists in my own life. I’ve been an eyewitness for 30 years to those who should be dead but aren’t. Scenarios have played like broken records in my head: “Your mother is brain dead from the alcohol/lunch cooler full of prescription drugs combination,” or “Your sister will need help weaning off Seroquel because, although it helps her sleep, it’s giving her paranoid ideations.” The record would become embarrassing: “She’s not my sister, she’s my mom.” It bothered me because I’d always wanted a sister or brother to have good times with, or honestly, to help take some of the responsibility off. Even with intense wishes, I have been one to glorify what is. They sometimes call it grandiosity, which is better when it’s not in the form of a “symptom.” In this life, it is possible to be too happy. In fact, you’re not allowed to be too sad or too happy. What exactly are these words?

My mom knew all about them, and I, her role model, did too.

I began taking care of my mother when my cousin, Kara, came to our projects on Fairview Street. Don’t get me wrong, your mind might conjure up images of crack houses and gangs when you think of the projects, but it wasn’t so. These were brand new when we moved in. Every apartment looked the same: a red brick bottom with a butterscotch-colored top, as if they were dropped down for displaced and disowned families. My mom and I were unconcerned about what was happening in the outside world. Until I was about 11, and already bigger than her, we would squeeze beside each other in a worn, faded mauve chair in our living room, where everything clashed so much it matched. I’d understand our private world best when she sang:

“Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday, who could hang a name on you . . .”

When Kara came into the picture, I had an escape hatch. She and I would try not to giggle while acting out impressions of what we thought was odd adult behavior. This was around age 8, when I occasionally got to be a kid. Making fun of the weird things that “old people” said was a reprieve from my mercurial existence. Even
today, we still engage in the occasional mockery, including the kind that seems a bit like self-loathing. I have decided not to grow up taking myself so seriously, like many people I observe doing so on a daily basis. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that life is too short to try to live up to everyone’s expectations. And for some of us, it is impossible, especially after growing up with standards so vague.

My mother smoked Virginia Slims in the ‘80s, and I hated it. Everyone at school was pounding into our heads that smoking was bad, smoking kills, smoking ruins lives, smoking gives you black lungs and makes you look like a skeleton, etc., etc. Well, I can laugh about it now, but having become a smoker when I was 15, I reflected on how cruel it was when Kara and I alternated riding my pink Huffy over my mom’s new carton of Slims. I thought she might then stop sending me down the hill to Rossi’s corner store, with a note that might as well have said: “Here is my permission for my Jacklyn, a.k.a. Pumpkin, to take care of me forever. I wish I could be stronger and much better for her, but she is my smart and beautiful girl and I will love her until the day I die, which might be soon because I don’t know why, but I just feel way too much. I know she does, too. Life is unbearable when you feel as much as someone like me. Please allow my daughter to use this money and this note to buy me two packs of Virginia Slims. Yours kindly and more sincerely, Jacklyn’s Mom.”

My stepfather worked his way permanently into our lives by the time I was 12. On more than one occasion, I overheard him being referred to as a “saint.” I have to admit, it would anger me sometimes. Hadn’t anyone noticed what I had gone through and how I tried to fix Mom? How was I expected to behave? Although we’re two completely different people, and I’ve occasionally “put his patience to the test,” I do believe he’s as close to a saint as a man can be. Dad worked long hours, every day, to change our lives for the better.

“When you change with every new day . . .”

I think it might be possible to understand the ambiguity of life without having a mother who one minute needs to be lifted from the floor, carried away for her own safety, and the next minute zips your Eskimo jacket so far up that your neck gets pinched and you cry, and you have the tears wiped from your face, and then, with a little spit on her hand, the dirt she missed. I miss that mom.
“Still I’m gonna miss you . . .”

It wasn’t until after mom’s death, almost exactly one year ago today, that I found out she had also taken to vandalizing packets of cigarettes. It had been over a year that she was living without her best friend and brother, my Uncle Rob, a very funny and kind-hearted man, with a passion for photography that passed on to me. Uncle Rob always offered straightforward advice, and was very moral, yet fiercely against organized religion, at least where he was concerned. I remember speaking with him, while he lay in a hospital bed, just a few weeks before his death. I dropped some books off for him to get started on. I had a list of authors he liked and went to the bookstore, tossing them into a basket, the quick way one would buy groceries in a crowded market. “You’re too young to be so anxious about life” were his last words to me before the usual, “I love you; take care of yourself.”

Losing Uncle Rob was the first death of a loved one I had ever experienced. The entire period is still quite foggy. My mother took it the hardest. He was like a solid rock she had been able to hang on to, a validating man who would not turn a cold shoulder on anyone. His death was from lung cancer. That’s what they were trying to warn me about, back in the ‘80s, at Riverside Elementary! I will admit I smoked a year after he died—it leveled out my brain. I hid this from most people, not thinking they would understand the need.

After my mother was gone, I could barely breathe, even with my seemingly rational, logical friend by my side. I’ll call him “Mr. Logic,” to be kind. “You’re better off without her,” he’d say. “Obama’s grandmother just died, and you don’t see him dropping out of office.” I defended myself with carefully constructed bouts of the truth, backed up with as many facts of the tragic experience as possible. I mentally prepared a diagram, with my face next to Mr. Obama’s: mine was red and desperate; his nose so high in the air, you could only see his neck.

I wanted some time off. There was always pressure to be stone cold and non-emotional; little did friends such as Mr. Logic know I’d practiced just that, on and off, my entire life. For two and a half years in this maniacal partnership, I was convinced I could live as a “German Robot,” as he put it. I’m not German, and cry far
too much to be a robot. I was clearly at the end of my tether. Mr. Logic sat and watched redneck TV. He was fascinated with those he considered beneath himself. I’m not so sure “fascinated” is the right word, but those he considered a lower status always got the most direct attention. He watched Married with Children, while I was brave enough to search my heart and house for evidence. “Somebody has to scratch beneath the surface, Mr. Logic.”

Eventually I found what confirmed my previous belief: my mother’s departure was of her own will. Periodic attempts since she was 13, plus the cryptic e-mails she sent me a week before her death, would seem to be enough proof. Why did she need to repeat the fact I could have anything I wanted in the event “something happened” to her? I had gotten used to ignoring these statements because they were just plain depressing. There are not enough pills in the world to make any one person tolerate what life can present, unless you prefer walking around like a zombie. That can be left to those who have advanced degrees in psychology and have only learned to ask, “So, So-and-So, how does that make you feel?”

I sickly, sadly, and inappropriately felt better; three empty plastic bottles on the very top shelf of her over-trinketed buffet. Mom always recycled immediately. One pill left in one of the bottles. I will never know why, but at least I’ll know something.

They say too much of anything is dangerous. Who exactly are they?

I looked in the tiny drawers to see if there was any part of my mom I wanted to bring back to my apartment with me and hold on to. “YOU KILLED ROB,” I read, written with black Sharpie, on two packs of Basic cigarettes. I quickly shut the drawer, practicing a strong denial that serves an even stronger purpose in the family. I imagine her last months alone, leading to her decision. The laundry would still be washed as soon as it was worn, the floors shining and clean, her books spread out around her for research into her afflictions; she tried to be the best person she could. Mom never let go entirely. There is no convincing someone who is missing a large part of the foundation needed to survive: a belief that you are as good as all of the good you see in others. That is a double-edged sword. She was never acceptable to herself.
Logic . . . where is it when you need it? It’s catering to its own desires, when it should not have any at all. It’s dictating. It’s pretending to be the right answer for everything. It’s practicing its own act. It doesn’t need anything or anyone, except to be acknowledged again and again. It’s loved for what it is, but it hates that.

Ambiguity . . . it’s pretending to be strong when you so desperately need a rest. Convincing oneself is the road to hell. It’s not ironic; it levels life like a cigarette to the brain. It is life before you lose it. You can know that you got here the way everyone else did. When you’ve found a place of no responsibility in your mind, then you’ve made it. What is the cost of making it? You might die trying to find out.

Loneliness . . . it’s what everyone experiences as an individual, but the emotion itself can burn away any strength in you that might exist. It helps to keep your dreams with you. I wonder if we spend too much time humming to the melody, but not understanding the lyrics. It seems too much to ponder, and too dangerous to think of all alone.

“There’s no time to lose, I heard her say
Catch your dreams before they slip away
Dying all the time
Lose your dreams
And you will lose your mind.
Ain’t life unkind?”*

* “Ruby Tuesday” lyrics by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, 1966.
History of the Homes Where I Grew Up
Heather Johnson

Trailer parks and city apartments,
mobs of neighborhood children sporting
red Kool-aid mustaches. I have one too.

My first home, once my great-grandmother’s,
little white house on Garfield Avenue.
I ride my banana-seat bike, rubber bands
around bell-bottomed legs keep from catching the chain.
Grape vineyards, mud pies stain my favorite white sweater.

Curtis Street, yellow ranch with brown trim
city lights and starry nights beheld from deck.
To four sisters, two brothers are born.

Two-bedroom apartment on Sheldon Street.
Parents off to Bible school. Six children
and one more. I care for all.
Watch old Mr. Lampher push his garden cart full
of rutabagas and carrots, he wears a red flannel cap.

Old farm house on Kelly Hill
Don’t flush, put the paper in the trash.
Nightmares plague my sleep.

The house in Tyrone, bags of trash left by past renters.
My room so cold I can see my breath, flowers
from my fiancé seem to last forever.
My parents charge me rent.
The time for independence is now.
Dog Gone
Susan Rochmis

Winter howls outside.

Inside the house is cleaner.

Where is my old pal?
January
Kirby Olson

My door was frozen shut
In the parking lot, so
Kevin at Groundskeeping
Got a bucket & threw hot water
& the lock clicked open.

As I dried off out of the bath,
I remembered the woodchuck.

Last July he did not eat the lettuce.
He demolished the gladiolas.
He did not chase the children,
But had a stand-off with the toddler.
She stood her ground like a gladiator.

I wanted Molotovs, but the older kids
Said “Have-a-Heart” traps.

Am I the woodchuck’s neighbor?
I had no heart for the Have-a-Hearts
Or dropping him off at Gilbert Lake.
Still, he disappeared, and I miss
His menace.
Leaf Photograph
Melissa Kasprzak
My head was pounding as I walked through the door in front of my mom. She could tell I didn’t want to talk. I’d had a long night and all I wanted was a big glass of water and a bowl of ice cream. I’ll admit it to anyone who asks. I’m obsessed. I just love ice cream. It’s like there isn’t a problem that a bowl of the cold stuff can’t fix. It’s my mental band-aid.

So after I had my fix in hand I sat down on the couch and sighed.

“How’d the dance go?"

“It was fine,” I responded to my father, trying to be convincing.

“Did you dance with any boys?”

“No boys, Dad. I fought ’em off just like you said,” I lied.

“That’s my pretty.”

I never understood why, but my Dad never actually called me by my name. He had dozens of nicknames for me. My name is Marcy, and you’d think since he gave me the title he’d use it. That’s not the case, however. He called me Marce, Pretty, Bonnie, and Old Girl. The only explanation I could ever come up with for my father’s strange nicknaming habit I call the Ozzy Syndrome. Clearly, he’s a bit of a burnout.

As my sisters and I grew up, we realized those hand-rolled cigarettes weren’t smoked in secret because he was protecting us from second-hand smoke. His love of Cheech and Chong wasn’t just because he’s old like them. And the tattoo on his arm of a wizard growing “flowers” was starting to make more sense.

So Pops liked his herb. I’d never smoked. I sat through the D.A.R.E lectures and wrote the essays. It was the gateway drug, they said. I nodded and took the vow not to do drugs because they’re bad for you and anyone else but my dad.

I didn’t hold it against him that he smoked. He didn’t drink unless it was at a family party, and he was a good dad while smoking weed, so why change him now? I’m not going to lie; I love my old man. He’s the only guy I know I can trust.
Then he said the line I’ve heard all my life. I knew it was coming because he was watching me avoid his gaze. “Did I ever tell you I love you?” He said it with a big grin while my insides squirmed because I’m too cool to still have my dad say these things.

“Yes, Dad,” I replied, trying my best to hide the sarcasm. “Well, I do, you know.” He smiled and I said it back like always. I looked at the man who had watched over me all 16 years of my life. I can still see a lot of myself in him.

I should probably mention that I have three sisters who all have brown hair, brown eyes, pale skin, and every other similarity to my mom. I share the green eyes and light brown hair of my father. I also have the tan skin of my father and his habit of singing despite protests from the rest of the family. I was his little girl from the first time we’d gone fishing together. My sisters were there too, but I was different the first time we went. I never caught a thing because I was distracted watching the dragonflies soar across the pond. I couldn’t stop moving. I wandered all over the pond and the docks, even the ones that looked like they’d been there before the pond.

That’s where it happened. I was walking on an old dock trying to see the fish when it collapsed. I fell straight through to the ice-cold waters below. My dad pulled me out just about as quickly as I fell in, but at four or five years old, I was still shaken. I was soaked so he wrapped me in his flannel jacket and took me to the Blazer. He sat me down on the passenger seat and tried to calm me down. He told me I was all right, that I would dry, it was only water, but not a word would make the screaming stop. My older sister walked over, saw my look of horror, and asked what happened. I looked at her and shouted louder than a child that size should be able to, “I’m drowning!”

My dad looked at me with a smile and said, “You aren’t drowning or dying. You’re alive. So have a doughnut.”

I didn’t say another word once I had that doughnut in hand, not a peep the whole ride home. I realized I was safe with my dad. He was always there to protect me which is why that evening, years later, when my mom entered the living room while my dad and I were sitting on the couch, I wasn’t expecting what she was about to say.

“You need to go get Ashley and meet us out in the garage. Don’t tell your sisters.”
She was serious so I just said OK and left the room to retrieve my older sister from her video games.

We had no idea what was going on. No one’s birthday was coming up and we hadn’t done anything wrong, not as a team at least. The door was open already as we walked into the garage and faced my parents. They looked nervous or worried, so Ashley and I immediately mimicked them and their scared looks.

My mother started off by saying, “You didn’t do anything wrong,” as she gave my father a look that made him stare down at the floor in shame.

“Last night the cops came. They searched the house, and your father spent the night in jail.” She spat the words out like a poison. We just stood there frozen in shock, and I can clearly remember looking my dad in the face as he began to repeatedly say, “I’m sorry, girls. I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t say it enough. I thought he was going to cry or maybe my mom would or I should. I’d never been in a situation like this. I was sixteen. The most complicated thing I’d ever had to face was boys and let’s face it, it doesn’t take much to figure them out.

“He was arrested for growing marijuana.” And then the “I’m sorry’s” started up again. I wanted to leave. The tension was so thick the air felt like Jello, and I was trapped. I was frozen in fear of moving and not moving. My sister was always the shy one, despite the fact that she was older, so I knew it was up to me to be the one to speak so I tried. “What does this mean? How bad is this?” I felt stupid for asking questions I probably already knew the answer to.

“Dad has a court date set up, but it’s not for a while,” my mom said as she began to relax. “But the only reason we decided to tell you is it might be in the paper tomorrow, and if some kids ask about it in school we don’t want you to be in the dark. We figured, since you’re older, kids your age are more likely to ask.” My mom finished and looked at my dad who said, “Make sure you keep an eye on Ericka and Taylor. If Taylor doesn’t have to know I don’t want her to. I don’t want her thinking I’m a bad man. I was trying to make money for you girls. Ericka will find out soon enough, I’m sure, but we’re going to try and save that argument for a later date.”

I knew what he meant by this. Ericka hates people who do
drugs. She also wasn’t really close with my dad as it was, so it was best she didn’t know for now. Taylor was daddy’s little girl, literally. She was only seven or so at the time. She idolized my dad. I didn’t want her to find out, ever. Then they asked us if we knew anything about my father’s operation.

“The lawyer is going to ask you to make a statement about your father and if you knew about what was going on. You don’t have to. You can just tell him you’re uncomfortable with it and that’s all.” I remember us nodding and realizing he was going to need a lawyer and what that meant. It was the quietest night in the Price family house since my grandpa died.

My dad was sentenced to a year in prison the following June, and after seeing him in that light he was forever changed to me. My dad was no longer the perfect superhero I’d thought he was. For the first time in my life, I had to do something for him. I got a part-time job, bought the family Christmas presents and bought my mom birthday presents because my dad wasn’t there to. I comforted my mom when she was having a bad day like my dad should have been able to. I was the one who was most like my dad so I did my best to make sure everything he couldn’t do still got done. I gave my sisters doughnuts when they were worried. I was the one to remind the family that this wasn’t the end of the world. We weren’t going to die, and no one would drown.

That year without him we realized how much he was a part of the family, a part of all of us. We worked together and counted the days until he was allowed back where he belonged, at home.

My father wasn’t a bad man. He was a gardener and that’s how he helped support the family. The day he returned I remember being sick with excitement. I didn’t want to talk; I just wanted my dad back so we could be a family again. I sat on the couch and waited for him to come through the door and, when he did, he picked me up in a big hug and said, “Did I ever tell you I love you?” I was too choked up to respond so he just finished with the usual, “Well, I do, you know.” And that’s how I knew everything was the way it used to be. My dad was back to protect me once again.
The Line
Tom Recinella

Long and sleek,  
silver counters glinting,  
white boards gleaming,  
black iron steadfast,  
orange flame raging.  
The Line.

Sauté pans whistling,  
sizzle platters hissing,  
char-grill crackling,  
hood fans wailing their endless dirge.  
The Line.

Sharp knives cutting deep,  
flat top burns flesh,  
stock pots strain lower backs,  
feet aching beyond perception,  
chasm of endless hours.  
The Line.

Waves of orders slamming, crushing,  
tickets flying, voices projecting,  
brothers and sisters to  
meet the onslaught jamming,  
chaos and mayhem ever threatening,  
intensity sublime.  
The Line.

China clanging,  
pans screaming, flames biting,  
smoke intrusive,  
water boiling, oil bubbling,  
senses heightened,  
air thick as granite.  
The Line.
My first love,
never looked back,
no master chef am I,
but merely a cook until I die,
wanting to be there always.
The Line.

Dedicated to Tom “Gibbi” Gibny (1964-1987), my brother on the line. His “Shift” ended far too early. And to all of my students past, present, and future and my children Amber and Vincenzo, I hope that they all have the chance that I did, to fall in love with The Line.
Untitled Photograph
Vivian Walker
To Produce a Specimen
Miriam A. Sharick

(With acknowledgments to Jack London.)

For some weeks now, she had been avoiding eye contact with the sheet of paper tacked to her bulletin board next to the kitchen phone. The paper listed some medical tests that her doctor wanted her to undergo as a matter of routine before he saw her again. She was unconcerned about the expected results; she had recovered her health a couple of years ago and had steadily improved ever since. But she wasn’t looking forward to the tests themselves. The blood tests required that she fast for twelve hours before giving the sample. Well, the fasting wasn’t a big deal, but she had small veins, and an inept technician would make this exercise acutely uncomfortable. Worse than that, even, was the checked-off item “U/A.” She shuddered every time she was forced to think about it. There was almost nothing she disliked more than producing a urine specimen.

Her doctor appointment was coming up soon, on a Tuesday, and she was trying to find a morning the week before to get the tests over with, so that the results would arrive in time at her doctor’s office. But all kinds of events conspired to make this schedule impossible. The only morning she could have the tests done was that Tuesday of her appointment. She had to reschedule it. This wasn’t difficult; her doctor’s receptionist kindly gave her an appointment on the Friday afternoon three days after she would have her tests done, enough time for her doctor to peruse the results. She resolved to stick to this schedule.

She arrived at the lab mid-morning Tuesday, not having eaten or drunk anything since dinner the night before; this of course meant no breakfast, or even coffee, that morning. Naturally, she had gone to the bathroom when she had arisen that morning, but she hoped that, by the time she checked in with the lab receptionist, she could produce a decent urine specimen. First, though, she had to endure giving the blood samples. A young technician, pregnant out to here, the name Rose embroidered on her lab coat, cheerfully checked all the tiny blue tubes in the crooks of both elbows and chose one in the
right arm. Keep that fist tight, encouraged Rose; now the alcohol will feel cold, now a stick; it may sting a little; maybe you should look the other way; hmmm. . . .

She winced as the needle stuck her and glanced away, but the sight of blood didn’t bother her; she looked back at the syringe Rose was holding and raised her eyebrows. No blood was entering the vial. Rose began moving the needle around—Does this hurt? Not yet, she replied, biting her lip, turning clammy. Suddenly it did hurt. Ouch! she squeaked. Rose kept moving the needle, and the hurt turned into a stinging burn that made her cry out loud. Rose finally withdrew the needle and taped a fat piece of gauze over the crater-like puncture. Her elbow joint was already turning black and blue. I’m sorry, Rose stammered; I got nothing from you, and I’ll have to do it again. Oh, man, she groaned, on the verge of tears. Let me get Judy, Rose decided; Judy’s an expert with small veins. Rose bolted.

In came Judy, name embroidered on lab coat, who cheerfully checked out her left elbow crook, chose a vein, prepped it, stuck it, filled two vials with rich purple blood, and put a band-aid over the stick spot. No significant discomfort this time. The other pain had largely subsided, and she took a satisfying cleansing breath. It was a momentary reprieve. Judy gave her a three-ounce paper specimen cup, a labeled, calibrated plastic tube, and a Bio-hazard zip bag. She was expected to pee into the cup, pour the contents into the tube, cap the tube, seal the tube in the bag, and give the bag to Judy. Her embarrassment at having to do this shut her bladder down—I can’t do this, she faltered. Here, said Judy, handing her a blue ticket, have a cup of coffee on us at the café and come back when you’re ready.

She was hungry. She splurged on a toasted raisin bagel with cream cheese to go with her coffee. She sat in the café for nearly an hour, nursing her coffee, savoring her bagel, reading Angels and Demons, hoping the coffee would make her ready. It didn’t. Despite her swelling discomfort, her bladder had clamped shut immovably. This is not going to happen any time soon, she told Judy. When can you come back? Judy asked. Not until Friday, she replied; I’m supposed to see my doctor Friday afternoon, but I guess I’ll have to reschedule again. She shook her head.

The specimen collection kit sat on her bathroom counter in a
plastic grocery bag, so that her family wouldn’t be overtly reminded of her embarrassment. Tuesday evening, all day Wednesday, all day Thursday, it sat there; she had to collect that specimen Friday morning. First catch, her obstetrician had once called it. She blushed to remember all those samples she had to produce during both her pregnancies twenty-something years ago. Her obstetrician hadn’t given her any kits; bring me a specimen every visit, he had told her. She had always used a jar with a tight lid.

Friday morning, she waited until her husband had left for work before she even got up. Her dread had the effect of shutting down her bladder again; she couldn’t relax, she just couldn’t. Maybe breakfast and a cup of coffee will open me up, she thought; it doesn’t have to be a fasting specimen like the blood. She was uncomfortably full when she tried again. Nothing was forthcoming. It’s that cup, she decided, that damned little three-ounce cup. She couldn’t pee into that cup. She threw out the cup and fetched a jar from the recycle bag. She hoped this would give her the security to relax.

_Tinkle tinkle._

Oh, no! she thought. I’m missing the jar! She repositioned it.

_Tinkle tinkle._

I’m still missing it!

_Tinkle tinkle._

Oh, shit, she thought. Wrong stuff, she corrected herself, and blushed so fiercely that she had a hot flash. Then her bladder shut down again. She peered at the jar; there was a little something in it. Doubtfully, she poured it into the tube. It filled only to the 2-cc mark. She needed at least eight more milliliters to complete the specimen. And it wasn’t going to happen at that moment.

She capped the tube and rested it in a Dixie cup on the bathroom counter. I’ll do this if it takes me all morning, she thought grimly. I must. I can. Grimly she dressed, made the bed, cleaned up the kitchen, added to her shopping list, and called a friend she was supposed to meet for lunch to say she might be late. She also called her doctor’s office to reschedule her appointment, but the receptionist said to come in anyway; the doctor had her blood test results and would not mind that the urinalysis was late. The thought of sticking to her schedule spurred her; she had to bring the specimen to the lab.
in enough time to go shopping, have lunch with her friend, and keep her doctor appointment, and then come home to cook dinner.

Grimly, she went into the bathroom again. No dread this time, only angry resolve. Get the jar right this time, she snapped to herself.

_Tinkle tinkle._

Move the jar, damn it.

No sound. Oh, at last, she thought. She removed the jar and finished what she had to finish, relieved on every level. She poured her specimen from the jar into the tube until it passed the 10-cc mark, capped the tube, sealed the tube in the Bio-hazard bag, discarded the excess specimen, rinsed the jar, and put the jar into the dishwasher. Now she got ready to leave the house. She could function for the rest of the day.

She arrived at the lab an hour or so later and checked in with the receptionist. Judy glanced at the diminishing bruises in her elbows and accepted the specimen with thanks. I collected it this morning, she said proudly. It was the hardest thing I had to do all week.
Untitled Photograph
Jordan P. McClure
A warm sunny day of summer, blue sky and warm breeze, birds singing in the trees above: this is the day etched in my mind’s eye. It is the day I entered the courtyard of my grandmother’s Catholic church. I recall the concrete walk, evenly laid against a pristinely manicured garden, now in full bloom with the colors and scents of summer. The scene was made more peaceful and serene by the presence of marbled statues: the Madonna holding her infant son; long-ago saints garbed in clothing foreign to me. I, a small child of four or five, held the hand of my mother as my grandmother led the way through the garden to the doors of the church. It is then that I saw him, the aged priest my mother spoke so highly of. I was intrigued that she called him “Father.” As he came toward us on the path, his black robe and white hair were encircled in the sun’s rays, giving him an almost angelic appearance. I had been taught to remain silent in the presence of adults. He greeted my grandmother, embraced my mother. I longed for him to acknowledge me as well, to offer the prayer of blessing that I’d heard rumored he bestowed upon children. And when he did, my heart skipped a beat. I looked up at him as he placed his weathered hand upon my head, slightly off to the side so that it also covered part of my ear. It was a gesture of love, and it immediately endeared him to me. Then I heard his soft voice offer the prayer of blessing over me—such peace enveloped me, and in my heart a seed of longing for the spiritual was planted.

The anticipation for summer vacation was great following my fifth-grade year. My mother had made preparations for me to attend camp with a group of friends. The planning alone was enough to make me giddy. I wore out the camp brochure with my constant perusal. The tri-fold pamphlet had glossy pictures of smiling children and boasted of all the activities that awaited me there. My mind was spinning with thoughts of the craft shop, nature trails, trampoline, and water slide. My mother read through the list of items I should bring and I diligently checked them off as she placed them into a rather antiquated suitcase: a one-piece bathing suit, a toothbrush and collapsible cup, a flashlight, a pad of paper and pen. In addition to all
of this, I was being given money to spend however I wished. I already knew I would buy the green t-shirt sold in the camp store. It was the one with the line of trees across the chest and the camp name, Bliss Summit Bible Club Camp, in rainbow letters underneath.

At camp there wasn’t a church; instead there was a rustic building called a chapel. The little chapel with its wooden floors and walls, its rows of creaky hard-backed pews, became a place of wonder and discovery for me. Here I was taught the stories of old, stories of boys becoming kings, mighty miracles, the dead brought to life. Here contests were held, sword drills and memorization. There were songs both to help in our memorization and for just being silly. We attended chapel twice a day, once in the morning and again in the evening for a special service called “vespers.” The camp director oversaw all these events. Uncle Ron, as all the kids called him, was a man of imposing stature. He wore faded blue jeans and a camp shirt that fit snugly over his bulging middle. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy and everyone snapped to attention at the sound of his deep, gruff voice. Yet despite all of this, he was kind and gentle and sensitive to the needs of the children. His personal space was very small and he took little notice that my space was bigger than his. He would just barge right in, put an arm around my shoulder, and carry on a conversation of care and encouragement meant only for me. It was that summer at camp that I found yet another who would endear himself to me, one who would take the time to water the seeds sown in my heart. The relationship that began that summer between Uncle Ron and me became one that would sustain me throughout my teenage years and well into my adulthood.

May 16, 1992, dawned bright and sunny. It was a perfect day for a wedding. Nothing was going to dampen my spirits this day, not my father’s stubborn refusal to support my marriage, or the urinary tract infection that had sent me to the emergency room the evening before. Today I was going to marry Derek and together begin our “happily ever after.”

The service was to begin at one o’clock, held in the little white church of our youth. Set at the top of a hill on a country road, the church, surrounded by wildflowers and a field of cattle, possessed
a sentimental appeal because of the people it represented. Those familiar faces now crowded the pews, as my mother, serving as both mother of the bride and matron of honor, fussed with the final touches of my hair and veil. My grandfather, a steel worker by trade, looked dapper in the suit he wore only for such occasions. He had agreed to walk me down the aisle, and I was grateful for his strong arm of support as he placed a kiss upon my cheek. He led me down the aisle and placed my hand into the hand of my beloved, the one who had won my heart and who was now promising to protect it for the rest of time. I had gained another cultivator of my soul.

Throughout my life, the many faces of church have been as unique as the venues in which I encountered them. Each face has entered and exited at specific times and seasons of my life, impacting me in ways both big and small. Together they have planted, watered, and cultivated the seeds of my soul, causing me to grow into a flourishing tree, with branches reaching out to shade those who stop beneath.
Hen-Picked Peckles
Martin A. Christiansen

Hen-picked peckles
Pepperoni pie
Positive perfunction
that pokes you in the eye
Panama persuasion
Perambulatory shoes
Minor graphic boulder bruiser
Contemplative muse

Salad strong performers
circle in the sea
Can you name 11 places
that you’ve been with me?
Sorta makes me wonder
as I’m drawing to a close—
is the answer to our searching
at the tip of tongue and nose?

Better leave you hanging
than confirm the foolishness
It’s a marvelous invention,
these words that make a mess
But what I’m really saying
is exactly what I mean
Words may imply a million things
but actions can be seen.
Nastassja Blasette is a SUNY Delhi student who enjoys drawing.

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Martin Christiansen enjoys teaching English and Humanities courses at SUNY Delhi and other colleges in the area as well as editing and publishing academic theology and other related books and journals. He has also been writing poetry, music, and song lyrics as a hobby since his teenage years.

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Marty Greenfield survived a childhood on Long Island. In 1970 he came to Delhi to attend college, and he forgot to leave.

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