

The Mockingbird

The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University



2014

Volume 41

The Mockingbird 2014

The cover image is a detail from Kaci Wells's *Untitled*.

The Mockingbird design is by Jeanette Henry,
East Tennessee State University, Printing and Publications.

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The Student Arts & Literary Magazine
of East Tennessee State University

Published annually
as a joint project of the
Department of Literature and Language
and the Department of Art and Design



2014

Volume 41 edited by Maggie Colvett

A project like *The Mockingbird* requires the support and cooperation of so many people that one hopes the production of the magazine itself serves as an expression of gratitude, but we would like to offer our thanks to Dr. Bert C. Bach, ETSU's Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, who has authorized the magazine's production fund as part of the regular budget of the Department of Literature and Language. We also thank Dr. Gordon Anderson, Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences, Dr. Judy Slagle, Chair of the Department of Literature and Language, and Professor Catherine Murray, Chair of the Department of Art and Design, for their continued support and commitment to this project. We cannot overemphasize the creativity and patience of the ETSU Printing and Publications Office and, particularly, Ms. Jeanette Henry, our designer. Thank you all for sustaining this project.

Table of Contents

9	Editor's Note
11	Octet and Sestet from an Asheville Balcony – Andrew Butler
12	Convalescent Haiku – Andrew Butler
13	Good Stock – Andrew Barnes
14	Learning Norn Iron – Mary Hunter
22	Baptism – Ashley Fox
23	His Girl – Ashley Fox
24	Go Singing into Zion – Jerianne Paul
30	The Mouthpiece – Jared Sand
31	Radio Children – Andrea Menendez
32	<i>Inward Spiral</i> – Hunter Hines Best Of Show
33	<i>The Void</i> – Tyler Ridgeway Drawing Merit Award
34	<i>Origin: Johnson City, TN</i> – Storm Ketron Faculty Choice Award
35	<i>Altered Vessel</i> – Becca Irvin Ceramics Merit Award
36	<i>Quilt – Disconnected</i> – Rima Day Fibers Merit Award
37	<i>Pop-Up Book I</i> – Derek Laurendeau Jewelry & Metals Merit Award
38	<i>Selkie</i> – Hannah Harper Painting Merit Award
39	<i>Yellow House with Sign</i> – Lauren Roberts Photography Merit Award
40	<i>Bargaining</i> – Nikki Buckner-McCoy Printmaking Merit Award

- 41 *Empty Nest* – Kimberly Leland
Sculpture Merit Award
- 42 *Untitled II* – Freddie Lyle
Sculpture Merit Award
- 43 *Metamorphosis* – Derek Laurendeau
2nd Place, TACA Craft Award
- 44 *Mirror, Mirror* – Shalam Minter
3rd Place, TACA Craft Award
- 45 *Untitled* – Kaci Wells
2D Foundations Award
- 46 *Stella* – Caroline Lowery
3D Foundations Award
- 47 Interview with Jane Hicks – Ashley Fox
- 56 For Piper on My 46th Birthday – Cate Strain
Winner of *The Mockingbird* 2014 Prize for Poetry
- 58 The Canyon Black – Jacob Vines
- 65 Astray – Daniel Taylor
- 66 Children until We Die – Danielle Byington
- 68 Firebird – Josh Blevins
- 74 Rafters – Jerianne Paul
- 75 Seek – Kelly Meadows
- 76 Goddess of the Harvest:
How I Met My Wife – Joseph Sloan
- 81 Alchemy – Andrew Butler
Winner of *The Mockingbird* 2014 Prize for Fiction
- 88 Epilogue – Joseph Bowman
Winner of *The Mockingbird* 2014 Prize for Drama
- 97 The Older City – Adam Timbs
- 98 Coming of Age Again and *The Graduate* – Andrew Butler
Winner of *The Mockingbird* 2014 Prize for Nonfiction
- 101 Judges' Biographies

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Editor's Note

Maggie Colvett

Every issue of *The Mockingbird* is a composite, collaborative work, bringing together an abundantly varied selection of pieces from authors and artists across ETSU's student community. Each contribution to the magazine is imbued with the particular essence of its maker—his or her background, influence, and fascinations—but each becomes part of the whole, just as each author or artist is part of the community that connects us. Likewise, each issue of *The Mockingbird* is itself part of a larger continuity; each year's edition preserves a little of ETSU's creative tradition, holding a thread that goes back, as of this issue, more than forty years.

The cover of this forty-first issue features a detail of an untitled fiber art piece by Kaci Wells. We've highlighted a piece in a different medium on the cover of each issue since 2011, when *The Mockingbird* assumed its present format. I'm especially happy to feature fiber art in this issue, in which we also have an interview with alumna Jane Hicks. In the interview, Hicks discusses her work as a poet and quilter, which she considers related processes. She describes them both as a kind of process of assemblage and relation, "a lot of decisions to be made ... in both quilting and poetry you have to decide which form to use as well as detail and color placement." She places her work in both local and global traditions, emphasizing its connections to both the breadth of community and the depth of time, and the family history that draws on both:

Ashley Fox: In your poem "Where You From, Honey?" you write, "I am from the quilts I sew." This enlightening statement and poem illuminates a familial and cultural significance many see in the practice of quilting. What does quilting mean to you, and when did it claim a strong presence in your life?

Jane Hicks: My grandmother, with whom I spent a lot of time when I was young, was a master quilter. To keep me from running off with her supplies and messing with her stuff, she would flatten a brown paper bag, draw the pattern she was working with onto the bag, and give me scissors, scraps, and glue to get used to what quilts look like and reproduce them. When I was six she actually taught me how

to sew, and quilting has always maintained a strong presence in my life. When I graduated from high school my grandmother gave me one of her last hand-quilted ones, which was a double-wedding-ring, and it is made of my mother's maternity clothes and my old dresses that she had made for me. So those are precious things that one must hold onto.

Every work of art represents a gathering of elements, each with its own source and history, but all parts of the whole that unites the constituent pieces. Likewise, every piece in this magazine—poetry or photography, fiction or ceramics—has a place in a cross-weave of traditions, connected to places near and distant, times present, future, and past.

Multas gratias to this year's student readers, Andrew Butler, Ashley Fox, Jennifer Grant, Jessica Hall, Joseph Sloan, Adam Timbs, and Jacob Vines—many of whom have excellent work in this issue, though I took a lot of pains and Post-Its to ensure that nobody read submissions in his or her own category. Many thanks as well to our literary judges, Nicole Drewitz-Crockett in nonfiction, Denton Loving in fiction, Linda Parsons Marion in poetry, and Elizabeth Sloan in drama, for their time and careful attention in selecting this year's prize-winners. Finally, I'm profoundly grateful to *The Mockingbird's* faculty advisors, Drs. Thomas Alan Holmes and Jesse Graves, and to *editrix emerita* Catherine Pritchard Childress; without them, I would still have no idea what I was doing.

Octet and Sestet from an Asheville Balcony

Andrew Butler

Like children in school halls
Long after school hours,
Bars line the streets
With lowered heads at 9 a.m.
Starlings light
On telephone wires
To flit and fly away,
Satisfied or unsatisfied.

O middle-aged man in cargo shorts—
What treasures
Do those pockets hold?
O woman on a cell phone so loud—
Don't you know Applebee's will be packed
On a Saturday night?



Convalescent Haiku

Andrew Butler

I met my soul mate
A while back. We didn't
Really get along.



Good Stock

Andrew Barnes

I think of the Oregon Trail
Or Boone, or Crockett,
Or that maybe you were kept in sight
For the appearance of danger.
An idol to unrealized potential,
All packed down and rammed and set.
Your neck like a throttled snake.
Some hand that realized
The life it stood to take,
When you were set for destruction.

Now you lean against the bookshelf
To collect dust, with the stories
Held in wood, in steel,
Held in good stock
On my Father's side.
At rest from being
Charged through thickets for game.

Your courage, like grass,
Faces fire without freedom,
Feeds the flash of war.
But I know you were always
Petrified at the lock for fear
Of what you could accomplish.



Learning Norn Iron

Mary Hunter

Author's Note: From August 2009 to July 2010, I lived and worked in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program. While there, I worked with various organizations who are trying to actively bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants in this still-torn country. I worked with a local church in their youth program, aimed at helping kids in what Americans would consider "the projects," and with a non-profit grassroots organization who catered specifically to people who had been injured—physically, mentally, or emotionally—during what is known as "the Troubles," one of the most violent yet overlooked chapters of 20th Century history. What follows is a recounting of trying to learn to understand what I thought would be a familiar language.

The hardest part about moving anywhere is learning the culture. No matter where, the place you move to has its own culture, its own rhythm, most often its own language. Clearly, if you're learning a new language you're bound to make mistakes. (Damn you, false cognates!) I had a friend who, after really sticking her foot in her mouth, tried to make amends and say how embarrassed she was. She was living in Guatemala at the time, so she said something along the lines of *"mi mucho embarazado"* It makes perfect sense for "embarazado" to mean "embarrassed"; except it doesn't. It means "pregnant." Oops. Her host mother was quite confused—and more than a little concerned—for a while, but they got the misunderstanding cleared up, and now it's a rousingly funny dinner party story.

I figured I would be spared this lexicon nightmare moving to a country that still spoke English. Granted, a slightly different form of English, but really how hard could this be? Sure, the accents might be funny, and I knew there would be some word changes, but all in all I figured I wouldn't have nearly as hard a time as my friends in Kenya who were learning a tribal pidgin form of Swahili. And I was pretty

sure that “embarrassed” still meant “embarrassed.” Plus, I’d watched a lot of *Monty Python* as a teenager, and I guessed that between dead parrots, *Love Actually*, and late-night BBC America I should be set for understanding the local lingo. No false cognate problems here! (And other famous last words.)

Well, accents aside, the words alone are enough to leave you guessing. For example: cookies are “biscuits,” biscuits don’t exist, fries are “chips,” a huge breakfast is a “fry,” chips are “crisps,” cabs are “taxis,” trucks are “lorries,” little is “wee,” the hood is the “bonnet,” the trunk is the “boot,” stores are “shops,” children are “wee’uns,” strollers are “prams,” pants are “trousers,” underwear is “pants,” whiskey and whisky are two entirely different things, erasers are “rubbers” (which will *really* get you confused), and people don’t “pass away” in Belfast-- they just straight up “die.” If things get messed up they are said to “go pear-shaped.” To be exhausted is to be either “knackered” or “shattered.” If you’re cold, you’re “Baltic,” and if you’re crazy you are said to be “madder than a box of frogs.” If you get along well with someone you “get on like a house on fire.” No one compares apples to oranges, but if you need to accentuate the differences in things, say, “They’re like chalk and cheese.” (Which actually makes more sense, if you think about it.) If a woman nods her head and mutters “ach aye, ach aye” while you tell a story it’s the same as her saying, “bless your heart.” Women have “friends,” while men have “mates,” but anyone, regardless of gender or age, can be addressed as “love.” And everyone uses some form of “fuck” or “flip” in everyday conversation.

For the first weeks I understood approximately thirty percent of what people said. If the words and expressions weren’t enough to leave me wracking my brain, then the speech pattern definitely put it over the top. I’m from the South, the Bible Belt, well below the infamous Mason-Dixon Line. In the mountains of East Tennessee there are, I would guess, no less than 157 different dialects of English, each specific to its own hill, holler, river, town, city, school district, poll location, bar, and/or service station. The one thing that most of these dialects have in common is that despite the mumbling manner of speaking (necessary when you have either a wad of chewing tobacco stuffed into your lower jaw or a cigarette clutched precariously in your lips, or in some cases both) adding syllables to every word is an art form. Like any true Southerner we can’t say “hello” or “good morning” in less than ten minutes, and most of the time those words are drawn out as long as humanly possible; “good morning” can easily be a sixteen-count salutation. Most sentences are accented by a drawl that would do Scarlett O’Hara proud, while at the same time being completely unintelligible to anyone unaccustomed to the pattern of speech. There are cases of thick-lipped sentences being devoid of otherwise necessary syllables (as Jeff Foxworthy con-

veniently points out in his sketch on “Southern Words”) but these instances are few and far between and are generally reserved for the more mundane, everyday exchanges.

Such is not the case in Northern Ireland. While I was accustomed to various dialects and inflections, I was not accustomed to their being so pinpoint-able. One Northern Irish native with a well-tuned ear cannot only tell what county you’re from, but also what town in that county you’re from; sometimes even what neighborhood. Even without word and phrase differences the accent was unlike anything I’d ever heard; a weak Scottish brogue with an Irish lilt and a Welsh manner and just enough of a smattering of the Queen’s English to really confuse any non-native speaker and/or hearer. Add to that a partial disregard for French (“*croissant*” and “*gougon*” were typically pronounced wholly through the nose, while “*filet*” and “*duvet*” were pronounced exactly as they are spelled) and a complete disregard for American English. As if that were not enough, in a total cultural antithesis, while good American Southerners make it a well-practiced art to see how many syllables we can put into words, the Northern Irish make it an even more well-practiced science to see how many they can leave out. Nowhere is this more evident than in the name of their own country. Ask any native of Belfast—indeed Northern Ireland—what country they are currently in, and their answer will undoubtedly be, “Norn Iron,” spelled as such, too. This is also the name of their language and people group. It’s all proudly “Norn Iron.” So it is.

I was introducing myself to the children in the Youth Club on my first Saturday night with them and would swear blind that one ten-year-old said his name was “Stert.” I asked him to repeat himself and again he said, “Stert.” I thought, *My goodness, your parents must hate you.* “Stert?” I asked. He and his friends laughed uproariously.

“No!” he said. “Stert!”

“Right. Stert,” I repeated again. He laughed harder.

“No!” he said again, close to tears. Then he spoke loudly and slowly as one has a tendency to do when someone doesn’t speak the language, as though yelling slowly will magically make them understand. In this rare case, it worked. He took a breath and leaned toward me to make sure I didn’t miss what he was about to say. “STUUUU-AAAAART!”

“Oh!” I yelled in glee. “Stuart!”

“Yea!” Stuart and his friends dissolved into paroxysms of laughter as they rolled on the floor clutching their sides. I could tell it would be a long year.

After a month or so in my new home, I finally got to the point where I could understand approximately seventy percent of what people said instead of just thirty percent. It was all starting to make sense. That is, if I listened intently while someone spoke, doing nothing else in a quiet room. But I really could understand people. For the most part. I still just nodded and smiled when my boss, Chris, said he was “cream crackered” but at least I understood the words coming out of his mouth if not their meaning.

The exception to this rule was, of course, the phone, in particularly my mobile. I hated talking to anyone other than the other YAVs because inevitably they always had to repeat themselves ten times before I finally got a grasp on what they were trying to tell me. I really hated talking to Chris because even though he was one of the easier people to understand on the whole, he was still a native and spoke with the quick, mono-syllabic mumble of the Northern Irish. Being his subordinate and assistant meant I often had reason to be on the phone with him and usually wanted to end all our conversations with the fervent promise that I was not, contrary to outward appearances, a complete idiot, I just had slow ears.

I was helping to prepare lunch for the Women’s Lunch Club at the WAVE Centre when he called me. I looked at the caller ID and groaned a little. I thought briefly about letting it go to voicemail—my slow ears coupled with the background noise of clanking dishes and chattering women would only add to my frustration and self-perceived status as the village idiot—but then I remembered that I didn’t have voicemail and even if I did it would do me little good if I couldn’t understand the caller in the first place. Plus, Chris knew where I was working and would probably just keep calling until I answered.

I pressed the key with the little picture of a green telephone receiver. (Some things appear to be universal.) “Hello?”

“Hello,” Chris said in his usual way. This was the only word I ever heard Chris deliberately make two syllables, and I highly doubt he did it consciously. I liked it. He drew out the first part a second longer than necessary and then clipped the end short in a manner that always made it seem as though the word just fell off a cliff. Even without caller ID I could always tell it was him with that one little word. “Ya be th meein fried?” After that initial “hello” it was all downhill.

“What?” I asked.

“Ya be th meein fried?”

“Umm...” I tried to buy myself some time as I rolled the sounds over in my

head. Maybe if I could repeat them in an American accent they would make sense. Usually not. “I’m sorry, say again.”

“Ya be th meein fried?”

Cripes, man! I clearly can’t understand you, why do you keep saying the same thing when you know I haven’t a clue what you’re saying?! I decided to pass the buck. “I’m sorry, Chris, but I’m at WAVE prepping lunch and it’s really loud in this kitchen.” I dropped an aluminum bowl in the sink for emphasis. “I can barely hear you.”

I heard a slow sigh down the phone. There was a brief pause where I imagined Chris removing his trademark red-rimmed glasses, closing his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose and saying a quick and silent prayer for patience and compassion. When he spoke again it was slowly, accenting every consonant a little louder than normal as one does when one speaks to the very young, the very old and the mentally dim.

“I’ll text you.”

That I understood. “Okay,” I said sheepishly, feeling belittled none by him, but by my own incompetence. I hit the end button and pocketed my phone. *Is this culture shock?* I wondered. *I’d almost rather learn Swahili. Then everyone would expect me to be a dolt.* My phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out and looked at the screen.

Will you be at
the meeting on
Friday? –cp

“What?!” I said out loud to no one in particular. “That is not at all what you said!” I hit reply.

Yes. 11, right?

send

BUZZZ

Aye. –cp

“Oh, for the love! The man *texts* with an accent!” The women in the kitchen at this point were politely trying not to stare as I carried on an animated conversation with myself. “Ugh. This is so not fair.” I tapped out a reply, grateful that frustration didn’t come across in text messages.

See you then.

I went back to preparing lunch, wondering if I would ever get the hang of listening to the people I was surrounded by. The most frustrating and ever so slightly infuriating thing was that it seemed no one—and I mean *no one* from the three-year-olds in the Sunday School to the partially deaf pensioners at the Newton Day Centre—had the slightest trouble understanding me. They understood my accent, my expressions and, to a certain extent, even my East Tennessee colloquialisms. Nothing I said was lost on them and yet, while I was admittedly doing much better than before, unless I was in a one-on-one conversation in a quiet room I could barely understand a thing anyone said. It was embarrassing and made life difficult, especially since I was supposed to be here as a representative of the church. Sometimes the only thing I could do was to make light of it and poke fun at myself. Got to laugh to keep from crying.

Not long before this day in the kitchen, I was asked to be the secretary for quite an important meeting between members of WAVE's Injured Group and two commissioners from "The Commission." I didn't know who "The Commission" was or what "The Commission" did, but I did know that this was an important gathering to help aid victims of the Troubles and push forward an effort to recognize all victims and thus put societal and governmental measures in place to help accommodate their dizzying and vast array of needs. At least twenty men and women were there, ranging in age from thirty to eighty, with all manner of injuries and abilities. My job as secretary was straightforward: to record the minutes from the discussion. I still don't know how I was picked to be the secretary, or why I agreed to do it.

As the meeting opened, the chairman—bless him!—made it a point to tell everyone that "our visiting American intern" was to be taking the minutes so please speak up and speak slowly for her benefit and for everyone else's. That worked for about the first three minutes. After that, as could be expected in any meeting in any city on the globe, members became more and more adamant about what they were saying and less and less conscious of how they were saying it.

I scribbled furiously on my pad of paper trying to keep up and translate as best I could. I sincerely hoped that my notes about "the O.F.M.D.F.M.," "the Forum," "the hospital book launch," and "the disappeared" made sense to somebody, because these were the words I was hearing, but they made no sense to me.

Suddenly, one of the members turned to me. "Oi! Secretary!" he said. (To be fair to my own linguistic blunders, it would be the better part of a year before anyone figured out what my name was and how to pronounce it.)

"Yes?" I asked looking up for the first time in what seemed like hours.

“Can you write a letter to Obama?” All eyes on me. What were we even talking about?

“As in *President* Obama?”

“Aye,” the chairman said.

I was confused. They wanted me, personally, to write a letter to President Barack Obama? About what? Why? Could you even do that? Surely there were hosts of Secret Service and CIA agents with the specific job of opening mail addressed to the President just to make sure it wasn't booby trapped or worse. They probably had official titles like First Assistant to the Senior Undersecretary of the Post Master General. They probably had six-figure salaries with hazard pay just to compensate for the all-too-real threat of postmarked anthrax and mail bombs. But what did I know? I was just a lowly American citizen living in a foreign country. I'd never actually *tried* to mail anything to the President. Maybe you *could* send mail to the President. It was surely worth a shot.

“I suppose you could,” I started, but I'd waited too long to answer.

“Ach, never mind, sure, we'll find sum'in else,” the chairman said and the group was on to the next thing just like that. I was already behind in my minute taking.

As I continued to scribble partially legible minutes for a meeting I failed to comprehend the meaning of, the members of the group continued to speak passionately about people and issues of which I had never heard. On top of hoping the acronyms made sense to someone, I began to pray fervently that I would be able to decipher my own handwriting. Physicians wrote more legibly. Add to that the fact that I was still behind from mentally composing hypothetical correspondence to the President, and I was all but completely lost. Finally, I couldn't take any more; I just couldn't keep up.

“Wait!” I said, my voice a bit more nervously high pitched than I cared to acknowledge. “I just need to catch up.”

“What's the matter? Can't understand anything?” someone asked.

Normally I'm no good with quick, witty comebacks, only thinking of them hours later and then woefully coming up with several that would have fit the circumstance. On the rare occasions that I actually think of one and can deliver it within the context it is meant to be delivered, I am loathe to waste it, audience and placement notwithstanding. Fortunately for me, the Northern Irish are a nation of people who have honed sarcasm into an art form on level with Shakespearean prose, so I fit right in.

“No,” I said glaring slightly at my addresser. “I’m trying to write with an accent.” The group exploded with laughter. I hadn’t noticed it before being as caught up as I was in trying to decode my own notes, but there had been a palpable tension slowly filling the room. The members and the commissioners were trying to ultimately accomplish the same goals, but were going about it from two different angles. The stress was slowing building from a simmer to a low boil, but with that one well-placed quick comment, the lid was removed from the room allowing much of the steam to dissipate. I smiled in spite of myself. It wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I signed up for a year-long mission experience in a foreign country, but hey, if my slow ears could help bridge a gap, then this was going to be easier than I thought.

I thought of Chris’s unintelligible phone call in light of the minute-taking incident as I finished lunch for the Women’s Group. *Give yourself a break*, I thought. *You’ve only been here a month. Things will get better. Chill out. Just don’t stick your foot in your mouth and you’ll be fine.* I often feel like Alice after her tumble down the rabbit hole; I give myself very good advice, but I very seldom follow it.



Baptism

Ashley Fox

My feet rest cold against the deep sea
green of the porcelain sink.
Mamaw tests a steady stream
with her wrinkled hand,
warm not scalding. Dirt falls away,
revealing my morning toes before
mudpies and bike rides barefoot
left them covered with earth.
She lathers a soap bar with rose scent,
fragrant as her pink and red petals
climbing the clothesline post.
My feet disappear into white suds
on top of brown water, but I trust
the smooth hands that rub and cleanse,
like so many soiled dishes,
and revive my limbs, white as bone.



His Girl

Ashley Fox

Daddy lets me hitch a ride to distant
fields in his tractor bed, beside his
rusting axe and fraying ropes.
He liked me more back then.
His gloved hands shift gears,
gaining speed, dirt unsettles and
clings to our bodies' sweat.
I lean over the back, arms reached out,
head bobbing to the rhythmic bounce of
stony earth passing beneath our tires.
He yells, "Hold on!" before each rocky jolt
sends my legs flying, and we laugh.
He lifts me out into the lush weeds
and a firm hand on my head in approval
delivers me into a maze of thickets.
Later, I wonder at the nicks and scrapes
painted on my skin from thorns and briars
I did not feel. He asks if they hurt, and I
shake my head no, knowing he will be proud.



Go Singing into Zion

Jerianne Paul

The Bradford pears were in full bloom. A stiff wind had come down the road and blown half the blossoms off during the night. White petals were lying in the red dirt and wood shavings at my feet.

I looked up from the panel lying across my sawhorses to watch the happenings across the road. Ada West was beating out the bank's rugs, like she always did on a Friday morning. I nodded my head in response to her call of "Morning, Isaac." Mr. Horace was washing the windows of the general store. Life was going on as usual in Fillmore City, Utah. It was a consistency I had become use to after seven years.

I returned to my work and stood with hands on my hips. The panel before me was blank and smooth. The grain of the pine stood out from the white background of the wood. I recall sighing. I couldn't see the finished product. No shapes or designs were popping out of my brain. My father had always told me the grain would whisper the end result to me, let me know what the wood wanted to be. I'd seen things in the wood grain before, but just not that day. The casket just wasn't telling me what it wanted to look like, or so I wanted to think. I really just didn't want to finish it.

I left the panel and sat on a stool, one of the many my father crafted before the arthritis settled in his knuckles, and began to carve rosettes out of some spare dogwood. I wasn't wasting the wood. I had some pieces left over after cutting the casket's trim. I told myself I'd use them for something, maybe put them on the corner of the table I was making for Miss Clara Winfield. Really, I was just wanting something to do with my hands.

See, that casket I was making was for my father. That's why I wasn't in a hurry to finish it.

The daily life of Fillmore distracted me from my carving. I'd often found inspiration in the simple life of Utah Territory and had become accustomed to watching the world go by my workshop. I let the wood

rest in my lap and watched Catherine and Lou Craugh play hopscotch in the dust while their father loaded sacks of seed into the family wagon. His boy, Lemuel, was trying to throw a sack over the sideboard. The boy wasn't strong enough to get the sack out of the dust.

The blue ribbons the two girls had at the base of their braids caught my attention. I followed the curl of the ribbons and noted the dovetailed ends. I thought about adding thin ribbons to the chiseled wheat bundles on the casket's dogwood trim, then thought better of it. My father would have risen like Lazarus to tan my hide if I had tried to bury him in a box with ribbons carved on it. The thought made me chuckle to myself, for the first time in the two days since my father had passed.

I had finished carving two, maybe three, rosettes when I heard the commotion coming down the road. I looked up to see Nephi Tooley riding his bangtail mare behind a whole brace of ducks. Though I had seen that sight several times in my life, I was still as confounded as I had been when I was a boy.

Nephi Tooley had himself a mighty fine assortment of ducks that time. I recall seeing cinnamon and blue-winged teals, and maybe a shoveler or harlequin or two. Each and every duck had dried tar on their feet, looking like they were wearing black boots. All those ducks were quacking and tearing up Jake. They made enough noise to make old Mr. Turner step out of the bank and stand beside Ada West with his monocle hanging on its gold chain like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. And over it all, Nephi Tooley was singing what I guess was some Mormon hymn, something about all the saints and coming to Zion.

Nephi Tooley tipped his hat at Ada. I couldn't see his face, but I'd bet that he gave her a wink too. The fact that he was a handsome fellow just couldn't make up for the fact he was driving ducks like cattle, though. It makes me want to laugh, remembering Miss Ada West's face when that trickster rode past. The Craugh children giggled at the ducks running helter-skelter in front of Nephi Tooley's mare.

The livestock auction was just a little ways down the road from my workshop and that's where Nephi Tooley was herding all those ducks. I set my chisel down and brushed the shavings from my trousers. I walked across the road towards the auction house. Standing with my arms crossed over my chest, I watched that duck rustler carefully crack the tar from those ducks' feet with his pocket knife.

"Why do they got tar on them?" I asked. My father had never let me talk to him, and I had wanted to know about the tar since I was ten.

Nephi Tooley looked up from his work and flashed a smile. “The tar keeps their feet from callusing up on the trail.”

“They all yours?”

“They are now.”

He talked to me about some things, but I can't remember the particulars now. It was taking him a long while to chisel the tar from the ducks' feet. I thought about bringing him one of my chisels, but I remembered the first time I had seen Nephi Tooley trailing his ducks into Fillmore when I was about thirteen. I had watched him cracking the black tar off the ducks' feet from the workshop while my father worked. I asked my father if I could take one of our smaller chisels to him, thinking it would do a better job of breaking the tar than that old apple peeler Nephi Tooley was using. My father had answered, “You won't take him a single tool, Isaac. He's a liar and a thief, and we won't be helping him.” So, I didn't offer him that chisel, thinking to respect my old man's words. I walked back across the road and went back to work on my father's casket. I had wasted enough daylight and my father deserved to be buried soon. I knew he would have given me a lecture to rival Pastor Clayton's best hell and brimstone sermon if he had known I was fussing over fancy woodwork. I can hear him now: “Son, a soul ain't going to be sent to God's side just because he was buried in a pretty box.”

I sanded the edges of the dogwood trim until they were rounded. I ran my cheek along each edge to check for splinters. I didn't want a pallbearer getting poked and dropping my father. I began assembling the casket and soon had the sides holding at their pegs. I was about to make the holes in the trim and sides when I heard Mr. Horace call my name.

“I was hoping you could come look at a shelf that's sagging in the store,” he said. He fingered the wheat design of the casket's trim. “Maybe you could see if it needs fixing or replacing.”

“I sure can, Mr. Horace. I can do that for you now, if you like.” I began gathering up a few tools.

“I'd appreciate it, Isaac.” After a moment, Mr. Horace asked, “You know, your pa built those shelves for me. It was the first job he took after settling down here, after he left the mines.”

“I don't remember that.”

“You were just a boy. It's no wonder you don't. He did a fine job building those shelves, too. I hope you can fix this one. I'd hate to see it be replaced.”

I walked with Mr. Horace to the general store. The shelf beneath the jars of rock candy and caramels had begun to sag in the middle. After a brief inspection, I told Mr. Horace, "Well, looks like this board's going to have to be replaced. It's warped."

"That's a shame," Mr. Horace said. "I really hate to start replacing your pa's work before he's properly buried."

"I think he won't mind, Mr. Horace, so long's I replace it properly." I pulled the candy jars from the shelf and set them on the counter. "I wouldn't put anything on it. It looks like it could break if you coughed on it."

"Miss Ada told me you weren't having a service for your pa."

"He wouldn't have wanted a Mormon service," I said. "He was a God-fearing man, but he didn't always agree with you all out here. I mean no offense by that, either, Mr. Horace."

"No offense taken, Isaac. You have to respect your pa's wishes."

The bell over the door jingled, and Nephi Tooley walked in. He held a fan of crisp dollar bills in one hand and one of them Mormon Bibles in the other. He was tucking the bills between the pages as he walked up to the counter. Mr. Horace frowned as he watched Nephi Tooley shove the final bills in his hand between two pages with the word Mosiah printed at the top.

"What can I get you, Nephi?" Mr. Horace asked.

"I'm needing some seed. I've waited too long to get my crops in the ground as it is."

Nephi Tooley bought a sack of wheat seed, a sack of cornmeal, and some air-tights, which he put into the saddle bag he had carried in. He also bought some rock candy. He paid for the goods and left the store with the sacks over his shoulder. I saw him hand the Craugh children the rock candy as he passed by.

I finished taking the measurements for the shelf and went back to my workshop. I stopped just inside and stared at the casket. I picked up my awl, touched its tip to the wood, and couldn't work. I set the awl down and went back to my stool.

The Craughs had loaded up and left by the time I sat down. The only person left on the road was Nephi Tooley. He was leaning against the hitching post eating a biscuit and cold ham and drinking some Valley Tan he must have brought with him. I knew Otto Dryer didn't sell any more of that Mormon home brew at the saloon.

Nephi Tooley started walking towards me, leading his horse by the reins. I rose from my stool.

“I heard your father passed away,” he said, holding his hat in one hand. “I’m sorry to hear that. From what I knew of him, he was a good man.”

“He was,” I answered.

Nephi Tooley looked around me and pointed at the casket. “That’s for your father, isn’t it?”

I only nodded.

He did something I didn’t expect. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his ragged Mormon Bible. He thumbed through the pages for a minute or two before stopping on a page. “I lost a brother on the trek out here. I know what it feels like. Mind if I read you a verse?”

“Go ahead.”

“This is second Nephi, chapter eight, verse eleven. ‘Therefore, the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy and holiness shall be upon their heads; and they shall obtain gladness and joy; sorrow and mourning shall flee away.’”

Nephi Tooley closed the book in his hand. We stood in silence for a moment. I glanced over my shoulder at the unfinished casket, then turned back to him. “That verse brought you peace? After your brother passed?”

He shook his head and placed his hat upon his head. “No, it sure didn’t.”

I watched him mount his horse. “Then why did you read it to me?”

Nephi Tooley turned his horse towards the open land surrounding Fillmore City. I could hear the sheriff’s spurs on the saloon’s porch. Nephi Tooley must have heard it as well, because he looked over his shoulder and ducked his head. I knew he had to leave before the sheriff’s rounds brought him to my workshop or he’d risk being arrested for rustling.

“Why did you read that verse to me?” I asked again as Nephi Tooley kicked his horse into a trot.

He pulled on the reigns and looked back at me. “Just because it didn’t bring me any peace doesn’t mean it can’t bring you some.”

I will always remember how my father would describe Nephi Tooley leaving town when the sheriff left the jailhouse. He’d say, “Look at Nephi Tooley belly-ing through the brush like a hawk-seen rattler, back out to the badlands.” As I

turned to resume working on my father's casket, though, I didn't think of him that way, not with him singing that same hymn as he had coming in. Not at all.

I stared at the unfinished casket, and I heard the wood's whisper. I replaced the wheat trim with a rope design carved out of dogwood. I cut a new lid, this one vaulted with beveled edges. The sun was setting as I chiseled the outlines of mountain pines into the underside of the lid, where my father would have been able to see it, had he been only sleeping. I carved wild roses into the handles before I hammered them in place, because it felt good to work the wood. With each fall of my hammer, I repeated the words Nephi Tooley had read to me. I worked all night, but I had the casket done by the first bit of dawn. I even managed to make my father a nice wooden cross with his name carved into it before I had a breakfast of cornbread and coffee. I buried my father the next day. I wouldn't let anyone else hammer the nails into the lid.

Ada West brought me an apple pie and hugged me when no one was looking. Mr. Horace openly wept at the graveside. The sheriff squeezed my shoulder as he walked away. When I was alone in the cemetery, I looked at the cross pointing up at the sky and quietly said, "Pa, go singing into Zion."



The Mouthpiece

Jared Sand

scribe for cognition,
coax thought into speech
poised like an inky hydra
listening without patience

the microphone waits,
alive to the point
of leaping off the page

the noise probably looks like water
splashing around the room
eroding the scenery



Radio Children

Andrea Menendez

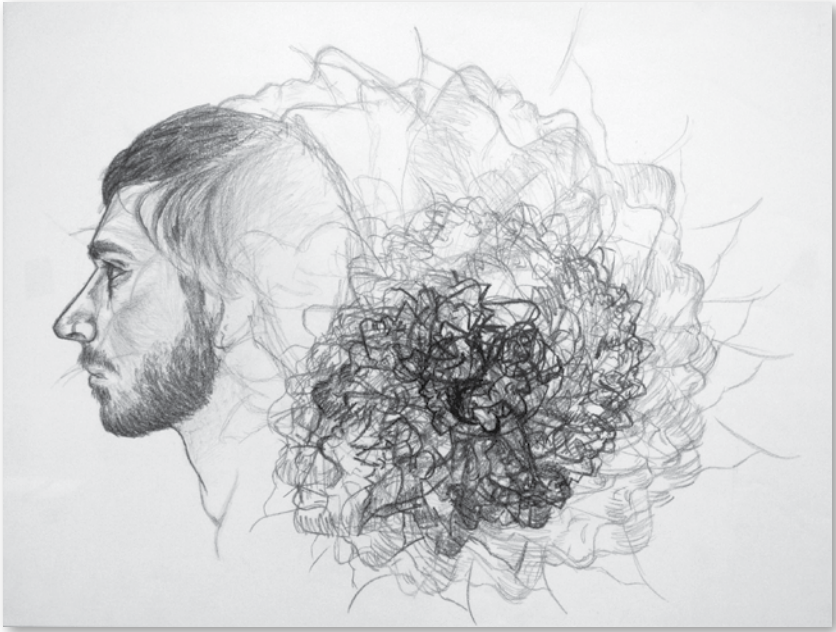
Tender fingers
twirl solid knobs,
cool, calculated
erasing
vulgar static,
persuading syrupy
melodies to ooze
through throbbing speakers.
Throngs of intricate
harmonies
rouse ears,
bristle noses,
liquefy tongues.
Rhythms
pirouette
among balusters,
along archways, landing
elegantly
in a *grande jeté*
in the foyer.



☞ BEST OF SHOW ☜

Inward Spiral

Sponsored by Nelson Fine Art Center



Hunter Hines

The Void

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Tyler Ridgeway

Origin: Johnson City, TN

Sponsored by the Faculty of Art & Design

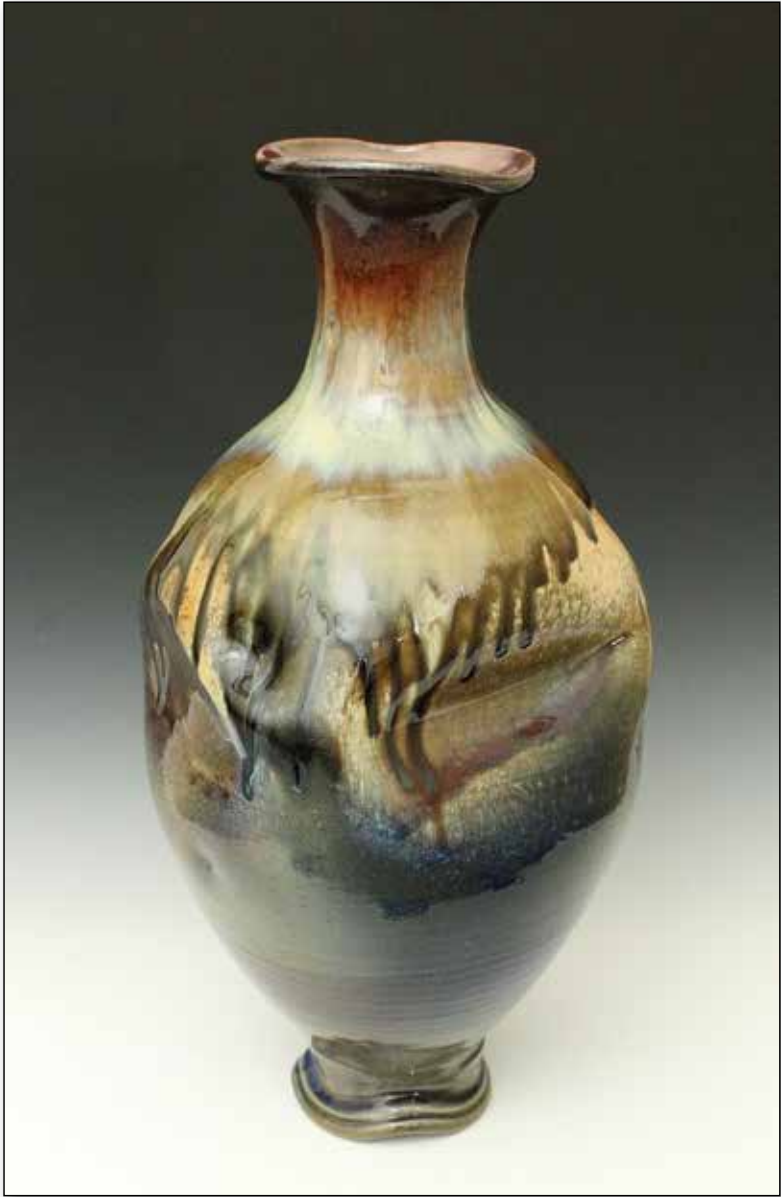
Sponsored by the Fletcher H. Dyer Graphic Design Fund



Storm Ketron

Altered Vessel

Sponsored by Highwater Clays



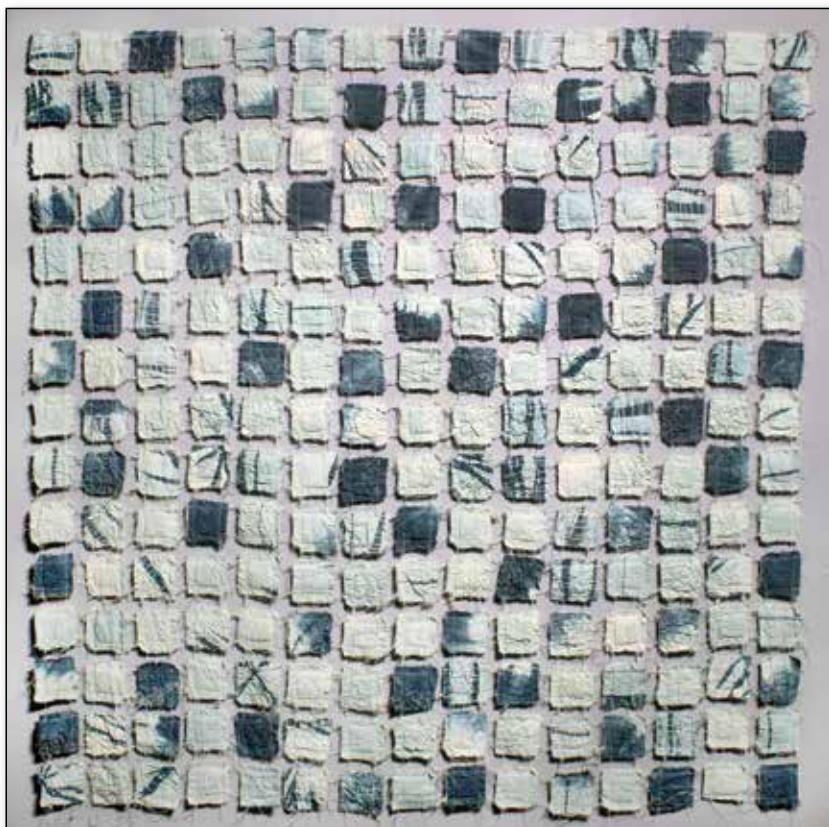
Becca Irvin

↳ *Fibers Merit and 1st Place, TACA Craft Award* ↳

Quilt – Disconnected

Sponsored by Soleus Massage Therapy

*Sponsored by the Tennessee Association of Craft Artists –
State of Franklin Chapter*



Rima Day

Pop-Up Book I

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Derek Laurendeau

Selkie

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Hannah Harper

Photography Merit Award

Yellow House with Sign

Sponsored by Jerry's Artarama of Knoxville



Lauren Roberts

Bargaining

Sponsored by the Wyatt Moody Printmaking Fund



"Bargaining"

1/9

N. McCoy 2012

Nikki Buckner-McCoy

Empty Nest

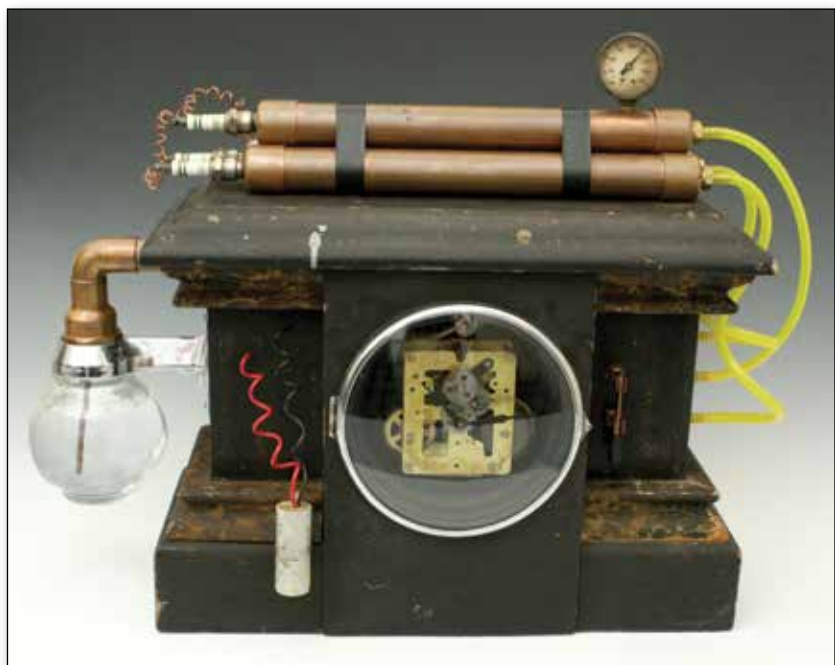
Sponsored by the Art & Design Sculpture Fund



Kimberly Leland

Untitled II

Sponsored by the Art & Design Sculpture Fund



Freddie Lyle

2nd Place, TACA Craft Award

Metamorphosis

Sponsored by the Tennessee Association of Craft Artists –
State of Franklin Chapter



Derek Laurendeau

🏆 3rd Place, TACA Craft Award 🏆

Mirror, Mirror

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State of Franklin Chapter*



Shalam Minter

Untitled

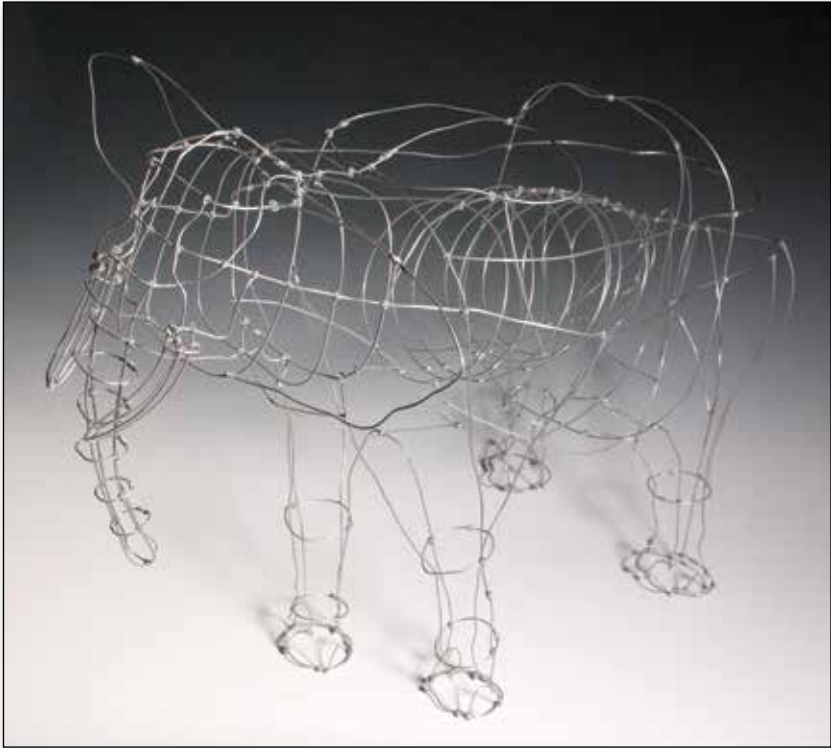
Sponsored by the Mark Russell Foundation Art Fund



Kaci Wells

Stella

Sponsored by the Mark Russell Foundation Art Fund

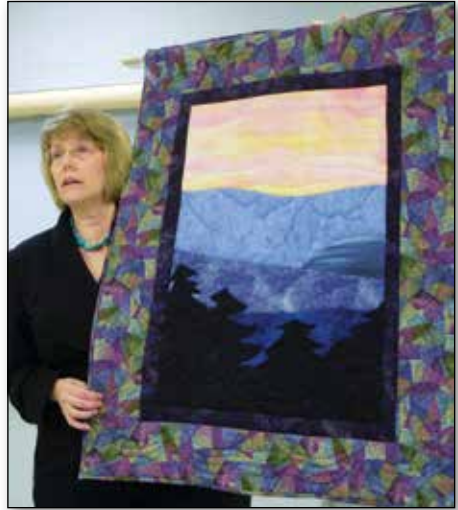


Caroline Lowery

Interview with Jane Hicks

Ashley Fox

A native of upper East Tennessee, Jane Hicks is an award-winning poet and quilter. Her poetry appears in both journals and numerous anthologies, including The Southern Poetry Anthology: Contemporary Appalachia and The Southern Poetry An-



thology: Tennessee. Her first book, Blood and Bone Remember, was nominated for and won several awards. Her “literary quilts” illustrate the works of playwright Jo Carson and novelists Sharyn McCrumb and Silas House; one became the cover of her own book. The art quilts have toured with these respective authors and were the subject of a feature in Blue Ridge Country Magazine in an issue devoted to arts in the region. The University Press of Kentucky will publish her latest poetry book, Driving with the Dead, in the fall of 2014.

AF: When did you begin writing poetry?

JH: When I was in the third grade there was a contest sponsored by the National PTA called “Reflections.” I won awards in that when I was young, and I was also published in *Highlights Magazine* in the third grade.

AF: Did you have a teacher or someone who inspired you to start writing at such a young age?

JH: Absolutely. I have even written about this teacher a great deal, and there are poems about her in my next book. Myrtle Foust was my second grade teacher, and every day she read us poetry. If you had ever been in her class, every year, until you graduated eighth grade and some for even longer, you would get a birthday card from her. On the inside she would copy poems, individualized for each student. I got them from her until I graduated from high school. She was a wonderful teacher in a lot of ways, and she instilled a love of reading and poetry in her students.

AF: Where did you go to school?

JH: For elementary school I went to a little school called Bell Ridge in Kingsport, Tennessee.

AF: Did you ever experiment with other genres?

JH: Yes, I won a *Mockingbird* prize for short fiction in addition to poetry and have finished a novel that is in revision. I am already doing research for another novel.

AF: Do you prefer poetry to fiction?

JH: I do. It is a different process because when you're writing fiction you have to live in your head, know your characters, and project what they're going to do. When you're writing poetry, you're living on the page and in the moment. You don't have to fill in as much information because it is like stepping stones across the creek, and you have to imagine what is under the water.

AF: I have found that one of the major struggles for aspiring poets is finding a writing process that works for them. How do you start a poem, and what is your process?

JH: I get a mental image or a phrase and explore what it might mean, and then I free write everything until I run out of words. I go back with a highlighter and find what seems to be important. I never throw away any of my drafts but number, date, and place them in order. I may go through eight or ten drafts before I even type the poem. Once I see what it is going to look like on the page, I put it into a word processor and place it with any subsequent drafts. When I finish writing a poem, although I don't think you're ever "finished," I staple and file all of my drafts to return to in case I ever lose steam or think something is not quite right.

AF: What are you currently reading?

JH: *Singing School* by Robert Pinsky, and I just finished *The Evening Hour* by Carter Sickels which is a wonderful piece of contemporary Appalachian fiction.

Pinsky had an earlier book called *The Sounds of Poetry*, and that is very important to me because all of my poems have worked very consciously with sound. In this one he has a quote from Yeats, “Nor is the singing school but studying / monuments of its own magnificence” which is from “Sailing to Byzantium.” If you want to learn to be a master, study the masters.

AF: Do you find that reading Appalachian writers strengthens your work more than writers from outside the area?

JH: I think it is a part of it. It certainly resonates with me because the Appalachian culture is in my head and what I know.

AF: I had a similar reaction to *Blood & Bone Remember* because the imagery you used, including the cicadas and locusts, were very familiar to me and pulled me into the moment. The strong sense of place was inspiring for me.

JH: Regarding the sense of place, Seamus Heaney talks about your diction being who you are and where you come from. It is always inside you. I like the image of the locusts and cicadas because they signify a cycle of death and rebirth.

AF: Are there any particular writers who influence your work and who you return to for inspiration?

JH: Seamus Heaney, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Ron Rash, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Wendell Berry, and James Still. All of those people have really influenced my work, and Gerard Manley Hopkins was my first literary love. I have a poem about Ms. Foust in my new book. We would make paper kites in March, and once a hawk got among our kites, so she brought us inside and read Hopkins’ “The Windhover” to us. Ms. Foust said, “You don’t have to understand the words. Ride the rhythm,” so I wrote a poem about that incident, and, although I was very young, I worked at and puzzled out his poem. When I revisited him in high school, he blew me away because he is so wonderful.

AF: How do you, ideally, like to spend your free time?

JH: Spending time with my family, playing with my grandson, quilting, playing guitar, hiking, and, in my old age, I have learned to just be still.

AF: In your poem “Where You From, Honey?” you write, “I am from the quilts I sew.” This enlightening statement and poem illuminates a familial and cultural significance many see in the practice of quilting. What does quilting mean to you, and when did it claim a strong presence in your life?

JH: My grandmother, with whom I spent a lot of time when I was young, was a master quilter. To keep me from running off with her supplies and messing with her stuff, she would flatten a brown paper bag, draw the pattern she was

working with onto the bag, and give me scissors, scraps, and glue to get used to what quilts look like and reproduce them. When I was six she actually taught me how to sew, and quilting has always maintained a strong presence in my life. When I graduated from high school my grandmother gave me one of her last hand-quilted ones which was a double-wedding-ring, and it is made of my mother's maternity clothes and my old dresses that she had made for me. So those are precious things that one must hold onto.

AF: As a skilled quilter and poet, do you see an inherent connection between the two?

JH: Oh yes. There is a great creative process in quilting, a lot of decisions to be made, and patterns are like forms. In both quilting and poetry you have to decide what form to use as well as detail and color placement. I actually had a workshop on the creative process in quilting one year at Shepard University when they had the Appalachian Heritage Series. I think when you are doing the handwork it frees up the left side of your brain to spring into action. Alice Walker quilts and keeps a journal beside her as she works, and almost all of the writers I know participate in some other kind of artistic endeavor.

AF: Family is a prevalent theme in your poetry. I had a strong reaction to many of your poems in *Blood & Bone Remember* because I, too, have a close relationship with my grandmother, or Mamaw as I call her, and it brought her influence to mind in a powerful way. Do you feel that poetry enables you to better connect with or understand your past? Is it more a way to memorialize significant moments and people in your life? Or is it perhaps a mixture of the two?

JH: It is a mixture of the two. I like to memorialize people who otherwise would not have been, those who have not done anything to have made it into a history book but are good and real people. It is a nice way to let someone know they existed by writing your experience with them down. When I was writing the poems in *Blood & Bone Remember* I was exploring those relationships and thinking about what they meant because some were written around the time my grandmother died. There were things that I had always wondered about, so I was able to go back and explore them through poetry.

AF: When you are writing about sensitive topics, how do you avoid sentimentality in a way that makes the feelings behind your poems more universal and accessible to your audience? You accomplish this beautifully in “Pap Goes Back to Texas” and “The Fall of the House.”

JH: Through a lot of drafts and edits. There are some stories in *Blood & Bone Remember* that come from my experience as a school counselor. Some of the poems come from students who gave me their stories and asked me to write them because they knew I was a writer and I advised for a literary magazine. To deal with these, I tried to stay close to the narrative and let my readers decide how they want to react to the poems and what conclusions they want to draw from them.

AF: Where did the name “Cosmic Possum” come from, and what does it mean?

JH: Back in the middle nineties I went to an educational conference with people who should know better and heard terrible comments made by people about our accents and stereotypes. I actually had words with someone and told my husband about it later. I said they treated us like roadkill possums, and he said, “No, you’re a cosmic possum.” So I started thinking about that idea and people of my generation who were the first ones off the ridge or out of the holler—the first ones with high school education, not always because their parents didn’t want it but because of their circumstances, and how you walk that fine line between back home and the world you are living in. Many people my age completely discarded their heritage, practiced away their accents, and would never take anyone home. In the writing community when I started writing with people like Jim Wayne Miller, James Still, and George Ella Lyon, I met a whole group of people who were quite proud of their heritage. The “Cosmic Possum” is not a romanticized view because it shows that there are problems but there are good things as well: the sense of place and knowingness of who you are. They appreciate where they are but where they come from too.

AF: Can you tell us about the new poetry book you are working on, *Driving with the Dead*?

JH: I am working with University Press of Kentucky, and the overarching theme is loss. It is not just personal loss but loss of environment and culture. The poems are historically framed. One of my readers said that despite the loss and the title, that I am doggedly optimistic. I have optimism for the region because we still have a lot going for us. We just need to figure out how to keep from losing our culture and the landscape and stop being a dumping ground. For instance, it is hard for people to imagine what is going on seventy-five to a hundred miles away with mountain-top removal, which is horrible. Carter Sichel’s book that I just finished was about his loss of his family, culture, and the land that they had inhabited for generations in West Virginia. We are losing everything to outside forces, and this must be stopped. *Driving with the*

Dead is also about my mother and how things have changed for women in the region as well.

AF: We are often taught poetry as if it contains and requires so many ingredients: form, figurative language, meter, etc. In your opinion, what makes a great poem?

JH: A great poem transcends place and time, and the sound and meter provoke the reader to feel and think.

AF: What piece of advice would you offer young poets trying to break into the profession?

JH: Read, read, read. I don't know how many young poets who say they want to write poetry but do not read poetry. You have to learn the rules to break them. I want to say to younger poets that just because a "Master Poet" is supposed to be great, it does not mean you have to like them. You have to find poets who resonate with you, and if you read enough, you will find them. You also have to edit your work. You can always say something better, and everyone who becomes successful has had to edit even if it looks effortless. Keep everything you write. Continue to submit work; don't be discouraged. It is hard work, and you have to find publications that are right for you. Finally, learn everything you can about everything you can.



Felix culpa (from *Blood and Bone Remember*)

Jane Hicks

Too wet to plow, we climbed
the ridge where Jack-in-the-pulpit
and Fire pinks fringed woods' edge.

Spent of love, he lay crucified
across my Garden Path quilt, hat low
on his brow to shade the sun.

Stretched beside him, I thought his feet
the prettiest I ever saw on a man. Upright,
they framed the wet bottomland below.

Blue veins traced a mystery map
to his toes. I wiped them with the long towel
of my hair, woke him to adoration.

A cast of hawks rose on a draft
towing spring in their talons,
snaring us in a greening spiral.

I think of those elegant feet,
boot-shod, mud-logged, entrenched
below shell-plowed, fallow fields.

Summer fades, no word comes, I soon
harvest what he sowed before following war.
Tiny feet beat sad tattoos under my heart.

Preacher calls me Magdalene. I refute
him, knowing her wiser in her choosing,
blessed by loving, not damned.



Draft Lottery (from *Driving with the Dead*)

Jane Hicks

July 1, 1970

Behind the meat locker, crammed into a tiny office,
the staff of the Taco King huddled about
a blurry black and white screen. Larry's
4E, polio-twisted hand held mine, I held Terry's,
Charlene held fast to Dennis, sweat dripped
from his nose, the drops mirrored blue shadows
on his forehead and around his eyes.
Paul, younger and trying for West Point,
stood guard for customers.

Fate circled and spun, old men called up
the young. The lives of Dennis, Charlene's young husband,
my boyfriend, and Terry tumbled in two cages,
numbers drawn at random. July gripped the pavement,
hunkered down and hovered, the Hardees across
the parking lot shimmered a mirage, the world
beyond a blur. No customers came, perhaps glued
to televisions numbering their sons.

July 9, the first call, my birthday. If a boy, I would have packed
for induction or Canada. We stifled nervous giggles as the
draw droned on: Number 22, Dennis out of school, out of options,
slid to the floor. We pulled him out of the close air,
Paul took him. Number 57 called Charlene's husband,
she gripped her belly, shaking. We quit watching at 150,
Terry's number, my boyfriend's never called.
In the light, Paul cradled Dennis,
spread cold paper towels across his peachy freckles.

We grew up trained to duck and cover, wary of
Sputnik's eye. The red glare of Mars raged greedy that year.
Paul climbed to West Point, Dennis came home with a habit,
Charlene's baby never saw his father, a bumper crop from the crew
that huddled behind the meat locker at the Taco King.



For Piper on My 46th Birthday

Cate Strain

Nothing I'd read prepared me for a body this unfair
~ John Newlove

Till we be roten kan we not be rypen.
~ Geoffrey Chaucer

It must be so hard getting old, she says,
my youngest son's fifteen-year-old girlfriend,
whose only facial treadmarks are creases
that I strongly suspect match the wrinkles
of my son's cool, crumpled cotton bedsheets.

There is a pronounced short-circuit between
that portion of her brain that monitors
the synaptical leap from thought to mouth,
yet I love her youthful, thoughtless candor.
She offers me friendship without caution.

You look sad, she says. Work in your garden.
When I see you there, you look so cheerful.
Astonished by her caring, I comply.
I wonder not at her welcome wisdom,
but rather at her noticing my pain.

Living on my own, with sons Silent Bob
and Holden Caulfield my only housemates,
I cling to this female solicitude
like so much flotsam in a silent sea.
I feel suddenly girlish, freed from age.

I'd like to offer her sage advice gleaned
from my apparently advanced years, but
how can she believe her unlined beauty
will relentlessly loosen and crinkle
no matter how softly the crow's foot falls?

*Well, don't get a tattoo, I'll advise her.
Open your art history text to Modern,
and imagine how a blue moon will look
when your body starts its slow, Salvador
Dali-esque slide into surrealism.*

Or perhaps I should tell her that one day
she will long to be touched by a hand that
still feels desire, or will want a young man's
stamina but be glad for an older man's
experience and tender gratitude.

I know she won't be able to hear me
while she is young and smooth and full of hope.

So I gather my rough gloves and trowel,
and I look for her word of approval,
bending down beside the fading roses.
You look happy, she says, and offers me
the highest praise she knows: *You look younger*.



The Canyon Black

Jacob Vines

Act I

Lights rise on the interior of an old saloon, entrance stage right. There are wooden tables here and there, seeming old and rickety, as if assembled from driftwood. The bar at the back is a bit anachronistic. Instead of an old-time kind of a shelf, there are draught handles, a sink, glasses with imprints on them. The entirety of the scene the BARMAN is polishing them, working quickly and mechanically as if repressing some hidden thought. Behind the bar is one door—the entrance to the kitchen. At the center table sits two men, both unshaven and run down. The scene opens en medias res, both men intently focused on their conversation; perhaps SAM is leaning back. The conversation is slow, solemn, raw, picking up speed and intensity gradually. At each long pause, SAM and PERRY avoid eye contact.

SAM. I just don't know why she did it.

PERRY. I know it.

SAM. I can't explain it.

PERRY. I know it.

SAM. *(after a pause)* I had this dream once. We was sitting in one of them trains heading west. Steam was all bellowing up around us. I looked out the window and could see the smoke. She was happy at the smoke. I don't know why. But I remember clear as day she said something about the smoke. It had kindly dirtied up the glass, you know. And so the next stop, she had me jump down and run to the other side and climb up it and with my sleeve I cleaned the window. The keeper looked all odd at me when I climbed back in. And when I sat back down across from her,

she told me she just wanted to see the smoke again. I told her the smoke will just keep dirtying the window. And she started crying. Telling me I shouldn't say such things. When I woke up, she was sitting on the porch. She had this look in her. Forgetfulness. Solemn, though. Frightening. Told me she had a dream about a train in a tunnel, where the steam from the train fogged everything up. Said you couldn't see your own hand at an inch away. I told her not to fret, it was just a dream. Told me I shouldn't say such things.

PERRY. You shouldn't say such things.

SAM. I know it.

PERRY. Some don't share that perspective, Sam.

SAM. I know, Perry.

PERRY. Some might like to think you can always see ahead, see. Some might like to think the steam don't have the propensity for blindness.

SAM. But it does. Hers all came from me. I think her blindness came from me.

Long silence. The BARMAN drops a glass he has been polishing and it shatters on the floor. He whispers "shit" to himself, but neither PERRY nor SAM notice the shattered glass. BARMAN begins to clean it up and then afterward resumes polishing glasses.

PERRY. You shouldn't say such things, Sam.

SAM. I know it.

PERRY. You were good to her.

SAM. But maybe not so good for her, I'm thinking.

PERRY. That ain't true, Sam.

SAM. Then why is she where she is?

Long silence. PERRY doesn't know how to answer. They sit quietly and drink, each in thought. In the pause, the sound of a horse and carriage rolls past the saloon door. A moment later, the sound of an automobile. Then, the sound of a train in the distance, echoing. The train continues as if moving through the town, the horns getting louder and then receding as the conversation continues.

PERRY. You told her father yet?

SAM. No. I don't know how to.

PERRY. I'm sorry, Sam.

SAM. I probably need to talk to the parson.

PERRY. I reckon he already knows.

SAM. Not for her. For me.

PERRY. For you?

SAM. To make sure I don't follow suit. Spade's a spade, you know.

PERRY. Parson only helps those that want to be helped. No use helping those who don't want it. You want to be helped? I don't know if you do. You been like this long as I known you.

Long silence. SAM doesn't know how to answer. At this point, the train's horns have ceased. There is a pause here as attention is drawn to the BARMAN, who steps into the back room through the door and carries out a dish tray of glasses. As he begins to polish, he notices a cut on his hand from cleaning the shattered glass up. He gets a towel and tries to wipe the blood off. PERRY and SAM don't notice any of this.

PERRY. What's that on your hand?

SAM. *(looks down to see a red stain)* It's her, Perry.

PERRY. Jesus, ain't you washed them?

SAM. Don't come out easy as it should.

PERRY. *(eyeing his shirt)* You changed clothes, right?

SAM. Yes.

PERRY. You can't keep them. Promise me you won't keep them.

SAM. I know it. Part of me doesn't want to wash them, though. It don't seem right.

Long pause.

SAM. Where do you think she is right now?

PERRY. I don't know. You know what they say about—

SAM. I know what they say.

PERRY. Maybe there's an exception.

SAM. Maybe there's an exception?

PERRY. Mercy makes exceptions.

SAM. But justice don't.

Long pause.

PERRY. (*carefully and curiously*) I want to know. But, if you don't want to tell me, then I won't make you.

SAM. I don't want to tell you.

PERRY. Then don't.

SAM. I found her....

PERRY. Don't tell me.

SAM. (*looks up at him, boring into his eyes*) I found her in the bed. Thought she was asleep, so I went and read the paper and drank some coffee. After a while, I thought she should be up by now. So I went in, and...she had done it. First time I looked, they was nothing but blankets from a distance. This time....

PERRY. (*nervous*) Don't tell me.

SAM. This time they was enough on the sheets to swim in. It hadn't set in on me, yet. I seen it, but I think I was in some disbelief still. And so I pulled the blanket back...and she had drug it from her stomach to her ribs.

PERRY. You shouldn't say it.

SAM. But it's true.

PERRY. I know it.

SAM. You asked me.

PERRY. I know it.

SAM. I'll stop.

PERRY. No. Tell me.

SAM. You sure?

PERRY. Just start somewhere else.

SAM. I called the Sheriff.

PERRY. There.

SAM. I called the Sheriff. Doctor came too. Sheriff went in to see her, came out about as pale as she was. His lip shook when he assured me they wouldn't press it no more. Said he knew I wouldn't a done it. Doctor didn't even

come in. Sheriff said something on the porch, and I saw through the dirty window the Doctor shook a little and asked him if he was sure. Sheriff put his hand lightly up and said it again. Doctor sat down in the chair kind of blindly and just said "God" over and over again for a while. I saw Doctor look up at Sheriff and say something. I couldn't make out the words, but whatever he said made the Sheriff's eyes wide. He looked straight ahead at first, and then at me through the window. I saw the Sheriff stumble through the door and he came up to me at the bed, eyeing her body. And he just said my name. He called me by my name and I knew by the sound of his voice.

PERRY. Sam, I'm sorry.

SAM. Doctor said she visited him while I was out. She showed all the signs.

PERRY. I don't know what to say.

SAM. There ain't nothing to say about it. Women is the well of life. It bursts out of them like the light of a train in the black of a canyon. But some get wrapped up in then canyon and open their bellies after breakfast.

PERRY. You shouldn't say things like that.

SAM. Well, it's true.

PERRY. People ain't like that.

SAM. I got a mattress paints a different picture.

PERRY. Sam.

SAM. There's naught but darkness in here, Perry. You just can't see it for all the light. There's naught but silence in here, but the noise drowns it out.

Long silence. The BARMAN drops another glass like before. Again not noticing, the two continue with more intensity.

PERRY. You shouldn't—

SAM. But it's true.

PERRY. But that don't mean you have to say it.

SAM. Here I am lost a wife to his own child and a child to his own wife, and you're telling me not to report it. To show them what it is. To show them what they are.

PERRY. Sam, I'm sorry. But it was never that light which drew you into her and you know it. She wasn't a well of life to you, she was your canyon black.

SAM. And that is my well of life. That is my light of life.

PERRY. The canyon black.

SAM. The fog in the tunnel. The canyon black. No light but the often moon above your head, seeming like you can squeeze it in your thumbs when it can and will crush you. Not to see your own hands. Not to know they're your own hands. Not to know nothing but being steeped in nothing.

PERRY. The canyon black?

SAM. Yes.

PERRY. Jesus. You know that people ain't like that, Sam.

SAM. Yes. They are. They're just afraid to say it.

PERRY. Why?

SAM. So they don't try to cut the light out of their bellies after breakfast.

PERRY. Don't say that.

SAM. It's true. Why, you want to follow suit?

PERRY. Don't say that.

SAM. I'm saying it.

PERRY. Sam, stop it.

SAM. Spade's a spade.

PERRY. *(standing, defeated, slamming hands on the table, putting his hat on to leave)* I can't talk to you right now.

SAM. *(disturbed)* I know it.

PERRY. I want to help, Sam.

SAM. I know it.

PERRY. *(stopping before walking out)* That well is here. Around you. You can't look at that sun out there and tell me it don't touch all parts of this earth. Life would die without it. They ain't need for the night. It just comes to remind us of the morning. *(he sees his words have no effect)* I'm sorry about her, Sam. She done wrong.

SAM. My child, Perry. I was a father. For a day I was a father.

PERRY. *(he leans over the table)* You shouldn't say things like that. They only make the canyon blacker. And then even the moon won't show. And the

now becomes all times at once. All time runs through you like a gate to the lack of it. Even when you see the sun, you will see nothing but a lighter shadow that passes into the ultimate one. And it will never stop. The same question every day from now until the end. When all things end in black, why even try? You can't live that, Sam. The flowers grow not in the canyon black, not in the tunnel, but only when the light is there for them to follow rise to set. You need to know that.

SAM. But the canyon is there. The mattress, Perry. She laying cut out onto the mattress. All of her laying like a pool of water. Flies buzzing. And my child cut out with her. Black blood. It's black when it's seen all together. It's just the light that makes it look red. The mattress. I can't go back to that cave. But I know I can't get away from it. Neither can you, Perry.

PERRY shakes his head over the table and starts to walk out, but wits back down. The BARMAN drops another glass, and it shatters. Livid, he grabs another and throws it yelling and cursing at the wall, "Damn it! Damn it all! Damn it to hell!" He grabs and throws another. And another. He reaches for another to throw at the audience but the lights die suddenly as a final "Damn it to hell!" echoes out.

(Curtain.)



Astray

Daniel Taylor

What's more sad than
A missing dog flyer
Nailed to a post
Above yard sale signs
And political posters
Faded by rain



Children until We Die

Danielle Byington

Our bodies become bigger,
and we can't remember exactly when the sun did pass by.
Everything that was once so intricately intimidating
is now modestly mundane in the mouths of these sharks,
sniffing for the correctness of starched smiles,
and reassuring that skirts are not too short, nor are they too long.
How long ago was there such glamor
in binging on colored cereal,
and only heeding the consciousness of two-dimensional life.
All of my first loves were fictional characters,
as though knowing how difficult it would be
to erase these men who wear three-dimensional shoes,
and there weren't enough writers in the credits
to make me want to stay.
From entry as an embryo,
we develop this tidy game,
a pungent probability
that penetrates our identity.
We errand our time with have-to's and must's,
and every chime of pride resonates with
"Look what I can do."
We fuss and gibe about threats to our stage,
and no matter our size,
the spotlight dictates the precision of our cartwheels,
gluing jealous eyes to what we have accomplished
through Xanax, contraceptives, and lies.
We are our own cup of coffee,
actively distracted by milk and sugar
from just how soon we take the last sip.

The pleasure of our rush is displaced
with social networks, spray tans, and sexual agendas,
all swirling in that coffee mug
like an infomercial with saturated fat.
Culture is the tasty despair
of this feeble court,
dressing its fertile greetings
in the escapades of a training-bra,
and history hangs on the wall
as a smudgy mirror
which hags refuse to look into.
Why bother asking who is the fairest of all,
when they only destroy themselves,
choking on the seeds of something
they thought was pretty.



Firebird

Josh Blevins

Patrick Sullivan was not a religious man, so what happened after death was not important to him. What was important was how it happened. As the sole of his boot pressed the gas pedal further to the floor, he began to weigh his options. Over the course of his ride he had formulated a plan, and it was simple. He would drive until the bald tires of his '69 Firebird left the road. Someone would find his car flipped over in a ditch or wrapped around the base of a tree. With any luck the speakers would still be blaring the Springsteen cassette he stuck in the player before taking off from his garage. The way he saw it, suicide was a high stakes investment. You had to get it right the first time and tell the world what you wanted it to know. In his case there was no real message, but the style in which he went was the key to a satisfactory death.

The car was a death trap in its own right. There were no airbags, and it was not covered in rubber and plastic like modern automobiles. The steering wheel, the console, and even the window cranks were basically large pieces of bare metal. The thing screamed "cool," or so Patrick believed. It was the perfect instrument for conducting a suicide despite the fact that a million different things could go wrong. It was worth the risk. Besides, gambling everything and losing was something Patrick was intimately familiar with. A broken condom on the night of his Junior prom led to a shotgun wedding to a girl that he barely knew. Three months of casual dating became thirty years of marriage in the blink of an eye.

After his son went off to college things became unbearable. His wife was the only other person in their house, and her voice began to feel like a Brillo pad against his ears. They didn't fight like other couples. Generally, they were perfectly okay with one another, but little annoyances had a way of quietly building up until they became serious problems. Enraged, he would lie silently beside her and think about how his life could have been different.

Despite all their problems, Patrick never actually cheated on his wife. He tried once, after meeting a woman on a hook-up website. They exchanged a few discreet e-mails and decided to meet when his wife was out of town, visiting her family. They got together at a cheap motel twenty miles away from town. The thought of meeting this girl drove him crazy; he believed that the experience would change his mundane life and bring him excitement. She was pretty and about the same age as him, but when it came time to start he simply couldn't. It wasn't out of guilt that he wasn't able to pull it off. It wasn't guilt that kept him from getting it up. He realized that another woman would not be able to solve his problems. So he went home and left his late-night companion angry and disappointed.

He thought he would regret not going through with it when his wife came home. She would tell him all about how her family was holding up and how big her sister's kids had gotten. He was sure that something inside of him would break and he would go off the deep end, but he didn't. He listened to her little recap, nodding and smiling in all the right places, and life continued on as it always had. In a way, he wished things had changed because it would have thrown a curveball into his straight and narrow life. Maybe things wouldn't have been so monotonous, and he wouldn't have grown so sick of the daily grind that his entire life had become. Maybe every day wouldn't have melded together into the next.

Jarring Patrick from his thoughts, the Firebird's right front wheel slipped off the pavement, landing on the wet gravel lining the road. He steered the car back onto the blacktop without losing speed, and a low chuckle escaped from the pit of his gut. "That was a close call," he whispered to the empty passenger seat.

Patrick needed a drink now more than he ever had in his entire life. Unfortunately for him, the liquor store was twenty miles in the opposite direction, and there were no bars to speak of in this podunk, backwater town. Tonight he was dead sober, but what better way was there to experience the last few moments of your life? It was just him, the open road, and the hundreds of trees that surrounded them on either side.

Still, a drink seemed like an amazing idea. He laughed as he imagined what his wife would say if he had vocalized that thought to her. "You have a problem, Patrick," she'd say, rolling her eyes in that stupid way she did. He didn't have a problem. Drinking just made him happy. It made everything clear. It was the equivalent to applying glass cleaner to a smudged window. Suddenly, you could see outside with such beautiful clarity that you wanted to leap through.

Patrick's neighbor, Jack Parsons, had a drinking problem. He could still see Jack standing out on his porch with a sweet tea in his hand. Jack had been "clean and sober" for eight years when they first met. The two men would

stand outside on Jack's porch on summer evenings, sipping tea and talking about anything that came to mind. Every thirty minutes or so Jack's wife would come outside with a fresh pitcher of tea and fill their empty glasses. Jack would watch her go back inside and listen for her footsteps echoing from the kitchen tile. He would then pull a flask from his pocket and pour a splash of vodka into his tea.

"I never drink anything without a little poison," Jack said with a wink. He slipped the flask back into his pocket and patted it gently. "The wife thinks it's a reminder of the 'dark times.' Hell, those were the good times."

"How do you keep liquor in that thing without her knowing?" Patrick asked.

Jack stomped on the board beneath his chair. "I've got quite the stash under there," he said. "She'll never find it, because she'd never be caught dead under the porch. She's too liable to get dirty."

He liked Jack. They understood each other, and they both enjoyed the company. Patrick often found himself sitting on that old porch when his wife was in one of her bitchy moods. Jack wouldn't offer advice. He'd simply get a drink from his fridge and pour a shot on top. They both felt that it was better to forget their problems rather than risk making them worse. That was Patrick's therapy, and no shrink could have done a better job than Jack.

Jack died three years prior, when his liver finally gave out. He always said, "On my deathbed I'll tell Mary to pour me a glass of whiskey." Patrick didn't know if he actually got that glass of whiskey, but he liked to imagine that he did. He could see Jack scrambling through his vomit on the hardwood floor, looking up at his wife. "Mary, would ya pour me a glass of whiskey?" he'd ask through his blood-stained teeth.

Patrick suddenly needed to piss. He pulled off the road and threw up the emergency brake, simultaneously turning off the car and pulling the key out of the ignition. With a loud grunt he pushed the door open and stepped out onto the pavement. It felt good to stretch his legs. He had driven for two and a half hours. Half an hour was spent speeding around town, blaring his horn to scare the shit out of the hippies that littered the sidewalks. After growing bored of screwing with the local wildlife, he decided to navigate some back roads before deciding to take the scenic route to the end of his road.

He stepped off the pavement and onto the grass, stumbling down the dew-covered ground to the bottom of the ditch. Unzipping his pants, he thought about how, really, he was just beating everyone to the punch. He would never again be content living a simple nine-to-five life, and God certainly wasn't calling upon him to part the seas. The sky was falling and everyone in the world was

breathing poisoned air. What no one else seemed to understand was that life was simply prolonged suicide.

He pulled open the passenger door and sat down in the seat. He had never actually sat in the passenger seat before, and it was strange viewing the car from a different angle. Everything seemed backwards and unfamiliar. He turned toward the driver's seat and noticed, for the first time, that the leather was starting to crack in places. It wasn't a bad thing. A little wear gave cars character. That's what his father used to tell him. He bought the Firebird because it reminded him of a similar car that he and his father had rebuilt one summer. Patrick was only nine at the time, but his dad insisted that they take some time to bond. He didn't have fond memories of those days, although he thought about them often. However, he did love that car. He promised himself that he would have one of his own someday.

Patrick recalled riding far outside of town in his dad's banged-up Ford hatchback to a rickety old house at the bottom of a hill. The lawn that surrounded the house was littered with various broken down vehicles that seemed beyond repair. The man who owned the house took the two of them around the yard for over an hour before they stumbled upon a rusty sports car. His father traded the man some utterly useless object that Patrick could no longer remember. His dad was an old-fashioned man who enjoyed bartering, and he never spent a dime if he could help it.

They spent the next three months working on the car, but they never finished it. By the time his father left he was able to drive it around the block a time or two before the engine would putter out. The closest Patrick ever came to driving the car was when he would steer while his dad pushed it home.

They never actually did much bonding that summer. The project was more about his father building his dream car than it was about spending time with him. Still, Patrick reminisced about those days often. The last good memory he had of the man who raised him was the way his cigarette-stained fingers tousled his hair after another successful trip back to the car port.

His mother kicked his father to the curb on Patrick's second day of fourth grade. He stayed at his father's apartment every other weekend afterward, but things were never really the same. A heavy drinker even before the separation, he was rarely sober during his son's visits.

One day, in November of that year, the principal of his elementary school came into his classroom. He spoke quietly to his teacher for a few moments before making his way over to Patrick's desk. "Come with me, son," he said. Patrick followed him to his office where his mother was waiting, her eyes bloodshot and

her hands crossed over her lap. She led him outside to her car and drove him home without saying a word. When they were finally inside she sat him down. Her swollen, red eyes looked directly into his.

“Sweetie, your dad passed away this morning,” she said.

“How?” Patrick asked.

His mom shook her head. “They’re not sure yet,” she said. It was a lie, meant to spare his feelings. He was found by the police, mangled and unrecognizable, after his car struck a tree at roughly eighty miles per hour.

The question was simply the first thing that popped into his mind. He looked past his mother, and as his eyes focused on the rusting sports car outside. He began to sob.

Waving the memories aside, Patrick crawled over the console and settled back into the driver’s seat. He gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands and took a deep breath before dropping his right hand to turn the ignition. He was finally ready.

He wasn’t gentle with the car as it sped down the road. He slammed the clutch down and shoved the shifter roughly into each consecutive gear, causing the car to jolt violently. The tires squealed over every curve, begging to be released from the hell that he was putting them through. It wouldn’t be long before they gave out completely and sent the vehicle tumbling off the pavement.

With one hand on the wheel he reached into his jacket pocket for his pack of cigarettes. He fished one out and pushed in the dash lighter, placing the cigarette between his lips as he waited for it to heat up.

Patrick’s heart began to pound inside his chest, and a lump made its way into his throat. His stomach fluttered just as it did during his first kiss with a girl named Melanie Barker a million years before. Nothing mattered anymore. Not Jack Parsons, his mother, or his long-dead father. Not his wife, Melanie Barker, the girl from the motel, or any other woman. Not even the vicious rumor that, within the next year, his job at the furniture factory would be done at a fraction of the pay by a Mexican thousands of miles away. He began inhaling large breaths through his nostrils and exhaling them slowly in a feeble attempt to calm himself. In the end, nothing mattered but the moment.

The lighter popped out from the dash. He reached down with his right hand and pulled it from its socket. His unsteady hand lifted the lighter to his face while he took little puffs to light the tip of his cigarette. As he watched the small orange light emitting from the tiny lighter, he had time to think about how this could very well be the last time he would ever have a smoke.

He glanced up to check the road and nearly screamed. His foot jammed the brake almost to the floor, and the car came to a screeching stop. Patrick neglected the clutch and the engine halted. The car jerked, sending Patrick's ribcage into the steering wheel. The horn let out one quick blare before he was able to push himself away. A smell like a mixture of burning rubber and hair wafted throughout the vehicle. It took Patrick a moment to realize that, in his panic, he dropped both his cigarette and the lighter. He plucked the cigarette from his thigh and tossed it out the window. He found the lighter sitting in a smoldering patch of carpet on the floorboard, and it quickly followed the cigarette out the window.

Patrick stared through the windshield at the road ahead of him. He was a little shaken up, but he felt absurdly calm. His eyes slowly crept up and gazed into the rearview mirror. Lying outstretched just a few feet behind his car was what looked like the remainder of a human body. An unbelievable amount of blood was smeared across the road. It was evident that the person had first been hit by something much larger than his car.

Patrick stepped outside and made his way to the rear of his car. The body looked worse from outside, and the stench was unbearable. It was not the smell of rot, but of blood on wet pavement and burnt rubber. Seeing the mess up close made the entire situation feel more real to Patrick. He stepped back toward the safety of his car and began to dry-heave.

After a few moments it was obvious that Patrick's last meal wasn't going to creep up from his stomach. He stood upright and slid his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans. However, his hands were shaking too badly for him to keep his grip. The phone fell to the ground, sending the cover and the battery flying in opposite directions. He didn't bother to look for the pieces. Instead, he crept back to the rear of his car so that he could see the body once more. The mess of bone and muscle resting on the pavement no longer resembled a human being, but at the same time it was so unmistakable. As a member of the same species, this person was no different from him on the inside. Patrick thought he was a hiker who wandered into the road to find a ride only to get struck by a speeding tractor-trailer. This was likely just a tragic accident that some truck driver couldn't bear to face, but none of that really mattered. This bloody mound of flesh he had found in the road may have once had a wife and children. Not very long ago it had problems and emotions. It may have even contemplated suicide. Now it no longer felt anything.

As he stared at his gruesome discovery, illuminated by the red flood of his taillights, Patrick Sullivan lost all interest in dying.



Rafters

Jerianne Paul

When our conversation fails
and the wells within us draw up
only silence, we fill the quiet
with gazes at an apple cider sky.
Our shoulders rest a shrug apart
in easy companionship.
I hope we're seeing the same thing
in this November afternoon.
That there are no cross beams in heaven,
no ceiling to cap our dreams.



Seek

Kelly Meadows

I wish your hands were cold
so that when you slide them
down my shoulders, I could
grow numb. I wish your touch
was hot and as you caress the
length of my hip, I could turn
to ash. I wish the oil of your
anointing was poison that
flows from my hair roots to
my toe-tips, a slow murder
on your head. On your head.
I wish that God saw all that
He said He sees. If He saw
all that He said He sees, He
would hitchhike to the coast,
and fetch a ferry to the island
where you hide me so well. I
wish God would then beat
you to a bloody pulp because
He said He was my savior. I
am told that believers do not
wish. We pray.



Goddess of the Harvest: How I Met My Wife

Joseph Sloan

Setting a Stone Aside

It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving in 2007, and I found myself alone in the car, driving back to Chicago after spending the holiday with my family. I had been dating sporadically and trying to be sociable while knocking down twelve hour days at the office all in an attempt to strike some sort of balance in my life, or at least shift the weight one way or the other. On the road is one of the best places for me to think, and I realized that I needed to make some adjustments in my life and focus on things that I could change in a positive way. I know a guy named Rob, his close friends call him Wheels, who at times can lean a bit toward eastern philosophy.

He had said something a few weeks earlier that struck me: “You’re carrying around some heavy stones right now—it’s not sustainable.” He paused there and regarded me with a crooked smile, and continued, “Okay, grow up for a minute and quit laughing—this is serious. I know you have to carry a few of them around with you, but you can put down at least one of them. It’s okay. It’ll be right where you left it when it’s time to pick it back up.”

With that in mind, I made a decision—I didn’t need to worry about finding the “right girl” with everything else that I was dealing with. I vowed to set that stone aside for the time being and not look for her right now. I’d said the same thing to myself before, but this time I meant it. It just wasn’t the right time to worry about something like that, and I knew that when the time was right it would happen on its own—things like that tend to work themselves out.

My dad was terminally ill, and every weekend I was making the seven-hundred mile round-trip from Chicago to where my parents had retired near Traverse City, Michigan. I needed to spend as much time with him as possible—he had pancreatic cancer and only months left at this point. My live-in girlfriend of the previous three years, Erica,

and I had been on the rocks for the better part of a year, and we had broken up at the end of August—it was within days of Dad’s diagnosis. She was incapable of getting her act together...was still living at what I had come to think of as my place. It was dreadfully painful, and at thirty-seven years old, I was getting too old for that kind of shit—it was as far from an ideal situation as you could imagine. The only thing that made the unfortunate arrangement even remotely bearable was her job as a flight attendant—she was gone four or five days out of the week. The days she was in town I made myself scarce, and I managed to avoid her poison completely for weeks at a time—I chose to spend the time she was in town with friends and family. She wouldn’t be there when I got back home from Thanksgiving, one small blissful break for me. I was back in the city and home by ten p.m., settling in from my trip when Wheels called. He was at Hüettenbar, a favorite haunt of ours over in Lincoln Square, and wanted me to come out and meet him. It was late on a Sunday night, and I tried to weasel out of it by claiming that I was caked in road dust and tired from the drive. But he wouldn’t have any of that and demanded that I head over for a pint or three.

In less than an hour’s time, I had taken a shower, made my way over to the Square, and found him sitting at the regulars’ bar in the back of the place. We threw a few back, fed some cash into the jukebox and talked about the holiday weekend. I felt relatively relaxed, and after a while we headed up to the front of the bar to see who was about and mingle a bit. Wheels was starting to get pretty boozy—it’s not hard to tell with him. For some unfathomable reason, whenever he starts to turn the corner he switches over to drinking White Russians. He has this ill-conceived notion that they’re somehow better for him than sticking with fine German brews. Whatever, the practice is just foul and usually ends badly.

Up at the front bar he engaged himself in a bit of drunken conversation with an acquaintance. I snagged an open seat and turned my attention to the room in general and trading conversation with Adam, who was tending bar. Just when I started to think about tabbing out and calling it a night, I noticed that directly around the corner of the bar from where I was bellied-up one of the most stunningly beautiful girls I had ever seen in my life had just sat down. Long chestnut hair cascaded off her shoulders and spilled down her back.

I watched her for a while across the few feet that separated us—brow knit, she was having what appeared to be an inordinate amount of trouble texting someone, which I kindly pointed out to her with a laugh and a smile. I might have even let slip something about seeing her compete at the national speed-texting championship. Luckily, she took it the right way and with a musical laugh and an engaging smile her cheeks dimpled. Putting her phone on the bar, she raised her head and snared me with big beautiful brown eyes, and we started a conver-

sation that lasted the better part of an hour. It was bar-time already. I pointed out the fact to my new friend, Elise, that we had enjoyed a very pleasant conversation and asked for her number. As she gathered up her things, she gave me her number and told me to give her a call soon, and then she and her companions headed for the door. The shorter of her two friends sensed something—she turned unexpectedly at the last second and caught me gazing after Elise as she walked out of the bar—I just smiled, raised my glass to her in salute, and swiveled back around.

Only a moment had passed when startlingly close, the dulcet tones of a smoky female voice warmed my ear, “In case you’re wondering, we’re headed over to the Mill—you know, The Green Mill.” Flashing a brilliant smile, she turned and rejoined her friends at the door and then together, they headed out into the crisp night waiting on the Square.

I sat for a moment finishing up my Spaten and reflected on the conversation I’d had with myself just a few short hours ago about how I wasn’t going to pursue any dating for the time-being. Laughing at myself aloud, I turned and looked over to where Wheels was still chatting up a drunken storm and caught his eye. He smiled, disengaged himself and weaved toward me through the two a.m. crowd beneath the harsh glare that let all of us know it was time to go.

“Aren’t you glad that you came out tonight?” he asked as he slid in next to me at the rail.

Nodding my head, I answered back with a question of my own, “Any interest in catching some late-night jazz?” He thought for a moment too long. That, along with the fact that he was working on his fourth or fifth White Russian, told me that it would probably be best to get him stuffed into a cab and safely on his way home to his wife, Leyla. As soon as his cab pulled away from the curb, I hailed one for myself and was on my way.

Nothing Ventured...

Hastily pressing a few crumpled bills toward the cabbie, I exited and found myself standing in the street at Broadway and Lawrence just in time to see three women entering the Mill. I stood there for a moment and gathered myself—there was something about this girl that I had never encountered before. Shaking myself firmly, I walked through the heady waves of sound radiating from the door and let the dark, soothing art-deco interior swallow me whole. There was Stella by Starlight (or more formally—Ceres, the Goddess of the Harvest) in her alabaster glory greeting me from the far corner of the club. The Green Mill is a late-night venue, and I had bought myself until four a.m. to spend with Elise. I signaled one

of the barkeeps and slid unobserved in next to Elise and her friends at the bar. Seeing that the girls were almost done with their drinks, I ordered another round of Guinnesses for them and a shot of Maker's with a side of Harp for myself. Leaning over to speak in her ear above the music, I caught her attention and greeted her. The momentary look of surprise on her face alarmed me until it melted into a genuinely warm and friendly smile—there were those damned dimples again.

Well played for once...don't get overconfident. Okay, now just be yourself and don't screw this up.

We ended up closing that place also, and I offered to share my cab with her and drop her off on my way home. I had a Monday morning meeting in a little less than four hours in the West Loop, but I couldn't have cared less as we walked arm-in-arm out into the pale sodium glow of streetlights. A blanket of low-lying clouds tinted with the familiar orange light of the city hovered above, and birdsong floated on the thin early-morning air. After seeing her safely home I stumbled into my place around four-thirty and collapsed contentedly into my bed for a few hours of rest before the week started.

Sleep came slowly, and it hit me as I lay alone in the darkness with my thoughts that against all odds, and my recently laid-out plans, Elise was the one. There is no such thing as love at first sight, but that hadn't prevented it from happening to me—funny thing how that works. I was staggered by the thought and, rolling over, I brushed it away while at the same time knowing deep down that it was nonetheless—the truth.

The next month was a blur, I was spending as much time with Elise as work allowed, and it never seemed to be quite enough. She had started a new job down in the Loop with one of the larger communications companies in Chicago, which kept her busy with the late nights that walk hand-in-hand with new jobs. It was stressful for her—the work was completely outside of her experience. She had a “Master's in Play-Actin,” her words, not mine, and had just finished a four-year stint working as a professional actor. She grew up in Nashville, Tennessee, and had lived in five other southern states—Chicago was her first venture into the North. To say the least, corporate Chicago was a bit of a shock to my Southern belle. She was in transition, and her hands were just as full as mine were.

Around this time, something happened that lightened my load significantly—another stone was taken from my hands, and I didn't even have to put it down. It just crumbled to dust and blew away. My ex-girlfriend—most unwelcome of guests—had finally bucked-up, got her shit together, and moved out. How she managed to stretch what should have taken only weeks into several months I'll never understand. I wasn't going to give up the apartment—it was too good of

a place to lose. Three-bedroom apartments on the top-floor, located less than a mile from Wrigley Field, were hard to come by and commanded at least twice the rent of this one, if not more, when available. I've rarely felt such an overwhelming sense of relief as I did the day she packed herself up and got the hell out of my life forever.

An Anxious Conversation

Things continued to progress quickly. I introduced Elise to my parents in mid-January, and we flew down to Nashville so I could meet hers a month later. Alone with her father after our first dinner together, I had never been more nervous in my life. After serving his time in the Army during Viet Nam, Lee had finished up his undergrad degree and gone on to receive his JD from Vanderbilt Law School. He never practiced. Instead, he landed a position with a large national health-care company where he rapidly worked his way up to an executive position. He's a large and direct man that carries his strength cloaked in the gentle, and often misleading, polite demeanor of a Southern gentleman. We spent some time getting to know one another, and before he could ask me what my intentions were regarding Elise, I asked him for permission to marry his daughter.

After a long and grueling conversation, he gave me the green light, "I know you'll love her best, and if for some reason you don't...her brother and I will come and pay you a visit."

The hint of a smile played around his lips as he said this to me, but his eyes didn't contain any trace of humor. We spent the balance of our time in Elise's hometown touring her old stomping grounds, enjoying good home-cooked Southern meals and more time with her parents. We were back on a plane to Chicago before I knew it, and as the front wheel lifted off the tarmac, I realized that although I had her father's permission, I still hadn't proposed. I furiously began thinking about exactly how that was going to go down—this was suddenly much more real than it had been just a few days ago. I knew, or at least thought I knew, that Elise would say yes—but that didn't fully dispel my fears. I wouldn't be content until I had a gleaming bauble on her finger and her assent ringing in my ears.

*A buzz of silent expectation weaves
as the man who looks like a Joe
sits at the piano. A note
stirs the murky air,
ringing.*

~ excerpt from *The Green Mill* by Lisa Rathje



Alchemy

Andrew Butler

He had broken his own rule, picking the wrong weekend to wake up in someone else's apartment on the other side of town. Seven years later and "every third weekend" still tripped him up sometimes. It didn't neatly follow the months on a calendar, didn't depend on the weekend before. It required planning, which Nick did by starting his Friday nights earlier.

But last night he had let himself go. After two straight lonely weekends spent inside, he had taken an old friend's offer to hit up some old haunts and maybe make some new friends. "Like men," his friend would interject throughout the night, before rounds and the like. The sentiment creeped Nick out. His friend's wife had left him the month before and he had received the papers earlier that week. Nick expected a night of lager-soaked heart-to-hearts, ceremoniously welcoming his friend to the life, telling him it's not really as bad as it seems now. Last night had no such mood, though, and his friend's enthusiasm, however misguided, was contagious.

Nick caught a whiff of himself and his clothes as he dressed. He hoped to get home in time for a shower, but he had to abandon this hope as he stepped out to an empty lot in front of the small peach stucco building. He called a taxi to the convenience store across the street. He bought a toothbrush and some travel-sized toothpaste and deodorant, which he used to clean himself up in the bathroom as he waited. The fifteen minutes he had allotted for driving home came and went. Still no taxi. The clock behind the counter had started the morning as a villain, but became just a regular clock again as the hands passed ten. He was now officially late.

The taxi rolled in at five past. Nick ignored the gregarious and bored cabbie, who provided little more than shopworn innuendoes on the way back to the bar. Nick politely laughed at the proper cues, but focused his attention on the clock. He noticed how much slower time

passed when looking at the cab's faded neon numbers than the analog hands marking the seconds in the store, but also how final each minute lost felt.

At a quarter past, Nick was in his car. He turned the radio on, but turned it off again in the same motion. With each red light, Nick would crunch numbers—how late he already was, how long it would take to buy a comb and Febreze from the nearest drug store, and the arithmetic of whether an additional ten minutes' tardiness or his current appearance would harm a daughter's dignity more. Maybe she wouldn't be there at all. But as he turned the last corner into his neighborhood, twenty-eight minutes late and reeking of the last twelve hours, Nick saw her waiting on the porch. She was standing with one hand on her hip, heel of her palm up, her arm not so much to her side as flanking her. Her other hand rested on the railing, fingers tapping slowly and unevenly. She was standing in the shade of the porch, though her tapping hand lay in the near-noon sun and even from a distance her nails glinted in relay with each rise and fall. A backpack sat beside her, zipped open, with a binder inattentively leaning against it. She looked at something far off opposite the driveway Nick pulled into. If she noticed his arrival, she didn't let on.

"Hey, Mia," Nick shouted as he got out of the car. "Sorry I'm so late. Something—" He knew his bullshitting was obvious and considered cutting out the routine, leaving just the apology. There was something respectable in an apology with no excuse. But the moment seemed ripe for desperation, though he regretted it as soon as he said it. "Something came up. You know how it is."

"Yeah," was all Mia replied, rolling her eyes. She gathered her schoolwork and followed him inside.

"You should've called or something. It would've given me an excuse to leave earlier," Nick said.

Mia threw herself on the couch. "Yeah, well, that's awfully hard to do when Mom takes your phone away."

"Oh, damn. She can do that?"

"Apparently," she said. "If I had it, do you really think I would've spent all that time waiting if I could've just called Mom?"

"Why did she take your phone?"

"Broke curfew last night."

"What's your curfew?" he asked.

"Ten."

“Yeah, you’re a little young to be staying out that late,” he said.

“You sound like Mom,” she said. “I’m fourteen. I’m not a baby. And I was with Michael, so it’s not like I wasn’t safe or nothing.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

The conversation stalled. Nick went to the bathroom to get some aspirin for his flaring headache. Mia absently flipped through channels, lingering an extra moment on the brightly colored or quickly moving. This did nothing to help Nick’s headache, so when he returned from the bathroom he passed his usual recliner and sat in an unused chair in the decorative corner of the room. It was an antique, an heirloom he held onto for forgotten reasons, the kind with a straight upright back and thin padding that smelled faintly of pipe smoke and stale fruit. Here Nick was safely outside the television’s rays and the main splash zone of the speakers.

His daughter was in full view. She was supine on the couch, dangling a flip-flop on her toes, occasionally prolonging a yawn out of boredom. At three-week intervals, Nick’s memory of her since the divorce had a time lapse effect. As soon as he had a grasp of Mia’s identity, someone with different outfits and interests would appear at his door. She had spent most of her freshman year in a grunge phase, or at least that’s what it was called when Nick was her age. But now a few months into her sophomore year, she seemed the opposite. She was dressed in bright pink-and-green sweatpants and tight-fitting shirt, cute even when dressed down. Her face carefully redirected the shine of her teenage years. Her hair was pulled back and blonder than he remembered, though he didn’t ask if it was her natural color. Her breasts had filled out over the past year, and her hips were on their way. Nick hoped she was making good friends and hanging around the right people, but it’s not something they ever talked about much.

Hidden behind the couch was the fireplace. First-time visitors would remark about the strange placement of the couch, blocking the mantle like that. Nick would reply that there was no room anywhere else for it and that the chimney was blocked off anyway, rendering the fireplace useless. Neither of these was true. When he first moved in, the couch stood in the middle of the room, facing the fireplace, which Nick had wanted to make the focal point of what he imagined to be a den.

On her first nervous visit to his new house, Nick comforted seven-year-old Mia by roasting marshmallows with her in the fireplace. It had been a good night. It

wasn't until the next morning Nick found two chimney swifts lying in the ashes, their small bodies corrupted by the heat. The stench of the following weeks hinted at a third still in the chimney, rotting away while caught in its nest. Nick moved the couch over to block the fireplace and bought the recliner to fill the vacant space.

As the throb in Nick's eyes went away, they grew heavy. He rested his head on the chair's wing and closed his eyes for a moment.

Small hands shook him awake. Nick rubbed the sleep from his eyes against tugs on his shirt sleeve. Mia anxiously pulled on him, prodding him awake. Not the teenage Mia from that morning, but seven-year-old Mia. Nick's Mia.

"It's Christmas, Daddy! Wake up! Wake up!"

Mia kept tugging at his sleeve. Her small body shook with uncontrollable excitement.

"Is that so, little one?" Nick grinned and ruffled Mia's unruly hair. "Let's go see what Santa brought you."

As Mia pulled him along by the hand, Nick realized he was no longer in his living room, but his ex-wife's house. His old house. Mia grew impatient and skipped ahead, leaving Nick to find his way in the familiar halls. It was early morning, still dark outside. The only light to guide Nick was the red-and-green tangles burning fiercely on the walls. Downstairs, he found Mia under the tree, inspecting the boxes for her first unwrapping. The tree was adorned in Nick's patented style—tall and thick, a November picking, but sparsely decorated. A victim of ambition. Ruth, his ex-wife, sat in a robe in the corner. She sipped from her coffee quietly, rubbing her temple and looking like someone who had spent a long night awake and alone.

Mia began opening her presents. It was Nick's year to be Santa, and Mia unwrapped a series of dolls and pop music and all the things an out-of-touch father imagines his young daughter to want. She welcomed each with a smile, joyful for the sake of being joyful on Christmas morning.

Mia brought him one of the few remaining unopened gifts. It was a small box, easily carried in her small hands, wrapped in lusterless silver paper. "Merry Christmas, Daddy," she beamed. She was proud of her gift, Nick could tell, whatever it was. She placed it in his outstretched hand and fixed her anxious eyes on him. Though it was no larger than his fist, the present's surprising weight lowered his unsuspecting hand as Mia let go. He gripped tightly to keep from dropping it and felt a rigid hardness fight his fingers. He slid off the paper and held in his hand a finely cut cube of solid lead.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Of course, sweetie. I love it,” he replied, smiling back at her.

He did a poor job masking the confusion in his voice, but it seemed to satisfy the young girl, who turned back to her presents. Nick wondered what hidden significance the lead cube held as he rubbed his thumb against the dark gray surface, feeling the metallic softness warming in his hand. The way it caught the light charmed him, but he was fascinated by the dullness when it did not. He pressed his thumbnail against it and admired the slight marks left behind.

As he put the lead down, he noticed all the other metal in the house. The Christmas tree was an unruly mass of oxidized copper shards. Mia’s gifts were piles of iron. The wooden floors were copper and the walls a silver-gray zinc that gave Mia’s laughter a tinny ring. The room had grown cold.

For the first time that morning, Nick really looked at his wife. Ruth still sat silently in her chair. Iron ate away at her feet, then her ankles. She offered no resistance as it swallowed her knees, chest, neck. Ruth returned Nick’s gaze, granting him one final look before the iron overtook her face and eyes. She gave a solemn nod. Nick understood. He wished it didn’t have to be this way, not this morning, but they had been putting it off for months. He was moving out in a week and didn’t want Mia finding out on any other terms but theirs. He nodded back.

“Mia, we...”

Ruth faltered.

“We need to talk. Your father and I have something we need to tell you.”

Nick looked on as she told Mia about the divorce. Mia curled up on the floor, clutching a stuffed bear, and slowly turned to lead like her gift moments before. Nick wanted to pick up the statue and carry it to his new house, to always have his Mia with him. But he could not find the strength to get out of his chair. Instead, he sat alone in the silence, shivering in the still house.

Hands shook him awake once again. Through squinted lids, he saw bright pink and green.

“Hey, Dad,” Mia said. “Wake up. Mom said you needed to help me with school. I have this scrapbook thing due this week and apparently you have all our old family photos.”

“I do?” Nick said, still coming to. “Oh, yeah. I guess I do. I’m pretty sure they’re in the closet in the guest room. In a box, I think. You can go ahead on in and start looking for them. I’m just going to put on some coffee, and I’ll be there to help in a minute.”

He took his time getting up. Stretching, shaking his head, poking the fleshier parts of his gut and face. His hand trailed along the paint and plaster of the wall as he walked to the kitchen. He put on his cup of coffee and waited as it dripped.

By the time he made his way to the guest room, Mia had found the photos. They were laid out in front of her in piles. She was inspecting one, holding it up against the light, as Nick leaned against the door frame.

“You looked a lot different back then,” she said.

“Seven years is a long time. It can do a lot to a man.”

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing. Like here,” she said, putting down her photo and picking up another. “In the ones of you when I was a baby. The nineties must have been a cruel time.”

“Not at all,” Nick laughed. “I guess you just sorta had to be there.”

“You had an earring.”

“And better music,” Nick said. “What’re you getting at?”

“Whatever,” Mia scoffed. A smile pulled at the corner of her lips.

“But that’s not really what I meant,” she added after a moment. “I mean you and Mom together. You just look different, that’s all.”

The doorbell rang. Their time was up. Mia took the neatest pile and tucked the photos in her binder. She grabbed her backpack and slunk past Nick into the hall. “I’ll let you know how it goes,” she said over her shoulder. Nick didn’t see her out. Still standing in the guest room doorway, he watched Ruth’s pearl Mitsubishi pull out of the driveway and leave the window frame.

Nick stooped over to clean up the photos Mia had left strewn behind. One in particular caught his attention, a brightly lit rectangle of gold. He picked it up and saw two shadows in the center on the beach. Nick remembered the picture. It was their last family vacation, the summer before the divorce. They had taken a detour to the Outer Banks after a weekend visiting Ruth’s parents. The getaway was supposed to save a sinking marriage, but he remembered the three-day argument with Ruth about whether they could afford the trip. He remembered Ruth flirting with the receptionist, her recriminations, and coming back from the hotel bar to find her in Mia’s bed.

He also remembered the exact moment on the beach when the photo was taken. It had been the closing minutes of the day, where the sun descends, though still dominates the sky. The dusk breeze caught and carried the sound of the calm waves. Other than a few birds in the distance, the three of them felt like

the only creatures for miles. Young Mia must have sensed the perfection of that moment. She demanded her parents let her take a picture of them, and insisted on having the beach in the background despite being on the western bank, the sun at her parents' back. Nick tried to explain the way lighting worked for photography. Such a picture would never come out clearly, he told her, but Mia's youthful stubbornness won out. Nick and Ruth posed, arms around one another and the sun resting on their shoulders. Nick's lecture had proven correct. It was a terrible photograph, washed out entirely. The sun spilled over everything in rings of gold, saving nothing but themselves and a few sandy edges. He and Ruth had been darkened out, leaving behind two silhouetted forms embracing on the beach.

He walked back to the living room and, setting the photo down on the mantle, rearranged his furniture for the first time in years. He pushed the recliner into a corner and slid the couch back to the center of the room where it once stood, facing the fireplace.

Nick took the photograph and sat on the couch. He gently ran a finger across the image, tracing the outlines of the two people and wondering about the girl behind the camera. A fingerprint stood out against the dark figures. He rubbed away at it, enveloping the two in a smear his sleeve spread but could not remove. Nick tossed the photograph in the fireplace, where it fell to rest among the untouched ashes. The early December cold had snuck in, and Nick thought about getting firewood that evening and whether any birds now nested in his chimney.



Epilogue

Joseph Bowman

Act I

Setting: a loft apartment. Dimmed lighting casts shadows on center stage, showing the outline of set. Center stage sits an executive desk, covered in notes and papers as well as a decanter filled with a bronze colored scotch whiskey. Behind the desk sits a large rolling chair. Downstage right sits an armchair and ottoman. The stage backdrop is decorated with bookshelves, scenic portraits, and a big bay window in the center. FRED can be heard offstage, talking on his cellphone before entering through door on stage left carrying a large box with a cellphone wedged between face and shoulder.

FRED. Yes... Yeah, I think it went well for a Mom and Pop bookstore. They printed out a large cardboard cutout of me, which was kind of *(closes the door with the back of his foot)* weird, but I think the turn outs will be with the bigger the venues get... Right, right... By the way have you talked to the printing company about...? The box actually just came in... *(sets box on ottoman, kneels, opens box, takes out book, and observes it carefully)* Much better... No obscene water marks to be found... Yes, this time. Hahaha... Uh huh... *(flips through pages; gets close to the end of the book and pauses)* There's... Why is there...? *(continues to inspect the inside of book)* The pages in this of the book are blank... No... No, the—the book is still all here, but there's just a couple of empty pages after the conclusion... Like maybe 20 or so... It's not as big of a problem, but do call them, please... Alright. Yes. Okay... Okay. Thank you... Alright, buh-bye.

FRED hangs up, exhales before setting the book back in the box and begins to dial another number. FRED stands and slowly makes his way to the decanter sitting on the edge of his desk.

FRED. Hey Beth... Ah, you know *(begins to pour himself a drink)* can't complain. Kicking off my book tour today, nothing special. How's

mom...? That's better, certainly. Have you read the book yet...? And...? Well, it isn't a book for mom. I couldn't imagine that she would love it as much as these teenage girls and middle aged housewives do... I know. I know how mom is. It's just what the market, you know, demands. It's what sells, makes movie deals, and spin offs... I'm not whoring my talents out... Okay, okay. Look, look, look. I'm not having this discussion today.

There's a rapid knocking at the door. FRED finishes his drink and sets down his empty glass on the desk. Moves to door.

I called to just check in. Be the good son, and what have you.

FRED looks through peephole of door. His stubbornly confident attitude changes to slight disbelief.

Beth... Beth... BETH...! I have to call you back... Okay... All right. Love you, too.

More knocking, furious and more rapid.

Okay, bye.

FRED shoves phone into pocket, straightens his hair, and readjusts his posture. He takes a deep breath and opens the door with a new sense of confidence.

Well, I didn't th—

Book flies through the door, hitting FRED in the face, knocking him back. Enter SARAH.

SARAH. You're a piece of shit, Fred Tyler.

FRED. *(recovering, picks up the book and begins to fondle his nose)* It's nice to see you again, too, Sarah.

SARAH. *(insults at a rapid-fire speed)* You no good, impudent, psychotic, perverted piece of chicken shit-

FRED. *(unfazed, slightly satisfied by SARAH's barrage of insults, but facing opposite from her)* Yes. It has been quite a while since we seen each other, hasn't it? *(turns to face her rageful face)* May I get you a drink or offer you a seat?

SARAH. Oh, please. *(steps further into office)* I'd rather- *(noticing the box on the ottoman, crosses to box)*

FRED. Yes. Come on in, by all means.

FRED crosses to desk, sets the book down and begins pouring himself a drink

from the decanter as SARAH begins to inspect the contents of the box.

SARAH. I can't believe it.

FRED. That's a first. *(takes a drink and leans on desk)*

SARAH. Why would you write this?

FRED. I'm not sure what you're talki—

SARAH. Don't you play dumb with me. After everything we've been through—

FRED. I have no idea what you're—

SARAH. Your book, Fred. *(slowly crosses back to FRED)* An outgoing boy and a quiet, nervous girl. Growing up in a small town. Their first kiss on top of the ferris wheel. How they both left for the city together. The new... experiences.

FRED. I don't know what you're talking about—

SARAH. *(picking up the book from the desk)* This is about... me. About us.

FRED. *(scoffs)* Oh, please. *(begins laughing, turns away, and takes another sip of his drink)*

SARAH. What's so funny?

FRED. That. *(gestures to all of her)* Just that.

SARAH. Just what?

FRED. You, Sarah. First of all, if you look what it says before the book even begins, you'll see that it's clearly written, "All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

SARAH. As if. You are not creative enough to have—

FRED. *(interrupting)* -But you come here, after years of not speaking to me. Practically ignoring my very existence, and yet, not being afraid to take any chance to talk badly about me—

SARAH. *(overlapping)* What?

FRED. -and smear my good name just to make yourself look better. After years, Sarah, of hating me in the little corner of the world that you've built for yourself, and you come back to me. Not to apologize for your lack of maturity *(pronounced "muh-tour-it-ee")*. No, you come back to claim to be the reason for my recent success. That is just like you, though. Isn't it?

SARAH. *(pausing for a moment)* Wow.

FRED. Wow?

SARAH. Yes, Fred. Wow. Tell me something. *(crosses towards the door)* How long were you rehearsing that before I came here?

FRED. What?

SARAH. You wrote this to get to me, didn't you?

FRED. That's ridicu—

SARAH. You took our most personal, private moments together, skewed them to make you out to be some suave Don Juan type character and me this... this...

FRED. ...Bitch?

SARAH. You don't think I don't remember things about you, Fred?

FRED. What things?

SARAH. *(giggles confidently)* Tell me... Are you still toting that old shoebox around?

FRED. No. Actually, I threw it out when you left.

SARAH. Really?

SARAH strolls behind the desk, opens a drawer, and pulls out an old, weathered shoebox.

SARAH. What would be in this box?

FRED. *(hesitates a little)* Sh-shoes... Shoes, I believe, would be in such a box.

SARAH begins to open the box, but Fred is quick to try and retrieve it from her. She will not let go.

SARAH. What's the matter, Fred? Are the shoes afraid of a little fresh air.

FRED. Just let go of the box, Sarah. *(starts to pull the box away)* Please.

SARAH. Please? *(begins to pull back)* Where was this *(mimicking FRED)* "maturity" when you started to put me in a book?

They begin to fight over the box, pulling it back and forth.

SARAH. Where was this empathy when you started characterizing my thoughts... my actions... my personality... my life?!

FRED. It's... all... fictional!

With that, FRED accidentally elbows Sarah in the face and pulls the box away. Sarah, stunned, regains her composure and stomps towards the door.

SARAH. You haven't changed at all. *(pauses)* Goodbye, Fred.

SARAH exits. Lights Fade. The sounds of scribbling pen on paper can be heard.

FRED. No...No no no... Not like that. No... No...

Lights fade back up. FRED and SARAH are standing in front of the desk center stage. The scene resumes.

FRED. No... No... No, you come back to claim to be the reason for my recent success. That is just like you, though. Isn't it? Putting yourself at the center of everything. As if everything revolves around you. But you know what, Sarah. Quite frankly, it doesn't. I took the time to recover after you ended what we had. I didn't wallow in despair. I pushed myself forward. I made something of myself.

SARAH. This just isn't about you and some piece of... trash you wrote. You put a lot of personal stuff in there about me, and the things that we did, and-

FRED. And you haven't done the same thing?

SARAH. What are you talking about?

FRED goes behind the desk to grab a newspaper in one of the desk's drawers.

FRED. The Atlantic Crosswalk. July 28th, 2010. Page 4... *(opens the paper and begins to read out loud, slowly making his way back to SARAH)* "Dear Suzie. I've just gotten out of an abusive long-term relationship. My most recent partner and I had been together for almost 4 years. About 3 years, he began to be quite controlling. His temper became short, and it felt as if he was just trying to get me to fight him. I tried to appease him, but nothing seemed to work. After being unhappy for a year, I decided to do what's best for me and leave him. How do I go to from being in such a long relationship to putting myself back on the market. Signed, Sarah." *(drops newspaper back onto desk)* It's good to know this kind of stuff, you know, after the relationship is over. God knows you never brought it up while we were together.

SARAH. I tried to talk with you. I did. You just wouldn't listen.

FRED. You talked about how you were feeling, how you were always sad, but you never mentioned about me being abusive or controlling.

SARAH. So, you write a book about our failed relationship, and put yourself as the person in the right.

FRED. I am in the right. You wouldn't talk to me about what I did wrong.

SARAH. How could I have talked to you if you didn't want to listen?

FRED. I listened to you moan and complain about how sad you were. I tried to make it better. We went to... so many places. I just wanted you to be—
Lights fade out. More scribbling.

FRED. This isn't working at all. Just more of the same thing...

Knock knock knock... Knock knock knock...

FRED. Beth... Beth... BETH...! I have to call you back... Okay... Alright. Love you, too.

Knock knock...

FRED. Okay, bye.

Lights fade back in. FRED is standing at the door, straightening his hair, and readjusting his posture. Takes a deep breath and opens the door with a new sense of confidence. He opens the door, SARAH enters, throwing herself at him. FRED pushes away.

SARAH. Take me back.

Lights fade back out. Scribbling.

FRED. No. That's not it either.

Lights fade in. FRED and SARAH are center stage.

SARAH. You took our most personal, private moments together, skewed them to make you out to be some suave Don Juan type character and—

FRED. (*interrupting*) And you wrote into some relationship advice column right after you dumped me asking how to get over me faster.

SARAH. I was trapped for so long.

FRED. So, you leaving me sets you free, but when do I get set free? Where's my closure? Where's my letter to a relationship advice column? (*picks book up off the desk*) Don't I get a chance to let go?

SARAH. So you admit it?

FRED. Admit what?

SARAH. That stuff you wrote is based on me. (*pressing him now in her demand*)
Admit it, Fred. Just admit it.

FRED. (*angrily*) How could I not be about you, Sarah? Four years, and after all that time, you just up and leave? Sure, you go off and just start over, but where did that leave me?

SARAH. Exactly where I found you. I couldn't handle who you were and what you became. I wasn't going to belittle myself just to have you love me.

FRED. But I did! I did, Sarah! I dropped everything to follow you, but it wasn't enough, was it?

SARAH. I didn't ask you to do anything for me.

FRED. Because you were trying to get rid of me? Is that it?

SARAH. Yes, Fred. Yes. Is that what you wanted to hear?

FRED. No... Yes... I... I--don't know. I'm just sick of it.

SARAH. Sick of what?

FRED. You, to be honest. I'm sick of having you (*points to his head*) here.

FRED crosses to armchair. Sits.

You'd think that the opposite of love is hate, but... But that's not true... It still forces you to think of that person.

SARAH slowly crosses to chair behind desk, sits, and opens a drawer. Stunned, she pulls out an old weathered shoebox.

Invest just as much emotional energy into the very of idea of that person still... functioning like a normal human being. And I just want to wake up one day and not have to think about that part of my life anymore.

SARAH. So, why do you still have this? (*gesturing to shoebox*)

FRED. (*turns to look at SARAH; stands and crosses to desk*) That's only thing that's keeping me human.

SARAH. What if it's the only thing holding you back?

FRED. Nonsense. Nobody else knows of its existence.

SARAH. I do. Do you really think that I could forget something like this?

A brief moment of silence.

I couldn't deal with this being a part of you. It's haunting to even think about, and trying to bring it up was too taboo for us.

FRED. What do you think I should do?

SARAH. (*crosses to front of desk to meet with FRED*) You know what you need to do.

FRED. But what if I'm not the same?

Lights fade out. Scribbling continues.

SARAH. ...What if you're different?

Lights fade in. FRED is standing center stage, scribbling at the end of his own book. Pauses for a moment, and turns to find shoebox sitting on his desk. He closes the book, sets it down, and picks up shoebox. He slowly opens shoebox with subtly shaking hands. The lid of box falls to floor. FRED stares inside the box for a moment, before reaching in and pulling out a heart.

SARAH. (V.O.) What is that?

FRED. (V.O.) It's me. Kind of. It was removed from me when I was about 9, and the doctor's let me keep it?

SARAH. (V.O.) So, you kept it in a shoebox?

FRED. (V.O.) Where else do you keep a heart?

The heart starts beating in FRED's hands. The audible sound of a heartbeat can be heard.

SARAH. (V.O.) Why don't you just give it away?

FRED. (V.O.) Because it's mine. I'm still... connected to it.

The heart rate increases.

SARAH. (V.O.) You don't need to hide it in a shoebox.

The audible sound of a heartbeat turns into a bass drum.

SARAH. (V.O.) (*whispers*) I'll keep it safe.

The bass drum stops, and FRED throws the heart at the backdrop behind him, but the heart tears through it, revealing that it's paper. FRED slowly makes his way to the rip in the backdrop and then starts to rip it, slowly at first but faster when he sees something behind it. When he's finished, the word "EPILOGUE" can be seen in big bold letters.

FRED. (V.O.) The opposite of being in love isn't hate.

Lights off. Spotlight on EPILOGUE.

It's indifference.

Lights. Curtains.



The Older City

Adam Timbs

Downtown Charleston was dredged with winter rain.
A pale rain, shaken from the gray shawl of sky
That January had pulled about the city.
The young woman I was with could not stop
Laying her hands on gravestones.
The tombyards of the old parish churches there
Are not lonesome for creeping lichen and live oaks.
Wonder, for a minute, on the gone lives of those
Historical dead; how long does it take for
Moss to eat bones, to eat slate?
Out on the Battery the guns of the cannonade
Train sights ever on Sumter. The gallow trees
Have outgrown their ropes.
The groaning, grand antebellum houses
Bear the perpetual corrosion heaved
Up and out of the Atlantic.
Many windowsills are rusting
But the paint will spare the walls.
The pastel hues are layered and limed
Centuries-dense. They slake woodgrain of its salt,
Are dulling against the weight of winter air.
Something stark about a place that
Is sick with struggle not to forget itself.
The dark waves are snatching always
At the battered seawall there.



Coming of Age Again and *The Graduate*

Andrew Butler

Here's what was supposed to happen: Laughter. The script had the couple overcoming all odds to joyously ride off into the sunset together and live happily ever after.

Here's what really happened: A long and stressful day of shooting. It was late. The church scene had not gone well. The police had closed off the roads for the bus scene, which had traffic backed up for miles. The conditions caused director Mike Nichols to be irritable. He implored Hoffman and Ross that they had only a couple of takes to get it right. The scene starts with prescribed laughter and joy, but soon wanes. Nichols starts yelling at the actors to keep laughing, but it has the opposite effect. They behave like two kids in trouble. Hoffman stares just off-camera (presumably at the ranting Nichols) and Ross nervously fidgets, in turn fiddling with her dress and looking over at Hoffman. And no one turned off the camera.

To his credit, Nichols said it was obvious, watching the footage later, this was the only way the movie could end. The realization won him an Academy Award for directing. But it offered little consolation to me, who had just learned the closest thing I had to a coming-of-age moment had been a mistake.

Repeat: The thing that taught me life is meaningless was a mistake.

How is one to take that? It seems like both an affirmation and a refutation. If life really is meaningless, then there is no other way meaningful events could occur other than by accident. But the scene itself held meaning to me. It helped intellectually raise me. I imbued my worldview with its lessons, thinking I was at the feet of some wise maharishi passing along knowledge from another side, only to find out it's from some sap who is as clueless as I am. If it really is meaningless, then why do I feel so betrayed?

I don't know. But I'm not sure if that matters much. In being forced

to reconcile my coming of age on the fly, I think the process matters more than any conclusions. The process requires us to be something akin to really good bad philosophers. We raise the questions that we are to spend the rest of our lives chasing.

I suppose it goes without saying, but I have picked up writing as a hobby. I don't write particularly well, but it's cathartic. It distracts me with a search for meaning in what may well be a meaningless world. That was the intent of this essay, though it ended inconclusively. I couldn't stop thinking about those cameras still rolling, though, long after the shot was botched, or how a camera only has the same view we have. It reminded me of the blankness of a page, and if one keeps stumbling on past thought, what could be found there.

And if not there, then maybe here.



Judges' Biographies

Nicole Drewitz-Crockett — Nonfiction

Nicole Drewitz-Crockett is an Assistant Professor of English at Emory & Henry College. She also directs the annual E&H Literary Festival and edits the Iron Mountain Review. She specializes in Appalachian literature and maintains scholarly interest in depictions of Southern and southern Appalachian women. She has presented on the topic at the Appalachian Studies Association Conference, the Women of Appalachia Conference, the South Atlantic Modern Language Association Conference, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Conference. She has contributed to *Carson-Newman Studies*, *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, and the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*. Her article “Authority, Details, and Intimacy: Southern Appalachian Women in Robert Morgan’s Family Novels” appears in *The Southern Quarterly’s* Robert Morgan special issue.

Denton Loving — Fiction

Denton Loving lives on a farm near the historic Cumberland Gap, where Tennessee, Kentucky and Virginia come together. He works at Lincoln Memorial University, where he co-directs the annual Mountain Heritage Literary Festival and serves as executive editor of *drafthorse: the literary journal of work and no work*. His fiction, poetry, essays and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *River Styx*, *[PANK]*, *Flyleaf*, *Main Street Rag* and in numerous anthologies. You can find him on Twitter as @DentonLoving.

Linda Parsons Marion— Poetry

Linda Parsons Marion is an editor at the University of Tennessee and the author of three poetry collections—most recently, *Bound*. She served as poetry editor of *Now & Then* magazine for many years and has received literary fellowships from the Tennessee Arts Commission, as well as the Associated Writing Programs' Intro Award and the 2012 George Scarbrough Award in Poetry, among others. Marion's work has appeared in journals such as *The Georgia Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, and Ted Kooser's syndicated column *American Life in Poetry* and in numerous anthologies, including *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, and *The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume III: Contemporary Appalachia*. She lives in Knoxville with her husband, poet Jeff Daniel Marion.

Elizabeth Sloan — Drama

Elizabeth McKnight Sloan has served as the head of the Theatre Department at Northeast State Community College for the past five years. Originally from Nashville, she moved with her husband to East Tennessee from Chicago. Prior to living in Chicago, Elizabeth was a member of the Barter Players and Barter Theatre's Equity Acting Company. Elizabeth received her MFA in Acting from the University of Louisville.

<http://www.etsu.edu/cas/litlang/mockingbird/>



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