

*The*  
**2013 DOUBLE DEALER**

**Presented By The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society**



*Photograph by Joséphine Sacabo*

**Faith & The Search for Meaning As Inspiration for The Arts**

**Published December 1, 2013, New Orleans, LA**



*The*  
**DOUBLE  
DEALER**  
PUBLISHED AT NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

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# Welcome To The Double Dealer



**Rosemary James**

Welcome back to *The Double Dealer*!

Now, entirely an online journal published, *The Double Dealer* is published in conjunction with **Words & Music: A Literary Feast in New Orleans**.

Working with our Associate Editors for *The Double Dealer*—**Caroline Rash, Geoff Munsterman, Christine Murphey, and Shari Stauch**—is a great pleasure for me because of their diverse talents. All are writers but they have editing and publishing skills as well.

**Caroline Rash** comes to New Orleans by way of Clemson, SC; Dalian, China; and Conway, AR. Currently a copy editor at Peter Mayer Advertising, she has contributed as a freelance writer to regional newspapers and interned at *Oxford American* magazine.

**Geoff Munsterman's** poems have been featured in *Poets for Living Waters, The Southern Poetry Anthology, story|south, The New Laurel Review, and Margie* to name a few. His debut collection **Because the Stars Shine Through It** is just out from Lavender Ink and he is hard at work on the follow-up, the book-length poem **Where Scars Wake**. His shingle hangs in New Orleans.

**Shari Stauch** has been in publishing, marketing and PR for 33 years. She is a frequent presenter at **Words & Music** and five-time finalist in the Faulkner-Wisdom Competition, with first-runner-up finishes in both Novel-in-Progress and Essay. Her firm, **Where Writers Win**, works with emerging authors to provide marketing, websites, training and tools to set authors apart in a crowded marketplace.

We would also like to thank **Christine Murphy**, a published poet and non-fiction writer currently working on novels and a memoir, who contributed valuable proofreading and copyediting.

We are actively soliciting advertising for our next issue and future issues so that we can continue *The Double Dealer* well into the future. If you are interested in becoming a guarantor or advertiser, we'd love to hear from you. We'd also like to get your comments and suggestions for improvements in the future. And, finally, for those of you interested in submitting work of your own, we'd be happy to hear from you, too! One e-mail will reach us all,

[Faulkhouse@aol.com](mailto:Faulkhouse@aol.com)

—**Rosemary James**

Co-Founder, Faulkner Society; Supervising Editor,  
*The Double Dealer*



**Shari Stauch**



**Christine Murphey**



**Caroline Rash**



**Geoff Munsterman**



# The Other

by Rosemary James

*Hatred ... is dislike and antipathy inflamed to a high degree and inspired by beliefs which stimulate a set of other emotions in the hater, chief among them fear, ignorance, jealousy, anger and disgust. But note that all these emotions, and especially the first three, are about the hater; thus hating says more about haters than what they hate. It shows weakness, for it is a crude emotion which turns fears and anxieties outward to fix them on something else.*

— A. C. Grayling, **The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life**

One theological faction holds to the belief that the Biblical brothers, Cain and Abel, were black and white, different from one another in a startling way at any rate. The difference is held to be at the heart of the envy and hatred and meanness and alienation which developed between them, resulting in the murder of one, the ostracism of the other, destroying Paradise in the process for their parents.

It matters little if **The Bible** is your good book, or the **Torah**, the **Quran** or, perhaps, the **Bhagavad-Gita** or the **Pali Canon** of Buddhism. It does not matter if the difference is between black and white or between other skin tones. The eons-old legend of *the other* has meaning for us today. And that meaning is:

*One who would hate, one who would destroy a brother is self-destructive.*

Self-examination, always timely, is especially right for us now in an era which is characterized by increasingly aggressive levels of brother against brother not only in our own country today but abroad. And looking deeply into our souls is most certainly appropriate in this season traditionally given over to the concept of brotherly and sisterly (to be politically correct, of course) love; peace; good will toward all men and women, to be politically correct.

If it seems inappropriate to call attention to the “politically correct” here, not so. Adding “women” to the old words in this case is simply to appease the militants. Otherwise, there is no need, as it is, most often, men who break the peace, kill their brothers, leave women to mourn for them and, quite capably, pick up the pieces of a ravaged society.

The aspect of our lives which warrants closest examination is those deepest emotions we entertain with regard to groups and individuals who we characterize as different from us in some way, whether it be skin color, ethnic origin, faith, or place in the social structure.

If we are economically well-heeled, do we avoid the poor out of fear, and, ultimate hate; if black or yellow or brown or red do we hate whites; if heterosexual, is

our hatred spewed out toward gays; if women, toward men; if Farsi, Shiite Muslim, Jew, toward Christians; if Serb toward Croats, if Jews, toward Iranians and Americans toward Americans, and emphatically in each instance, *vis versa*?

Do we hate *the other*? If so, can we explain why? Is the reason fear? Can we overcome that fear and, eventually, therefore, the feelings of hatred?

The body of the year, 2013, is riddled with wounds inflicted by hatred of *the other*; erupting from our deep inner fears, taking center-front away from honorable actions in the theatre of life.

Today, battle-torn ghettos of poverty, American's urban concentration camps, and the violence boiling up and out of them are en pointe on the home front. The monstrous spectre of fear-powered racism threatens to pull our own country to pieces.

Can we ever resolve our differences? Do we even wish to love *the other*?

**Flannery O'Connor** made it her only too brief life's mission to come as close to God as possible through faith and to write about the people of the world she knew best, those of her small town of Milledgeville, GA. She might justifiably be called the *Saint of The Other*.

As a young woman, O'Connor went to the Iowa Writers Workshop, to the exclusive Yaddo artist's colony in Saratoga Springs, and then to New York City and Connecticut, writing all the way. Then, at the age of 25, she learned that like her father before her, she was dying of lupus. She was forced to return home and it was back in Georgia in the 1950s that she discovered the characters for her stories. In **Wise Blood** and **The Violent Bear It Away** and in 20 short stories, she told dark tales of murder and bigotry and madness, of a preacher of the Church without Christ who puts out his own eyes. Ralph Wood, one of her biographers, explained the inspiration for her characters.

*Flannery O'Connor lived in not the cotton belt, not the tobacco belt, but, ugly description, the Bible Belt, and for O'Connor that was the glory of her region. Hers were the marginalized people on the sidelines of southern life in small, out of the way places.*

Ms. O'Connor said her Christ-haunted characters were so cut off from orthodox religion that they did not have a guide and that they actually were involved in a kind of do-it-yourself religion, which is in a way, sadly comical. She didn't laugh at these people, however, she never wrote these people off with sarcasm or mean-spirited reactions to them.

*Look, these are my brothers and sisters. They are as unlike me as they can be when it comes to the church and its sacraments, but they are a kind of sweated gospel,*

a gospel that takes God and God's world with the utmost seriousness, and therefore I've got to attend to them. I cannot dismiss them... these are people after my own heart, and I want to write about them sympathetically.

A close reading of Ms. O'Connor's work and a study of her life today will stand us in good stead when trying to understand those of so-called fundamentalist offshoots of more orthodox religions, people who make up a large portion of the fringe right of American politics. Reading her portraits of ordinary men and women brings home hard the truth that people are pretty much alike, that some are just made to seem as something *Other* by twists of fate and circumstances. And it is these differences of fate and circumstances that make us fear on another and, yes, inspire hate.

2013 does appear to be the year of Flannery O'Connor with the release of the new book, **A Prayer Journal**, based on Ms. Connor's prayers to God jotted down in a simple notebook each day and a new, beautifully illustrated edition of her short stories from The Folio Society. Joining the choir of praise for Ms. O'Connor is the scholar of southern writers, the **Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J.** who has a new book completed, not yet published, based on Ms. O'Connor's long and enlightening correspondence with her editor.

And if there is a resurrection of interest in her work this year, I submit that it is precisely because we are in an era ruled by hate, divisiveness, and that we are, like the late **Walker Percy**, looking for the right **Signposts in a Strange Land**.

Literature always has provided such signposts and we do not have to go back as far as the work of Ms. O'Connor for help, Mr. Percy's memoir **Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self Help Book** will stand you in good stead.

Twenty years have passed since the publication such books as **John Keegan's** tome, **The History of Warfare**, in which he suggests that we, *all of us* humans, are genetically contrary, incapable of happiness, finding satisfaction only in strife; **David Malouf's** novel about the perils of crossing cultures, **Remembering Babylon**, which brings sharply into focus the destructive forces of fear—fear of the unknown, fear of that dark place outside our own crucible of experience, fear of those differences which make each of us unique; along with books by Albert French and Lewis Nordan, who each have examined the killing of a black child at the hands of men driven to brutality by their own personal deprivation, inadequacies, failures, insecurities. The Albert French novel, **Billy**, takes place in the rural South in 1937, the very bottom of the Great Depression.

Nordan's **Wolf Whistle** is a retelling of the story of **Emmett Till**, whose murder in the 1950s was one of two important events determining my own future political philosophy. When Till was killed, I was in high school in South Carolina working after school for a weekly, which

won a Pulitzer for exposing KKK cruelties in the gothic psychological landscape of eastern Carolina's swampy back lands, infested with more than one kind of viper in the 50s. My horror at the outcome of the resulting trial is as painful a memory today as the murderers' acquittal was shocking then.

1993 was hate ravaged, too, but you would have hoped back then that by now, we would have learned a thing or two about loving our brothers and sisters.

Realizing that it could happen again, now, 20 years later, not only that it could happen but is happening, triggers in me the deepest

kind of sadness. Nordan, my contemporary, lived closer to the happening, was influenced more drastically, was able to write about the event only in the distance of nearly four decades. To know about Billy and Boob (Till) is to doubt that *justice under the law* is a concept one can rely upon safely.

While their books were published two decades ago they bear re-examination today in light of what happened in the Trevon Martin hate crime.

The new spate of attention being paid to the bestselling novel, **Serena**, by Appalachia's fiction master **Ron Rash**, has reminded us that the face of evil can mask itself in beauty. The novel, adapted for a film to be released shortly will star Academy Award winner **Jennifer Lawrence**, and the star dust she sheds all over the story is timely in bringing the Rash masterpiece in sharp focus once again.

**Rodger Kamenetz** in his bestselling non-fiction book of several years ago, **The Jew in the Lotus**, offers us a lesson in what brotherhood means and how it is entirely possible for us to achieve a Godly grace in our dealings with those who are not like us in ethnic origin, appearance, or religious beliefs.

And many of the literary gifts of 2013 suggest that writers all over the world are looking at faith and the search for meaning as a way of delving into their own souls and the reaction to some of such works of literary art in many cases has been a shocking display of raw animosity.

One only had to be listening to Fox News, for instance, when renowned Iranian-American author and



**Flannery O'Connor** with *Robie Macauley*, left, and *Arthur Koestler* at *Amana Colonies* in Iowa, October, 1947.

religious scholar, **Reza Aslan** was interviewed recently about his new book, **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth** to understand immediately that the Fox religious commentator **Lauren Green** was fueled by hate, with her questions essentially boiling down to “How dare you, a Muslim, write about Christ.”

It is a hateful, too, to recognize that one of Latin America’s best fiction writers and journalists, **Horacio Castellanos Moya**, is in exile from his native El Salvador because he dared to hold a mirror up the brutal ramifications of the revolutions in his country and Guatemala gone horribly wrong. He’s the author of 12 novels but his novel **Senselessness** is especially heart-rending in its descriptions of the senseless killing of brothers by brothers. In exile, too, is **Behrooz Moazami** for his opposition to a religious state without democracy, without economic and social justice for all.

**Fredrick Barton** deals with the injustice of knee-jerk bigotry, brought to the fore by fright in his novel of contemporary New Orleans, **With Extreme Prejudice**, reissued this year under the title Rick originally wanted, **Black and White on the Rocks**.

The abiding theme of the works of these authors is loss, including those losses we inflict upon ourselves when we react to fear, without summoning our wits, when we act in the absence of reason.

In the play **Fishers of Men** by award-winning journalist and playwright **Harold Ellis Clark**—which debuted in New Orleans earlier this year and is a focus of the Faulkner Society’s **Words & Music** festival—the message basically is that most people simply want to improve their lives and those of the persons they love, regardless of their backgrounds and the unfortunate circumstances they may get caught up in, including criminal activities, while trying to achieve a better life.

Most people, deep down, are just seeking a better life and when they seek redemption, regardless of who we are, we must give them a helping hand out of troubled waters and into salvation.

It’s a message we all should carry in our hearts and act upon accordingly as we go forward into the season of giving and into the new year, the time for new beginnings.

Resolutions to quit smoking, give up chocolate, stop shopping, stop saying the “F” word are of little use if the world is about to impede in on us as a result of fear-driven hate.

—Rosemary James

## Humanists and God: A.C Grayling

No contemporary discussion of faith and its influence on our lives would be complete without examining the work of the British philosopher A. C. Grayling, founder and first master in 2011 of the controversial New College of the Humanities, an independent undergraduate college in London, and author of some 30 books on philosophy including **The Refutation of Scepticism** (1985), **The Future of Moral Values** (1997), **The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life** (2001), and **The Good Book** (2011).

Describing himself as “a man of the left,” others sometimes describe him as the “Fifth Horseman of New Atheism,” Grayling’s latest book, released this year, is **The God Argument: The Case against Religion**



When *The Telegraph* of London reviewed A. C. Grayling’s latest tome, **The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism**, Tom Payne’s review was illustrated with this photo of the painting in the Sistine Chapel and the illustration carried the line: “Is that God or A. C. Grayling?”

**and for Humanism** in which he attempts to counter the arguments for the existence of God. He proposes humanism as a suitable substitute for religion for a moral life or what he calls a “good life”. According to his definition of humanism, if you believe that moral choices should be grounded in “the responsible use of reason” and “human experience in the real world” then you are a humanist.

He does not go on to emphasize that humanists can be religious as well as humanists! Sir Thomas More, who became a Saint of the Catholic faith, described himself as a humanist, after all.

Reviewing this book, Tom Payne, writing in *The Telegraph*, said: **The God Argument** by A. C. Grayling is an anti-religious polemic enough to make even a hardened sceptic turn to God.”



# MEMORIAL: *Oscar Hijuelos (1951-2013)*

**O**scar Hijuelos passed away on October 12. This great and much loved author was enjoying the prime of life, playing tennis, when he collapsed and never regained consciousness. Mr. Hijuelos was a wonderful friend to the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and a great personal friend.

He symbolized for his friends and for the entire Hispanic community the best of the American Dream realized. Born of Cuban immigrants, who left Cuba in the wake of the Fidel Castro takeover, he became the first Latino writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1990 with his second novel, **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**.

Hijuelos became a national icon overnight, as the novel struck a chord with Americans of all ethnic backgrounds and the book also excited Hollywood moguls, resulting in a major motion picture two years later. The novel addresses the struggles of immigrants as they reconcile the contrast between the culture of their past and the culture of their future, a struggle Hijuelos knew only too well.

Born in New York, Oscar Hijuelos grew up in a neighborhood of transplants on their way to a better life. His own cultural experience was confounded by his light skin and blonde hair due to his Irish great-great-great grandfather. His identity as a Cuban-American was then splintered by his lack of a more traditional Cuban complexion; he didn't look like the other Latinos with whom he was supposed to identify. Simply put, he just didn't look the part and, as it turns out, he never would—a reality which would plague him long into his adult life.

Hijuelos addressed these experiences and other in **Thoughts Without Cigarettes**. In this universally acclaimed memoir, Hijuelos tells how winning the Pulitzer was both wonderful and terrible and how the sudden celebrity re-introduced him to his conflicted images of himself, as a Cuban American writer put on stage for examination and criticism. He said, however, that the Pulitzer also provided encouragement and a reason to for every other Latino writer to dream of following in his footsteps. The prestige of the Pulitzer would be shared with no other Latinos for 18 years, and even now only Junot Diaz, Fiction, and Nilo Cruz, Drama share the acclaim.

As a first-generation Cuban American, Hijuelos often explores what it means to be Hispanic in the United States, and his memoir continues this narrative but also does something more. Like the Castillo brothers of his fiction, Oscar came of age in New York, not in Miami's Little Havana. His father worked at a hotel, and his mother did odd jobs to bring in extra money. Unlike growing up in Miami, being Cuban in New York sometimes required ex-

plaining. His memoir provides a bookmark for a New York neighborhood in the 50s and its eclectic blend of colorful residents, including the many popular musicians of that era, who occupied the nooks and corners of the neighborhood. Indeed, a musician himself, Oscar's be-bop style of writing grew directly out of his neighborhood.

In his memoir, he came to grips with his often uneasy, wrenching experiences as a hyphenated-American which were aggravated by a long bout with nephritis, a potentially fatal inflammation of the kidneys, when he was five and losing his father, who was only 55 when he died, only three years after Oscar's own life and death struggle, so traumatic that he lost his ability to speak his first language, Spanish, for a while.

In novels like **Our House in the Last World**, which traces a family's travails from Havana in 1939 to Spanish Harlem; **Mambo Kings**, about the rise and fall of the Castillo brothers, Cesar, a flamboyant and profligate bandleader, and his ruminative trumpeter brother, Nestor; and **The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien**, about several generations of a Cuban-Irish family in Pennsylvania, he explored the non-native experience in the United States from a sympathetic, occasionally amused perspective and with a keen eye for detail in his period settings.

While examining the life of one writer in particular, his own life, Oscar Hijuelos illuminated the trials and tribulations in every striving writer's life, the small triumphs, chance encounters, and influences of senior writers. He also gives the reader highly personal insight into the particular difficulties facing those of Latino heritage writing for the diverse American audiences.

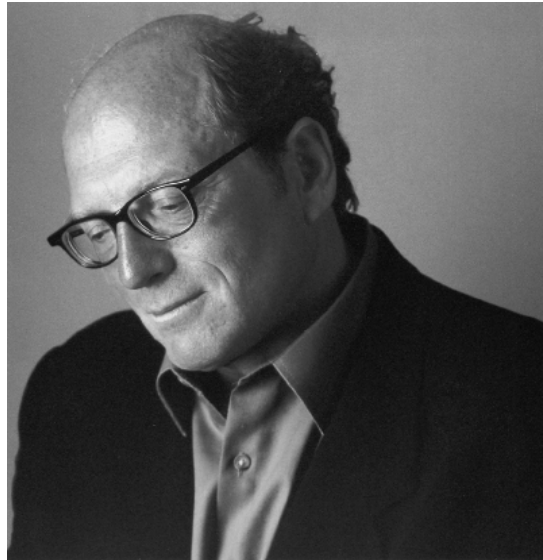
Hijuelos wrote nine major works and in 2000 won the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature. In 2011 he was awarded the ALIHOT (A Legend in His/Her Own Time) Award for literature.

Every reader has "favorite" books, but a word often used to describe Hijuelos and his novels is "beloved."

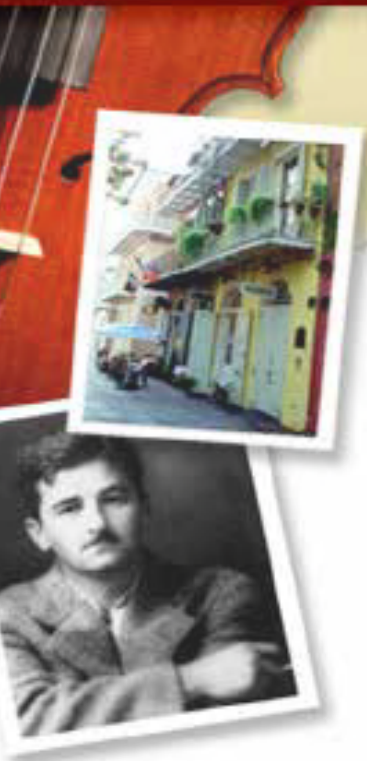
More than one critic has noted that readers fall easily in love with his fictional characters, a testament to both his enormous talent and his determination to treat his characters with tenderness, respect and forgiveness for their all-too-human faults. He lived with dignity and grace, giving back in many ways to developing writers. He was an original, he is irreplaceable.

Oscar Hijuelos will endure as a literary role model for the ages. We mourn this loss to literature and offer our deepest sympathy to his wife, novelist, **Lori Marie Carlson**, in her deep grief. We dedicate **Words & Music, 2013** to him, a writer's writer, a reader's source of joy.

—Rosemary James



# 2013 Words & Music Program of Events



*Inner Darkness, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

## Words & Music, 2013 Schedule of Events

### Wednesday, December 4, 2013

1:30 p. m. — New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA, 2800 Chartres )

#### Refreshments for Master Class Participants

Registered writers for *Words & Music* are invited to attend. There will be a sandwiches, fruit, and cookies.

2:00 p.m. — NOCCA, Reilly Hall



Carson



Samway



Mierl

#### ANNUAL MASTER CLASS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

**Part One** of this event will feature the distinguished non-fiction author and editor the Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J., author of *Walker Percy: A Life* and editor of the collection of essays, by the late Walker Percy, who won the National Book Award for his masterwork of fiction, *The Moviegoer*.

**Part Two** of the event will feature **Tom Carson**, who is author of the novels *Gilligan's Island* and *Daisy Buchanan's Daughter* and is Critic for *GQ Magazine*. **Jack Mierl** of Mandeville, LA, who studies at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, was selected by Carson as winner of the Faulkner Society's gold medal for Short Story by a High School Student. Carson will discuss what makes a winning piece of fiction and Jack will read from his story.

Registered writers for *Words & Music* are invited to attend. There will be a sandwich and cookie lunch.

4:00 p.m. — The Presbytere at Jackson Square

#### PRESENTATIONS OF NEW WORK

##### PART ONE:

##### 2013 Meeting of the Words & Music Writers Alliance

A joint venture with The Louisiana State Museum, this session will feature readings of new work, fiction, poetry, non-fiction, led by bestselling poet and non-fiction author, **Rodger Kamenetz**, who will start the program with a reading from his new collection of poetry, *To Die Next to You*. The new book is beautifully illustrated with abstract expressionist paintings by artist Michael Hafftka and slides of the illustrations will be shown during Rodger's reading. Other authors scheduled to read are members of the Peauxdunque chapter of the Writers Alliance, including **Terri Stoor**, who won the Society's gold medal for Best Short Story in 2011 and has been



Kamenetz



Members of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance:  
**Marston, Stoor, Bartlett, Choate, Ruffin**

a finalist several times in both the short story and essay categories of the *Faulkner – Wisdom Competition*; **Tad Bartlett, J. Ed Marston, Maurice Ruffin, Cassie Pruyn, and Emily Choate**, all of whom have placed in the Society's competition. Joining Peauxdunque members and Rodger will be associate editors of *The Double Dealer*, **Caroline Rash**, and **Geoff Munsterman**, whose new book of poetry, *Because the Stars Shine Through It*, has just been published by Lavender Ink. Subject matter of readings will be related to the theme of *Words & Music, 2013: Faith and the Search for Meaning as Inspiration for the Arts*. The event is free and open to the public. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.



Munsterman



Rash

5:30 p. m.

#### Intermission, Cash Bar with Complimentary Cocktail Snacks

Rodger Kamenetz and Geoff Munsterman will sign.

6:15 p. m.

#### PART TWO: CINEMA

Showing of *Walker Percy*, a new documentary film, by **Win Riley** of New Orleans, who will introduce the film and explain the perils and pleasures writing and producing a literary documentary. Win will take questions after the film. The Faulkner Society will have copies of the documentary for sale at the event and at the **Words & Music Book Mart** during the remainder of the festival. The film makes a good gift for literary men and women and it's great for book clubs, too.



Riley

7:45 p. m.

#### Program concludes, Evening Free to enjoy the fine dining and music of New Orleans.

The new restaurant of the Hotel Monteleone, *Criollo*, has exceptional food. Other walking-distance places recommended are *Muriel's* at Jackson Square, right next door to the Presbytere,



and **Tableau** at the corner of St. Peter and Chartres or Napoleon House, between at corner of Chartres Street and St. Louis. For Louisiana specialties, try **The Gumbo Shop** on St. Peter Street right around the corner from Jackson Square. For terrific diner food, visit **Camellia Grill** on Chartres Street or **Stanley's** at Jackson Square. For music, try **Irvin Mayfield's** music club at the Royal Sonesta Hotel for music or the Ritz Carlton's music venue featuring **Jeremy Davenport**, **Tipitina's** on Decatur or **Snug Harbor** and **Café Brazil** on Frenchman Street. Cabs are recommended to and from venues on Frenchmen Street.

## Thursday, December 5, 2013

8:00 a. m. to 10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone

### CAFÉ AU LAIT & CROISSANTS

Complimentary continental breakfast for **Words & Music** guests.

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Parlor, immediately adjacent to and opening to Queen Anne Ballroom.

### WORDS & MUSIC BOOK MART

**The Words & Music Book Mart** opens on daily at 8:30 a. m. and will be open until 5:30 p. m., closed during luncheons. The Book Mart will close one hour after the final session on Sunday, December 8. The Book Mart will offer books of participating authors, as well as books on New Orleans, how to do it books on writing, and books to consider as gifts for Christmas giving. The book mart will accept Visa, MasterCard, and American Express credit cards and will ship books purchased to the purchaser's home address if requested. The on-site festival book mart will be operated by **Faulkner House Books**, whose permanent address is 624 Pirate's Alley in the room where Faulkner wrote his first novel, **Soldiers' Pay**, in 1925. We hope you will take time for a visit. The bookstore will be open during the Post-Concert Welcome Party on Thursday evening. For those of you who want to do some festival homework prior to December 4, there will be a 10 per cent discount on books ordered by festival patrons in advance of the opening. To order, call Faulkner House Books with credit card information 10:00 a. m. to 5:30 p. m. daily and tell the store manager on duty that you are a registered **Words & Music** patron and would like to take advantage of the 10 per cent festival discount. The phone number is (504) 524-2940. That number can also be used to reserve tickets with credit card information for events of **Words & Music**.

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### NEW ORLEANS, MON AMOUR

Annually, the Faulkner Society devotes a day of **Words & Music** to work by New Orleans authors or work set in New Orleans in a group of sessions called **New Orleans, Mon Amour**, after the famous essay by the late National Book Award winner Walker Percy, who lived most of his life in Covington, LA, a North shore community of Greater New Orleans. To read his essay analyzing the soul of New Orleans, see 2013 Double Dealer, when it goes live from our website in late November. This year's program includes a discussion about his work by his distinguished biographer the **Rev. Patrick Sanway, S.J.** We start **New Orleans, Mon Amour, 2013** with a book appropriate to the 2013



Percy

theme of **Words & Music, A Literary Feast in New Orleans: Faith and the Search for Meaning as Inspiration for the Arts**. 8:45 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### NON-FICTION

**Hallowed Halls of Greater New Orleans: Historic Churches, Cathedrals, and Sanctuaries** is a marvelous new book on the history of landmark churches—and there are plenty of them—in New Orleans by author **Deborah Burst**. The book has a foreword by novelist **Anne Rice**, a New Orleans native who had a close connection with churches of the Irish Channel. The book comes just in time to make a very special gift for Christmas giving. A limited number are available signed by Anne Rice as well as Ms. Burst, who will sign in the Book Mart after her presentation. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*.



Burst

9:05 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### NON-FICTION: ABOUT FOOD

**Beignets, Po' Boys, gumbo, jambalaya, Antoine's...you name it.**

Everything you ever wanted to know about New Orleans food is to be found in the new book, **New Orleans: A Food Biography**. The city's celebrated status derives in large measure from its incredibly rich food culture, based mainly on Creole and Cajun traditions. At last, this world-class destination has its own food biography by **Elizabeth M. Williams**, featured author for this session. A New Orleans native and founder of the city's Southern Food and Beverage Museum, takes readers through the history of the city, showing how the natural environment and people have shaped the cooking we all love. The narrative starts by describing the indigenous population and material resources, then reveals the contributions of the immigrant populations, delves into markets and local food companies, and finally discusses famous restaurants, drinking culture, cooking at home and cookbooks, and signature foods dishes. This must-have book will inform and delight food aficionados and fans of the Big Easy itself and is another great gift for Christmas giving. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.



Williams

9:25 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### PAPER PRESENTATION

**Faith and Religion in Early New Orleans Literature Presented by Nancy Dixon, Ph.D.**

*Faith in Early New Orleans Literature* looks at the role of Catholicism and alternate religions in early New Orleans literature beginning with some of the city's earliest works up to the 20th century. "By reading the literature of this period, we gain a real understanding of the role of faith and religion not only in literature, but also in the city today," Ms. Dixon emphasizes. **Nancy Dixon** has been studying and writing about New Orleans literature, culture, and history for over



**Dixon**

twenty years. Her first book, **Fortune and Misery: Sallie Rhett Roman of New Orleans, a Biographical Portrait and Selected Fiction** (LSUP 1999), won the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) Humanities Book of the Year in 2000. Her latest book, **N. O. Lit: 200 Years of New Orleans Literature** is to be released from Lavender Ink Press concurrent with **Words & Music**. Dr. Dixon is a professor of English at Dillard University in New Orleans. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.

9:45 a. m.—Queen Anne Ballroom

**Intermission**

*Ms. Burt and Ms. Williams will sign in the Book Mart Following their appearances.*

10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone

The next three sessions will be introduced by author **George Bishop**, who lives in New Orleans and is author of the beautiful new novel, **Night of the Comet**. George will be available for signing with these presenters. He will be presenting on Friday afternoon as well.

**FICTION:**

**Set in New Orleans**

**Little Known Facts** is a new novel, set largely in New Orleans, by **Christine Sneed** which has been extremely well received nationally. The book received a positive review on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. The book also was cited by **Chicago Magazine's** as Best New Book by a Local Author and one of *Booklist's* Top Ten Debut Novels of 2013. Ms. Sneed was selected for the Chicago Public Library's "21<sup>st</sup> Century Award" for debut novels. Christine, who taught in the low residency MFA Program of the University of New Orleans in 2010, has woven a compelling and entertaining tale about Americans and their obsession with celebrity news. She peels back the layers of fame to reveal how that kind of life appears from the other side. Christine will discuss what inspired her to write this novel and why she chose to set it in New Orleans.



**Sneed**

10:25 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone

**FICTION**

**Set in New Orleans**

**Geronimo Johnson's** debut novel, **Hold It Till It Hurts**, set partially in New Orleans, was a finalist for this year's PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. The novel has been described by short story

master and poet Stuart Dybek as "a novel whose humane spirit is as large as its scope—and its scope is ambitious indeed, no less than an embrace of the USA of the first decade of the 21st century, complete with the upheavals of war, race, poverty, and natural disaster. It is the kind of impressive debut that marks its author, T. Geronimo Johnson, as a writer with a career that



**Bishop**

bears watching." We agree. His second novel, **Welcome to Braggsville**, will be published by William Morrow in 2015. Nimo will discuss the inspiration for the book and working with the boutique publisher, Coffee House Press. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.

10:45 a. m.—Queen Anne Ballroom

**FICTION**

**Set in Louisiana**

**David Armand**, a native of Louisiana, is author of the new novel, **Harlow**, which has been described this way: "If Cormac McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor had a literary love child, its name would be **Harlow**." Taking place over the course of three abysmally cold winter days in the late 1980s, **Harlow** tells the story of 18-year-old Leslie Somers, a boy who trudges his way through the dark Louisiana backwoods in search of his father, a man whom he has never met. David will discuss the **Old Testament** imagery of the book. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.



**Johnson**

11:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**Intermission.**

Christine Sneed, Geronimo Johnson, David Armand, and George Bishop will sign in the Book Mart following their appearances.



**Armand**

11:15 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**REMEMBERING WALKER PERCY**

**The Last Gentleman**

Presented by **Kenneth Holditch**

11:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

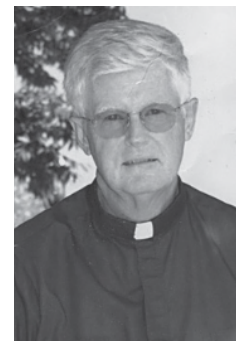
**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

**Faith and the Search for Meaning as Inspiration for the Arts.**

The keynote talk will be delivered by the **Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J.**, distinguished biographer of National Book Award winner the late **Walker Percy** and scholar in the work of other authors whose work is characterized by the search for meaning, including **Flannery O'Connor**, **Andre Dubus**, and **William Faulkner**. He is author of **Walker Percy: A Life**, which was selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the notable books of 1997 and was a main selection of the Catholic Book Club. He edited the collection of essays by Walker Percy, **Signposts in a Strange Land**. Father Samway today divides his time between Philadelphia, PA—where he is Professor of English at Saint Joseph's University and where he held the Donald MacLean, S.J., Jesuit Chair for two years—and Port au Prince, Haiti, where, St. Joseph's is in partnership with the Jesuit order in a system of grammar schools, established by the Jesuits after the devastating



**Holditch**



**Samway**



earthquake.

12:15 p. m.

**Intermission**

**Kenneth Holditch** and **Father Samway** will sign during the intermission.

12:30 p. m. — Riverview Room, Hotel Monteleone. Roof

**LITERATURE & LUNCH**

**Cross Pollination of The Arts**

**How the Visual Arts Have Been Inspired by Words and Music and Vice Versa**

The session will feature **Michael Sartisky**, President of The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities and author of **A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Louisiana Art**, who will discuss the ways the visual arts have been influenced by not only the Gulf light but by the arts, notably music and storytelling, historically in Louisiana. **Joséphine Sacabo** and **Dalt Wonk**, who recently created a new press specifically for creating beautiful books devoted to the arts, produced a remarkable book, **Nocturnes**, feature Joséphine's images and Dalt's poetry. The new company, Luna Press, also produced a collector's limited edition of Dalt's **French Quarter Fables**, combining his fables with his illustrations. Their latest offering is a fabulous reinvention of Tarot Cards, written and illustrated by Dalt, **The Riddles of Existence**. Sacabo and Wonk will be followed by bestselling poet and non-fiction author **Rodger Kamenetz**, whose new collection of poetry inspired a stunning collection of abstract expressionist art by his friend, The art images are reproduced in Rodger's new book of poetry, **To Die Next to You**. Rodger's poetry in turn has inspired him to create a band, **Married Woman**, with a repertoire of songs based on his poetry. The presentation will end with Rodger first reading and then singing his poems, accompanied by his



**Kamenetz**



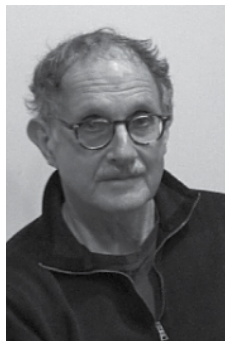
**Byar**



**Sartisky**



**Sacabo**



**Wonk**

music partner, Anna Byar. The authors will sign at the event. Books may be purchased in advance at the **Words & Music Book Mart**. Books will also be available at the event.

2:30 p. m.

**Intermission**

2:45 p. m. — Orleans Room, Directly Across from Queen Anne Ballroom

**MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUES**

**Note:** Agents and Editors have been provided with contact information for writers who have registered for critiques. They will contact their assigned writers in advance of **Words & Music** to make their appointments. The Orleans Room has been set aside for critique purposes but Editors and Agents may ask that writers meet them elsewhere.

2:45 p. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**MASTER CLASS: BUILDING A PLATFORM**

**Put Your Passion in Print:**

**How to Share Your Vision and Influence with a Greater Audience**

This session will feature Shari Stauch, creator of **Where Writers Win**, has been involved in publishing, marketing and PR for 30 years. She is also the principal author of the WWW blog, speaks at conferences around the country, and is co-producing "PubSmart: Emerging Authors, Emerging Avenues" in Charleston, SC in April 2014. The Where Writers Win team's newest collaboration is The Winner Circle – vetted book review directories, book clubs, and other cultivated resources for emerging authors. <http://writerswin.com/>

- Why having a great idea and enormous passion is no longer enough
- Five free ways to quickly give voice to your vision
- How to customize your passion platform to reach (and influence) a receptive audience
- Case Studies: Seven ways other writers are giving voice to their vision that you can start doing in just minutes a day



**Stauch**

Learn how authors touch on greater themes and issues in their work (i.e. animal rights, sustainable agriculture, women's rights, sexual harassment in the workplace, grief counseling, etc.) to tap into more and more passionate readers. Identify your own passionate issues and use your writing to effect change!

3:45 p.m.

**Intermission**

4:00 p. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**LITERARY ROLE MODELS**

**...And the Agents Who Help Them Achieve Their Dreams Against All Odds!**

Featuring author **David Menasche** of New Orleans, introduced by his agent, **Brandi Bowles**, who worked with David to complete an inspiring memoir and then sold it. At 34 years old, author and English teacher David Menasche was diagnosed with stage four brain cancer. Six years later, he suffered a catastrophic seizure that began to steal his vision, memories, mobility, and perhaps most tragically of all—his ability to continue teaching. But teaching was something David just couldn't quit. Undaunted by the difficult journey ahead, he decided to end his treatments and make America his classroom. Cancer had taken his past and would certainly, at some point, take his future, but he wouldn't allow it to take his present. He put out a call out on Facebook, and within hours of posting his plan to travel the country, former students living in more than 50 cities replied with offers to help and couches to sleep on. The lasting lessons he collected make up his memoir, **The Priority List: A Teacher's Final Quest to Discover Life's Greatest Lessons**, which will be released by Touchstone in





**Menasche**

January 2014. After traveling the country, David selected New Orleans for his new permanent residence. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*. To see an excerpt from David's new memoir, visit the 2013 *Double Dealer*, which is to go live from our web site in advance of **Words & Music**.

5:00 p. m.

**Intermission**

5:15 p. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**MASTER CLASS**

**21<sup>st</sup> Century Publishing Alternatives**

This session, which will be introduced by Shari Stauch of **Where Writers Win** and a member of the Faulkner Society's Advisory Council, will feature **April Eberhardt**, who owns the April Eberhardt Literary Agency and is expert in alternative options, including successful formats and planning for self-publishing. Ms. Eberhardt will be joined by **William Coles**, who has been a finalist multiple times in multiple categories of the **William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**. Bill, has successfully published and promoted



**Bowles**

several books and has good advice for writers beginning to build a personal platform for promoting themselves and their work. Joining them will be **Sharon Thatcher**, winner of the Faulkner Society's 2013 gold medal for best Novel in Progress, which was judged by Ms. Eberhardt. Sharon is invited to present the author's point of view in today's confusing and often totally frustrating publishing environment. To read an excerpt from Ms. Thatcher's novel-in-progress, **Trespass**, visit our web site, [www.wordsandmusic.org](http://www.wordsandmusic.org) for the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*, the Society's online literary journal.

7:00 p. m. — St. Louis Cathedral, Jackson Square.

**MUSIC: JAZZ CONCERT**

**Music in the Mood of the Season**

The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society is Co-Sponsoring with the French Quarter Festival and St. Louis Cathedral, the kick-off concert for the annual Christmas series at the Cathedral. The concert will feature the fabulously entertaining band, **Harmonouche**, an unusual jazz group led by French guitarist and harmonica player Rafaël Bas. Their music is an unusual blending of traditional jazz with gypsy strains.



**Bas**

*The concert is open to the public and this is a popular series, so get there a bit early to secure a good seat.*

8:00 p. m. — 624 Pirate's Alley  
**POST CONCERT WELCOME PARTY  
And Birthday Party for Faulkner Society  
Co-Founder, Joseph DeSalvo, Honoring  
sponsors, patrons, and faculty**

By invitation to registered writers, faculty, sponsors, and patrons, volunteers.

The event will include liquid refreshments,



**Eberhardt**



**Coles**

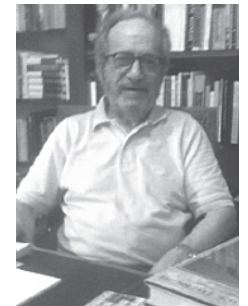


**Thatcher**

heavy hors d'oeuvres, and birthday cake



*Harmonouche plays at Jackson Square*



**Joe DeSalvo**

**Friday,  
December 6**

8:00 a. m. to 10:00 a. m. — Queen

Anne Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone

**CAFÉ AU LAIT & CROISSANTS**

Complimentary continental breakfast for **Words & Music** faculty and guests.

8:30 a. m. — Orleans Room, directly across hall from Queen Anne Ballroom.

**MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUES CONTINUE**

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Parlor, adjacent to ballroom

**BOOK MART OPENS**

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**NON-FICTION**

**LIMITED REGISTRATION WORKSHOP**

**How to Write a Saleable Memoir**

Led by **Brenda Copeland** with her client, bestselling writer **Victoria Loustalot**, this is a hands-on memoir session where writers can come in and "workshop" their ideas for a memoir, with one of the best editors in the publishing industry, who also is one of the best writing teachers in the country. Ms. Copeland, Executive Editor at St. Martin's, will conduct this workshop with Victoria, author of **This is How You Say Goodbye**, a well-received memoir just published by St. Martin's. Ms. Copeland will give the publisher-editor perspective and Ms. Loustalot, the author's perspective. The workshop will include a power-



**Copeland**



**Loustalot**

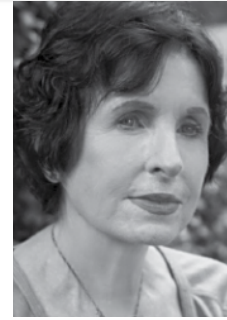
point presentation and printed hand-outs. Ten-page writing samples will be accepted for workshop critiques. Samples must be provided not later than November 7. Registration for critique is limited, but other registered authors may audit.



**Biguenet**



**Sneed**



**Ewenings**

10:00 a. m.

**Intermission**

Ms. Loustalot will sign.

10:15 a. m.

**FAITH & THE SEARCH FOR MEANING**

**The Impact on Literature**

This session will center on how faith or a search for it can inform an author's writing, sometimes obliquely. An award-winning master of multiple genres of literature, **John Biguenet**— poet, translator, fiction writer, essayist, and playwright—will set the scene with remarks about the representation of religion in literature. His new play in rhymed iambic pentameter, **Broomstick**, just closed an extended run at New Jersey Rep and will go on to at least three other productions around the country in 2014. An earlier play, **The Vulgar Soul**, which tells the story of a faithless stigmatic, was described by American Theatre magazine as “as a provocative inquiry into the nature of belief and self-deception.” Other featured authors will be **Robert Hicks**, author of the the bestselling novel, **Widow of the South**, with **Christine Sneed**, whose debut novel **Little Known Facts** spotlights costs of fame, erotic obsessions with movie-star power, and the true sources of joy; and **Leslie Lehr**, fiction and non-fiction writer, who won the Faulkner Society's 1998 gold medal for best novella. Literary agent **Deborah Grosvenor** signed Leslie and sold the novella quickly as a novel, **66 Laps**. Her new novel, **What a Mother Knows**, is a contemporary retelling of the **Old Testament's timeless tale of wisdom**, *The Judgement of Solomon*. Joining them will be **Pamela Binnings Ewen**, nominated for the Christy Award for her work and whose new novel, **The Accidental Life**, is a compelling story of the consequences of a live birth during an abortion. While none of their books are religious *per se*, all owe a certain amount of their success to the faiths of our fathers. The authors are featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*.



**Hicks**



**Grosvenor**



**Lehr**

and the United States. Currently in exile from his country, El Salvador, he teaches in the MFA Program in Spanish at the University of Iowa. His novel **Senselessness** is both a study in a revolution gone wrong and the search for meaning in the midst of horror. **Daniel Castro**, a New Orleans native whose heritage is Cuban and El Salvadoran, is invited to interview Castellanos Moya for this session. Daniel won our 2012 gold medal for his incredibly imaginative novella **Inspection**. Daniel received his MFA from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop and he and Castellanos Moya are friends. More information on these authors may be found in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*, live on our in advance of **Words & Music**, including story about Castellanos Moya and his advice to writers by prizewinning Latina author, **Mary Helen Lagasse**. The edition also will feature Castro's winning work.

Their appearance is made possible in part by a donation from the New Orleans Hispanic Heritage Foundation.

12:30

**Intermission**

11:15 a. m.

**Intermission**

The authors will sign in the Book Mart during intermission

11:30 a. m. — Hotel Monteleone

**PAN AMERICAN CONNECTIONS: FICTION**

**To Make it Real, Inject Black and Blue Humor**

**Steve Striffler, Ph.D.**, who holds the Doris Stone Chair of Latin American Studies at the University of New Orleans, will set the stage for this session featuring our special **Pan American Connections** guest of honor, **Horacio Castellanos Moya**, who is a master of black humor in the face of horror. Castellanos Moya is author of **Senselessness** and other novels, as well as an impressive body of work as a journalist in both Latin America



**Striffler**



**Castellanos Moya**



**Castro**



# Words & Music: 2013 Schedule, Friday



**Fonte**

Castellanos Moya will sign in the Book Mart immediately after his presentation.

12:30 p. m. — Cash Bar Opens, Riverview Room, Roof

12:45 p. m.  
**PAN AMERICAN CONNECTIONS LITERATURE & LUNCH**

*Cuba, My Beloved: Writing from the Heart about Tough Political Issues*  
Featuring **George Fowler**, author of the new book **My Cuba Libre: Bringing Fidel Castro to Justice**, and **Humberto Fontova**, best-selling author of the new book, his fifth, **The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro**. They will be introduced by Raúl Fonte of the New Orleans Hispanic Heritage Foundation. Prior to their presentation, Latina poet **Melinda Palacio** will read a new poem in tribute to the Pulitzer Prize Cuban American novelist **Oscar Hijuelos**, who passed away while playing tennis on October 12, 2013. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.

2:30 p. m.  
**Intermission**

2:45 p.m.  
**THE AESTHETICS OF LITERATURE**  
*What's in a Name? A Literary Field Full of Daisies*

This session will be introduced by **George Bishop**, author of the new novel **Night of the Comet** and will feature **Lee Froehlich**, the Managing Editor of *Playboy Magazine*, an excellent writer himself, who has spent much of his adult life on the job editing some of the most exciting writers of our time. Beyond that he is an incurable addict of serious literature consumed voraciously in his leisure time. He will lead off this session discussing the importance of selecting memorable names in creating successful characters for fiction, using the Daisies of literature, such as Daisy Miller of Henry James fame, as his focus. Joining him will be internationally noted poet **Gordon Walmsley**, editor of the *Copenhagen Review*, who has now turned his hand to fiction with his first novel, **Daisy, The Alchemical Adventures of a New Orleans Hermaphrodite**; and *GQ Magazine* critic **Tom Carson**, author of the recent novel **Daisy Buchanan's Daughter** (this Daisy, of course, was the love interest of Gatsby). More information on these authors may be found in



**Fowler**



**Palacio**



**Fontova**



**Hijuelos**

various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*. To read some of their work, visit *The Double Dealer, 2013*.

3:45 p. m.  
**Intermission**

4:00 p. m. — Queen Ann Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone

**FICTION: NOVELS**

*Worlds Imagined: Making them Real to the Reader.*

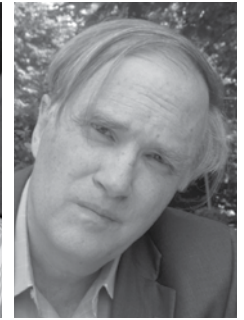
This session will be introduced by literary agent **Deborah Grosvenor**, who judged the novel category of the *Faulkner*



**Carson**



**Froehlich**



**Walmsley**

*Wisdom Competition* this year. Featured authors will include published authors **Beth Ann Fennelly** and **Tom Franklin**, the husband-wife team who co-authored the new novel, **The Tilted World**, writer **George Bishop**, author of the new novel, **The Night of the Comet**, and **Robert Hicks**, author of **The Widow of the South**. Joining them will be **Jennifer Steil**, first runner-up in 2012 Novel in Progress Category and winner of the 2013 gold medal for best novel for the completed manuscript, **The Ambassador's Wife**, which already has been sold to Doubleday and will be published in 2015.



**Bishop**

5:00 p. m.  
**Intermission**

5:00 p. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**MASTER CLASS: PUBLISHING THE WORK**

*Inside the world of Agents & Editors – How to Get them, Keep them, and Work with them.*

A roundtable discussion by all participating agents and editors, this session will be led by **Jeff Kleinman**, literary agent with Folio Literary Management, 2013 Judge of the

Narrative Non-Fiction Category of the *Faulkner – Wisdom Competition*, and one of our critiquing agents for **Words & Music, 2013**

6:30 p. m. — Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre, Corner of Chartres & St. Peter Streets at Jackson Square, enter from St. Peter Street.



**Kleinman**





Grosvenor



Franklin



Fennelly



Bishop



Hicks



Steil

6:30 p. m. — Courtyard Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre, Corner Chartres & St. Peter, enter from St. Peter.

### CASH BAR IN THE COURTYARD

The management of the newly renovated, historic Le Petit Theatre du Vieux Carre allows theatre patrons to carry their drinks into the theatre, so get to Le Petit early for a drink in the Courtyard before the play. The Cash Bar also will be open during intermission.



*Fishers of Men* stars **Martin “Bats” Bradford** as “Dabarrow,” seated left, **Harold Ellis Clark** (playwright, standing left), **Oliver Thomas**, “Bishop Perriloux,” seated center, **Al Aubry**, as “Deacon Job,” standing center, **John Grimsley**, Director-set designer, standing right, and **Damien Moses** as “Vic,” seated right. Photo by: Jim Belfon.

7:00 p. m. — Le Petit Theatre

### LIVE DRAMA

**Fishers of Men**, a new award-winning play by New Orleans playwright **Harold Ellis Clark**. The senseless murders of so many African-American men and children in New Orleans, the

unheralded work that several faith-based and other groups perform to combat violence in the city, and the peace and confidence playwright Hal Clark garners each morning from reciting both Philippians 4: 4-7 and Hebrews 13: 5-6, inspired him to write **Fishers of Men**, his critically-acclaimed play which debuted in June, 2012 in New Orleans to sold-out audiences at Dillard University’s 275-seat Cook Theatre. Another sold-out run occurred this September at the Baton Rouge UpStage Theatre, which named Clark winner of its Fourth Annual (2013) Emerging Playwright Project Award for **Fishers of Men**. He’s the first Louisiana-based playwright to win the prize. Encore performances held in October at UpStage sold-out within two days of being announced. (Included in **Words & Music** packages, \$15 per ticket to the general public. Reserve at [Faulkhouse@aol.com](mailto:Faulkhouse@aol.com).)

9:30 p. m. — Le Petit Theatre – Tableau Restaurant

### JAZZ AFTER HOURS

This popular annual feature of **Words & Music** will get a new look this year. The event, which has been at the Napoleon House for the last 15 years, will be hosted this year by the fabulous new restaurant of the Brennan’s Family of Restaurants, Dickie Brennan’s **Tableau**, located in the Le Petit Theatre property. The party this year will be in the theatre property. Funky New Orleans sound jazz by Armand St. Martin, heavy hors d’oeuvres, free open bar included in ticket price for this event. (\$75 for writers; \$125 for general public. Reserve through [Faulkhouse@aol.com](mailto:Faulkhouse@aol.com).)

## Saturday, December 7

8:00 a. m. to 10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom, Hotel Monteleone  
**CAFÉ AU LAIT & CROISSANTS** Complimentary continental breakfast for **Words & Music** guests.

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Parlor, immediately adjacent to and opening to Queen Anne Ballroom.

### BOOK MART OPENS

8:30 a. m. — Orleans Room, Hotel Monteleone  
**MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUES CONTINUE**

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### NARRATIVE NON-FICTION

#### What Works and Why

This session will be led by literary agent **Jeff Kleinman** of Folio Literary Management, who judged the Narrative Non-Fiction category of the **Faulkner – Wisdom Competition** this year. The program will begin with a reading by best-selling non-fiction writer **Gary Krist**, author of **City of Scoundrels**, The masterfully told story of 12 volatile days in the life of Chicago, when an aviation disaster, a race riot, a crippling transit strike, and a sensational child murder roiled a city already on the brink of collapse. Other featured authors are the men and women he selected to place: **Alex Sheshunoff** of Ojai, CA, **Misplaced Paradise**, Winner; **Sybil Morial** of New Orleans, **Witness to Change**, **Leah Lax** of Houston, TX, **Uncovered**, and the **Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J.**, “**I am Properly Back Where I Started From**”: **Flannery O’Connor** to Her Editor **Robert Giroux**, all runners-up. The four manuscripts represent four very different subjects, ranging from adventure, humorously told, to racial politics to orthodox Judaism to a scholarly addition to the analysis of a famous southern writer. Jeff will analyze with the

authors the four manuscripts and explain why each of the books work and seem more likely to be published than other entries. Each of the authors will read briefly from his or her work. The group will take questions from the audience at the end of their presentation. (To read excerpts from their winning work, visit [www.wordsandmusic.org](http://www.wordsandmusic.org) and click on the 2013 Edition of *The Double Dealer*, the Faulkner Society's literary journal.)

9:45 a. m.

## Intermission



Kleinman



Krist



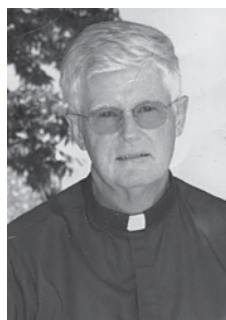
Sheshunoff



Morial



Lax



Samway

10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

## MASTER CLASS: FICTION

### *What is this Thing Called Novella?*

Lots of people write what they think are novellas but are really either longish short stories or short novels. **Chris Parris-Lamb**, a literary agent with the Gernert Agency, who does both fiction and non-fiction, will introduce and moderate this session, which features **Lisa Zeidner**, author of the bestselling novels **Layover** and **Love Bomb** and founder and director of the MFA program at Rutgers, and **Moira Crone**, winner of the Robert Penn Warren Award for her fiction, including her collection **What Gets Into Us**, former director of the MFA program at LSU, and author of the new novel, **The Not Yet**. The two authors will explain for writers what a novella is and how to achieve it and they will let readers in on the secrets of what to expect in a good novella and why they should read such books as National Book Award winner **Three Junes**, a novel of three linked Novellas, by Julia Glass; the new book by Andre Dubus, III, **Dirty Love**, a collection of four novellas; **Local Souls**, a new collection of three novellas by Allan Gurganus; and **Beggar Maid** by Alice Munro, who just won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Ms. Zeidner judged the novella category of the Faulkner Competition this year; Ms. Crone judged the category last year. Invited to join them are: **Jacob Appel**, winner of this year's gold medal, and **Daniel**

**Castro**, winner of the 2012 gold medal. Appel, who is now a three-time winner of a gold medal, previously for essay and short story, is a multi-discipline writer. He has just published his first novel, **The Biology of Luck**, released October, 2013 by **Elephant Rock Books**. Daniel Castro just won the 2013 Cinta Prize for best fiction by an American of Cuban heritage, which carries a cash purse of \$10,000. (Previous winners have included the late Oscar Hijuelos and Cristina Garcia.)



Parris-Lamb

11:00 a. m.

## Intermission

Ms. Zeidner, Ms. Crone, and Dr. Appel will sign in the Book Mart.

11:15 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

## THE AESTHETICS OF FICTION: *The Evil of the World Inspires Quests for Meaning...and...Compelling Literature*

Featuring **Horacio Castellanos Moya**, born in Honduras and raised in El Salvador, and whose work centers on horrific consequences during revolutions in El Salvador and Guatemala, **Ron Rash**, a native of the Carolinas whose work has focused on Appalachia, and **Tom Franklin**, a native of Alabama who writes in the dark, southern Gothic tradition. Castellanos Moya is author of **Senselessness**, and 11 other novels, along with short story collections and he also has had a dramatic career as a political journalist in countries where it has been dangerous to be political at all. One of Latin America's most important authors, his work only recently has begun to appear in English translations. His novels are born out of rage over inhumanity and injustice. **Rash**, a master short fiction writer and poet, as well as a critically acclaimed novelist, is author of the novel



Zeidner

**Serena**, a portrait of evil personified, which has been adapted for a feature film starring Academy Award winning actress Jennifer Lawrence scheduled for release this winter. His new book is a collection of short fiction: **Nothing Gold Can Stay**, which the *New York Times* has declared is his best book since **Serena**. Like Castellanos Moya, Rash looks around his world and is appalled by the evil he sees and is inspired to capture that evil in his stories and characters.



Appel

**Franklin**, like Rash, is a master of the short story form, and his books have included **Poachers**, which won the Edgar Award and other honors. Many of his characters are reminiscent of Faulkner's unattractive family of Snopes and the degenerate Popeye of **Sanctuary**. Most recently, he co-authored a novel, **The Tilted**



Castro





**Moya**



**Rash**



**Franklin**



**Aslan**



**Biguenet**

**World**, with his wife, the renowned poet and essayist, Beth Ann Fennelly. Invited to appear with them is **Barnes Carr**, selected by **Rash** as winner of the Faulkner Society's gold medal for Best Short Story for his dark tale, *The Needle Man*. These authors are featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*. 12:30 a. m.

**Intermission**

Messrs. Castellanos Moya, Franklin, and Rash will be available to sign in the Book Mart immediately after their presentation.

12:45 p. m. —Riverview Room, Roof, Hotel Monteleone

**LITERATURE & LUNCH**

**Jesus Christ, Superstar!**

Session features **Reza Aslan**, religious studies superstar, author of the international bestselling new book, **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth**. A renaissance man of literature, John Biguenet—award-winning poet, translator, fiction writer, essayist, and playwright—will set the scene for this session with remarks about the difference between faith and inspiration and scholarship.

**Aslan**, in addition to **Zealot**, is author of two previous international bestsellers, **No God But God** and **How To Win A Cosmic War**, which have been translated in more than a dozen languages. While there is a division of opinion in the religions of the world about whether Jesus was a gifted prophet and religious reformer or the Son of God, the fascination with his life continues to inspire literature. Since Aslan's book appeared, two books by fundamentalist Christian ministers have been published, each attempting to argue theology with Aslan, who has said in an interview with the Faulkner Society that his book is about history, not theology. He states emphatically that his book does not question any religion, that his purpose has been to examine Jesus in the context of an historical character in his place and time. Aslan, who has been both a Christian and a Muslim, will explore the impact of the teachings of Jesus in his own time, when Rome ruled the world.

**Biguenet** is author of the critically acclaimed short fiction collection, **The Torturer's Apprentice**, and novel, **Oyster**. His Katrina trilogy of plays, **Rising Water**, **Shotgun**, and **Mold**, have won a number of awards and enjoyed 30 productions and staged readings around the U.S. His new play in rhymed iambic pentameter, **Broomstick**, just closed an extended run at New Jersey Rep and will go on to at least three other productions around the country in 2014. An earlier play, **The Vulgar Soul**, which tells the story of a faithless stigmatic, was described by American Theatre magazine as "as a provocative inquiry into the



**Carr**

nature of belief and self-deception." 2:30 p. m.

**Intermission**

Reza Aslan and John Biguenet will sign during intermission

2:45 p. m. — Bonnet Carre Room, Across Hall from Ballroom

**PAPER PRESENTATION**

**The Moral Implications of the Time-Space Continuum**

Presented by **Gregory**

**Friedlander**, who will discuss the Einstein Hologram Universe theory of fundamental physics, not from a standpoint of the math but from the standpoint of logic and the moral underpinnings. "In order to understand the theory first I have to convince you that dimension is a function of time and doesn't exist independently, and I will do that," says Friedlander! His paper revolves around the concept that the existence of the universe derives from you, that your individual morality affects the universe, and that you can and should act with as much integrity and courage as your situation allows. **Gregory Friedlander** an attorney practicing in Louisiana and Alabama, author of **World War C** and **The First Battlefield of World War II**, publishes a blog, [gmfbbooks.blogspot.com](http://gmfbbooks.blogspot.com). He lives in Mobile, AL



**Friedlander**

3:05 p. m.

**Intermission**

3:20 p. m.

**THE HOLLYWOOD EXPERIENCE: PART ONE**

**Hot Openings and Compelling Characters, The Secrets of Success in Spec Screenwriting, as well as Novels**

Introduced by **Leslie Lehr**, a paroduced screenwriter, who currently is at work adapting her new novel, *What a Mother knows* for the screen, the workshop features **Mark Evan Schwartz**, author of the widely hailed **How to Write: A Screenplay**, this session will zero in on a dynamic opening and lead characters. In the professional world of spec feature film screenwriting, the first ten 15 pages of a screenplay can make it or break it. If the set up through inciting incident and characters don't immediately captivate, propelling the story and its leading characters forward in a way that compels the reader to keep turning the page, the agent, manager, development exec, and/or producer will pass. Want expert advice, direction, and constructive criticism? This is the workshop for you. For one-on-one feedback in a supportive workshop environment with screenwriting master



Mark Evan Schwartz, writers are invited to submit the beginning of their feature film scripts, ten to 15 pages, along with a one-page synopsis of their screen story. Pilot, sitcom, and episodic television scripts will not be accepted. Submissions must be received no later than November 8. Enrollment is limited to 15. Regardless of whether you want to sell a screenplay, writers will benefit from Mark's advice on strong openings and compelling characters. While hands-on critiques are limited to a registration of 15 persons, any writer registered may audit. Work of these authors is in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*.



Lehr



Schwartz

4:30 p. m.

**Intermission**

*Ms. Lehr and Mr. Schwartz will sign during intermission.*

4:45 p. m. — Bonnet Carre Room, Across Hall from Ballroom

**HOLLYWOOD EXPERIENCE  
PART TWO**

**Debut Authors: How to Improve Your Chances of Selling your Novel to Hollywood studios, Television, or Major Publishing Houses.**

Presented by Marilyn Atlas, an award-winning film, television, and stage producer and talent manager of actresses, actors, and authors. Many of her clients are debut novelists and screenwriters and many of her writing clients have been discovered at festivals similar to *Words & Music* or in writing classes she has presented. When she finds a writer with a voice she believes needs to be heard, she signs that writer and works with him/her to develop a manuscript. During the workshop she will present scenes and analyze them with participating writers and explain the types of books which work for film, television, and the stage and why, using examples of books that have been sold and effectively adapted. She also will present a brief analysis of the current marketplace. The class will include hands-on critiques. Samples submitted should have strong, commercial storylines with a hook to grab the audience from the beginning.



Atlas

7:30 p. m. — Hotel Monteleone, Queen Anne Ballroom

**FAULKNER FOR ALL**

**The Gala Black Tie Annual Meeting of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society: Cocktails, Awards Ceremonies, Dinner Dancing**

Featuring the always humorous Roy Blount, Jr., author of 22 books, most of them involving a unique intellectual twist to tickle the funnybone, as

toastmaster for the evening.

It is at this event that the Faulkner Society salutes winners of the **William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**, Awarding gold medals and cash prizes to them, and recognizes as well runners-up and other finalists in attendance. The Society will also award its annual ALIHOT (A Legend In His/Her Own Time) Awards for Philanthropy and Literature at this event.



Blount

**Sunday, December 8, 2013**

8:00 a. m. to 10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom, Monteleone

**CAFÉ AU LAIT & CROISSANTS**

Complimentary continental breakfast for *Words & Music* guests.

8:30 a. m. — Orleans Room, Hotel Monteleone

**MANUSCRIPT CRITIQUES CONTINUE**

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Parlor, immediately adjacent to and opening to Queen Anne Ballroom.

**BOOK MART OPENS**

8:30 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

**MASTER CLASS: POETRY**

This session will be introduced by poet **Caroline Rash**, a finalist in the 2013 Faulkner — Wisdom Competition and an Associate Editor of *The Double Dealer* and led by the widely published, critically acclaimed poet **Beth Ann Fennelly**. Appearing with them will be **Gail Waldstein**, who was selected



Fennelly



Waldstein



Munsterman

by Beth Ann for the Faulkner Society's 2013 Gold Medal for Poetry. She had this to say about Ms. Waldstein's poem, **Rapid**:

*This incredibly ambitious poem is an extended meditation on free will, responsibility, and death. This is a moving, accomplished, astute poem.*

Joining them will be **Geoff Munsterman**, Associate Editor of the Faulkner Society's Literary Journal, *The Double Dealer*, whose new collection, just published by Lavender Ink Press, is: **Because the Stars Shine Through It**. Among those who reviewed the book, Ms. Fennelly had this to say about Geoff's collection:

This rich, nuanced collection makes me nostalgic for a place I've never been--Belle Chasse, LA--where fishermen reel in human jaws and river pilot uncles work the spill and "township limit signs mock our effort." What a gorgeous evocation of place, and characters... **Because the Stars Shine Through It** is both elegy and paean, and we are richer because it's in the world.

The poets are invited to read briefly from their work. All of the authors are featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*, which goes live at our web site at the end of November.

9:45 a. m.

### Intermission

Beth Ann Fennelly and Geoff Munsterman will sign in the Book Mart immediately after their appearances.

### SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS

#### *Faith and the Search for Meaning as Inspiration for the Arts*

10:00 a. m. — Queen Anne Ballroom

### PAPER PRESENTATION

#### *Under the Bone: Islam and Rumi's Mysticism*

Presented by **Marylin Mell, Ph.D.**

Dr. Mell will lead us in an exploration of God and love in the work of the brilliant 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic of Islam. Dr. Mell is Coordinator of the English Department at Dillard University in New Orleans, where she teaches poetry, plays, essays, film. More information on these authors may be found in various sections of this edition of *The Double Dealer*.



Mell

10:20 a. m.



Moazami



Aslan



Kamenetz

### Intermission

10:35 a. m.

### POLITICS + RELIGION = GREAT STORYTELLING

#### *What You Need to Know About State Religions in Modern World, the Study of Other Faiths, and How Such Studies Can Point You Back to Your Own Faith and to the Creation of Compelling Literature*

**Behrooz Moazami**, who is author of the new book, **State, Religion, and Revolution in Iran, 1796 to the Present**, will introduce the subject matter and then moderate. Associate Professor of History and Director of Middle East Peace Studies at Loyola University in New Orleans, he is an Iranian political

activist/dissident. He holds doctorates in political science and sociology and historical studies. Before joining academia, he worked as a journalist, essayist, and co-editor of various dissident publications. The session will feature **Reza Aslan**, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, then returned to Islam and bestselling author of **Zealot: the Life & Times of Jesus Of Nazareth**; and **Rodger Kamenetz**, critically acclaimed poet and author of **The Jew in the Lotus**, a memoir about his studies of Buddhism and meetings with the Dalai Lama. Kamenetz, also is author of **The History of Last Night's Dream** and a trained dream analyst, says that in his dreams "I am a Buddhist, a Christian, and a Jew." A poet as well as a bestselling non-fiction author, Rodger's new collection is **To Die Next to You**.

11:00 a. m.

### Intermission

The authors Behrooz Moazami, Reza Aslan, and Rodger Kamenetz will sign during intermission.

11:15 a. m.

### PAPER PRESENTATION

#### *The Pearl:*

#### *The Medieval Poem Which Transformed Religious Art & Architecture*

Presented by **Loretta Victoria Ramirez**



Ramirez

**Loretta Victoria Ramirez**, a native Californian, began her higher education studying International Relations at Oxford University, England. She later earned a bachelor's degree in Political Anthropology at Stanford University and a master's in English at Loyola Marymount University.

She teaches a variety of writing and literature classes. As a representative product of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval poem *Pearl* reflects the symbolic and physical rise of the Gothic cathedral as a form of narrative enlightenment. *Pearl* was written in a North-West Midlands variety of Middle English by the same anonymous composer of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written in vernacular English rather than Latin, both *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* targeted a general public audience of the time. Although the *Pearl*-Poet shares literary genres and contemporary worlds with Chaucer and Dante, he stands distinctly. *Pearl* is credited with influencing a dramatic transformation in religious art and architecture, inspiring the Gothic period.

11:35 a. m.

### PAPER PRESENTATION

#### *A Trip to Andalusia*

Presented by **Katheryn Krotzer Laborde, Ph.D.**

Ms. Laborde visited Milledgeville, GA, to learn more about Flannery O'Connor's hometown and her home, **Andalusia**, and share discoveries with students of a new interdisciplinary course which considered both the literary and theological aspects of O'Connor's fiction. While there, however, Ms. Laborde says, "I was met time and again with feelings of not only familiarity (how could one read her works and not somehow feel a sense of recognition when viewing the dairy, the barn, the porch, and the kitchen?), but also a sense of the mystical, time and again." She will make a visual presentation on Milledgeville and Andalusia. Ms. Laborde is the recipient of the 2003





**Laborde**

Louisiana Division of the Arts Artist's Fellowship award, a 2006 Louisiana Cultural Economy Grant, and the 2010 Gold Medal for the Novella awarded by the Pirates' Alley Faulkner Society. An associate professor of Xavier University of Louisiana, she teaches writing as well as courses on the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Ms. Laborde will join the Round Table Discussion immediately following.

11:55 a. m.  
**Intermission**

12:10 p. m. — Queen Ann Ballroom

**ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION**

**The Year of Flannery O'Connor**

All of a sudden, **Flannery O'Connor** is making a renewed splash in publishing. The late, great Ms. O'Connor, whose work at heart was a search for meaning within the strictures of deep Catholic faith, an often dark sense of humor, and a straightforward



**O'Connor**

way of looking at life, was the first fiction writer born in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to have her works collected and published by the Library of America. Her long-time publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux this year released a slender, totally absorbing and charming book, **The Prayer Journal**, a collection of Ms. O'Connor's daily prayers, kept in a journal. Meanwhile, The Folio Society has compiled a unique selection of 17 of Flannery O'Connor's coruscating, plain-speaking short stories. In a compelling introduction, American author C. E. Morgan explores O'Connor's reenactment of ... violent grace and uncompromising, idiosyncratic wisdom. This collector's edition is illustrated by a set of powerful illustrations by Deanna Staffo's which capture O'Connor's Southern settings and macabre, surrealistic style. The University of Georgia Press re-issued Barbara McKenzie's **Flannery O'Connor's Georgia**, one of the South's best known documentary photography book, and there are other Flannery O'Connor works in progress, including a new manuscript by the **Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J.**, who

will lead this session. Father Samway will be joined by **Lee Froehlich**, Managing editor of *Playboy*; **W. Kenneth Holditch, Ph.D.**, scholar in Southern Literature and Co-Founder of both the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and the Tennessee Williams Festival, Editor and Publisher of the Tennessee Williams Journal; **Katheryn Laborde**, who teaches classes in the work of Flannery O'Connor, and **Don DeGrazia, Ph.D.**, who also will be doing a presentation on the work of **Sherwood Anderson** during **Literature & Lunch** with Dr. Holditch, who will be presenting on William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, as well.



**Anderson**



**DeGrazia**

1:30 p. m.  
**Intermission**

1:45 p. m.—Riverview Room, Hotel Monteleone

**LITERATURE & LUNCH**

**The Quests for Meaning of Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams**

This gala finale session will feature **Don DeGrazia**, a novelist, author of **American Skin**, and creative writing teacher at Columbia College Chicago, who will speak on **Sherwood Anderson**; and **W. Kenneth Holditch**, Professor Emeritus at the University of New Orleans, a scholar in literature of the South, who is co-founder of both the Tennessee Williams Festival and the Faulkner Society, who will be speaking on **William Faulkner** and **Tennessee Williams**, as well as Walker **Percy** and **John Kennedy Toole**. They each will speak for 15 minutes and they will take questions from the audience. These authors are featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*.

3:00 p. m.  
**Farewell, 'til 2014!**



**Samway**



**Froehlich**



**Holditch**

**The Prayer Journal**

Reviewing this new collections of Ms. O'Connor's personal conversations with God, for *The New York Times*, Marilynne Robinson, said:

*This slender, charming book must be approached with a special tact. To read it feels a little like an intrusion on inwardness itself.*





**Jennifer Steil**  
Novel



**Jacob Appel**  
Novella



**Alex Sheshunoff**  
Narrative Nonfiction



**Sharon Thatcher**  
Novel In Progress

## Bouquets to our 2013 Winners & Judges

**Jennifer Steil** won the 2013 Pirate Alley Faulkner Society's Gold Medal in the Novel category; **Jacob Appel**, Novella; **Alex Sheshunoff**, Narrative Nonfiction; **Sharon Thatcher**, Novel In Progress; **Barnes Carr**, Short Story; **N. West Moss**, Essay; **Gail Waldstein**, Poetry; and **Jack Mierl**, High School Short Story.

The **Novel** category was judged by **Deborah Grosvenor**. Ms. Grosvenor has more than 25 years' experience in the book publishing business as an agent and editor. The **Novella** category was judged by **Lisa Zeidner**, author of five novels, most recently **Love Bomb** (Farrar Straus Giroux). The **Narrative Non-fiction Book** category was judged by **Jeff Kleinman**. He is a literary agent, intellectual property attorney, and founding partner of Folio Literary Management, LLC, a New York literary agency which works with all of the major U.S. publishers and through subagents) with most international publishers. The **Novel-in-Progress** category was judged by **April Eberhardt**. After 25 years as a corporate strategist and consultant, she joined the literary world as head reader for *Zoetrope: All-Story*, a literary magazine, followed by five years as an agent with two San Francisco-based literary agencies. **Ron Rash**, the final round judge of the **Short Story** category is author of the critically acclaimed new collection of short fiction, **Nothing Gold Can Stay**, and **Serena**, the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Finalist and **New York Times** bestselling novel. The **Essay** category was judged by **Roy Blount Jr.**, author of 22 books of non-fiction and a winner of the Faulkner Society's annual ALIHOT Award (A Legend in His/Her Own Time) for Literature, is a frequent member of the **Words & Music** faculty, and has judged categories of the **William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition** several times. The **Poetry** category was judged by acclaime poet and essayist **Beth Ann Fennelly**. She directs the MFA program and teaches at the University of Mississippi, where she was named the 2011 named Mississippi Humanities Teacher of the Year and College of Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year. The **High School Story** category was judged by **Tom Carson**. He is author of the new novel **Daisy Buchanan's Daughter**, also is the author of **Gilligan's Wake**, a *New York Times* Notable Book of The Year for 2003. They will be presented at **Faulkner for All** on December 7 during Words & Music and their work is featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer*.



**Barnes Carr**  
Short Story



**N. West Moss**  
Essay



**Gail Waldstein**  
Poetry



**Jack Mierl**  
Student Short Story



**Elizabeth Sanders**  
Novel  
First Runner Up



**Patricia Benton**  
Novel  
Second Runner Up



**Lou Dischler**  
Novel  
Third Runner Up



**Julie Chagi**  
Novella  
First Runner Up



**Steve Yates**  
Novella  
Second Runner Up

## 2013 Runners-Up

Novel runners-up include **Elizabeth Sanders**, **Patricia Benton** and **Lou Dischler**. **Julie Chagi** took the first runner-up spot for Novella, while **Steve Yates** and **John Vanderslice** shared the second runner-up honors. Narrative Nonfiction runners-up include **Sybil Morial**, **Leah Lax** and **The Rev. Patrick Samway, S. J.** while **Chris Tusa** was awarded first runner-up in the Novel-In-Progress category with **Jacob Appel** taking second runner-up. Short Story runners-up are **Chris Waddington** and **Susan Jeschke**. **Petra Perkins** earned a runner-up spot in both Essay and Poetry. **Cassie Pruyn** was second runner-up in Poetry. Four high school students shared honors for Student Short Story: **Julian Lombard**, **Helene Lovett**, **William Maloney**, and **Sydne Thomas**.

The work of all of the winning writers and runners-up, as well as that of 2012 winners is featured in the 2013 edition of *The Double Dealer* available live from our web site, [www.wordsandmusic.org](http://www.wordsandmusic.org). Work of earlier winners is featured in our 2011 and 2012 editions which are live on-line from our web site and will remain a permanent fixture of the website as new editions are completed. These editions are humongous in size because we have been making up for several dormant years since the last hard copy was printed in 2007. Hereafter, winners will appear in the year they win, as this year.

Sincere congratulations to you all for good work!

*—The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society  
And Sponsors*



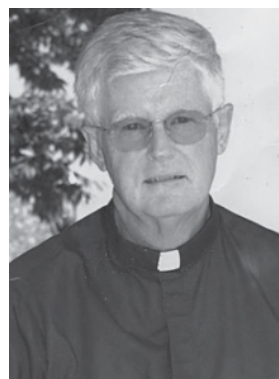
**John Vanderslice**  
Novella  
Second Runner Up



**Sybil Morial**  
Narrative Nonfiction  
First Runner Up



**Leah Lax**  
Narrative Nonfiction  
Second Runner Up



**Patrick Samway**  
Narrative Nonfiction  
Third Runner Up



**Chris Tusa**  
Novel In Progress  
First Runner-up





**Jacob Appel**  
**Novel In Progress**  
**Second Runner Up**



**Chris Waddington**  
**Short Story**  
**First Runner Up**



**Susan Jeschke**  
**Short Story**  
**Second Runner Up**



**Petra Perkins**  
**Essay & Poetry**  
**First Runner Up**



**Cassie Pruyun**  
**Poetry**  
**Second Runner Up**

## Who Makes the Competition Go?



*Judith "Jude" Swenson*  
*Chair, Competition Fundraising*

It's people who make our competition a success, starting with **Jude Swenson**, who for several years has helped ensure the competition by sponsoring the big ticket Novel Prize and then buttonholing others to support the prize fund. It's other sponsors like **Bertie Deming Smith**, **Theodosia Nolan**, **Rosemary James & Joe DeSalvo**, the **Mary Freeman Wisdom Foundation**, **David Speights**, **Nancy & Hartwig Moss, III**. And, then, it's you, you writers who enter the competitors.

Look at the Stats, Ladies and Gentlemen!

**Faulkner - Wisdom Competition** winners come from a competitive international field of hundreds of applications. This year, there were 362 entries in the novel category, including Louisiana's 144 entries, the rest from 37 states and seven foreign countries. There were 181 entries for the new category of book-length narrative non-fiction with 84 entries from Louisiana, 17 other states, and two foreign countries. 126 people entered the novella category, including 61 entries from Louisiana. The rest were from, 25 states and two foreign countries. There were 293 entries in the novel-in-progress category, including 133 entries from Louisiana authors, the remainder representing 38 states and eight foreign countries. 2013 saw 211 entries for short story, including 102 from Louisiana. The remainder represent 36 states and four foreign countries. There were nearly 200 entries for essay, with 101 entries were from Louisiana, and the others from 21 states and three foreign countries. 232 entries for poetry, included 136 from Louisiana poets, the remainder from 26 states and two foreign countries. Finally, we had 166 High School Short Story entries with 87 from Louisiana, the remainder from 12 states and four foreign countries.

There were lots and lots of you competing.

So, if you placed, smile!



**Photo Not Provided**  
**Nathan Deuel**  
**Second Runner-Up**  
**Essay**



**Julian Lombard**  
**Student Short Story**  
**Runner Up**



**Helene Lovett**  
**Student Short Story**  
**Runner Up**



**William Maloney,**  
**Sydne Thomas**  
**Photos Not Provided**  
**High School Runner-up**



# 2014 William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition

It will open **January 1**, and it's not too early to  
be thinking about what you will enter.



- Novel \*
- Novel-in-Progress \*
- Novella
- \* Book-length Non-Fiction \*
- \* Short Story \* Essay \*
- Poetry \*
- \* Short Story by a High School Student\*

*For Entry form visit  
[www.wordsandmusic.org/  
competition](http://www.wordsandmusic.org/competition)*

# Spiritual Journeys

*The section **Spiritual Journeys** showcases essays, interviews and excerpts relating to the 2013 Words & Music theme **Faith and the Search for Meaning Through Art**. Read on for personal writing from **Katheryn Krotzer Laborde, Naomi Benaron, Rick Barton**, and others, followed by analysis of faith and culture by **Reza Aslan, Behrooz Moazami, W. Kenneth Holditch** and others.*



*Whispered Prayers by **Joséphine Sacabo***



## Andalusia

By Katheryn Krotzer Laborde

Some may find a course on Flannery O'Connor a rather strange offering at a Historically Black University such as Xavier. After all, a black character never serves as a protagonist, nor does one experience the "moment of grace." (It is true; not one African American is gored by a bull.) Furthermore, the "N-word" appears time and again. And it never fails, when discussing "The Artificial Nigger" in class, that at least one female student will froth with indignation at the appearance of the curvy woman dressed in a tight pink slip of a dress, leaning in a doorway in the middle of the day.

But, then again, the name of this interdisciplinary course is The Theology of Flannery O'Connor, and Xavier is also a Catholic university. One might assume that teaching the very Catholic O'Connor's work at a such a place makes perfect sense, and it does...but not for the reason that anyone would ever imagine. The student body is comprised of many Protestants, most of whom are generally oblivious to references to ritual, sacrament, and Holy Spirit that Catholics more easily pick up on. Teaching such nuances to mostly non-Catholic students who are reading the works of a very Catholic writer that tended to write about fundamentalists and backwoods prophets falls squarely on the shoulders of my colleague from the Theology department.

For my part, though, I want to teach the literary portion in such a way that goes beyond talk of symbolism and metaphor. After all, as O'Connor once informed a college student, sometimes the "significance" of a hat is that it covers a head and, as she once told a "very earnest" teacher, that hat could be black simply because men from that part of the country tend to favor that color. No, going beyond an English teacher's tendency to see a work as a score of symbols to be decoded, I reasoned that understanding Flannery O'Connor's surroundings would inform the reading of her works in a way that would help to temper the occasional repetition of scenarios (sick adult child lives with mother on a farm) and stock characters (the "at least they aren't trash" couple hired to help the overbearing mother). And so I planned a trip to Milledgeville, Georgia, and Flannery's home, Andalusia, in order to immerse myself in a world I could then better explain to my students.

Or, at least, that's how I explained my motives when applying to the university for travel money.

While, of course, a better understanding of O'Connor's world would enhance my teaching of a literature that was formed there, at the core of my desire to go to Milledgeville was a connection I had felt to O'Connor from the age of fourteen. While I am sure most O'Connor fans, upon first reading of the Misfit's cold murder of an elderly woman and her family, or Ruby Turpin's attack on an old sow as she shouted angrily at God, are struck with a thought along the lines of I really

like this writer! I came away, even as the grandmother's heartbroken cries for her Bailey Boy rang in my stunned skull, with the realization that I am a writer. Not that I wanted to become one, but that I already was one. I walked away from that story with more than a new favorite author. From that day forward, I had a Mother Muse.

Yes, a trip to Milledgeville would be in order to better teach students, but I wanted more than that. "If the Catholic writer hopes to reveal mysteries, he will have to do it by describing truthfully what he sees from where he is," O'Connor wrote in "The Church and the Fiction Writer." I wanted to see the Protestant South from a rocker on a Catholic Novelist's front porch. I wanted to hear the pinched, nasal voices. I wanted to see the farm: its woods and its barn, its bright sun and coy moon, that black line of trees and its peacocks. I wanted to witness it all.

The flight to Atlanta that Tuesday afternoon had been a typical one, quick and nearly effortless. Once there, I found a penny in the airport bathroom; this I dropped into a special pocket of my purse and was on my way. I headed east and then south in a rental car and, after lunch and a wrong turn or two, arrived in Milledgeville. Visitors Bureau map in hand, I aimed for the outskirts of town where, about five miles away, the hotel and Andalusia were located. When I pulled into the long driveway of the Fairfield Inn, it was almost 4:30. There had been no Andalusia in sight.

I checked in, threw my bags on the bed, and headed right back out the door. Andalusia was closed to visitors on Wednesdays, and I couldn't bear the thought of waiting until Thursday to see the white clapboard two-story O'Connor had called home. Getting back on the highway, I turned back toward Milledgeville. The woman at the check-in desk had assured me that I had driven right past it Andalusia, and she was right: not even a mile from the hotel I saw not a house but a large sign that indicated Andalusia lay just past the wall of woods. I pulled in.

Another sign told me that visiting hours ended at 4 pm. Though it was several minutes past five, the gate several yards ahead was open. I drove on.

I made my way down the worn dirt road, tall trees resplendent in their summer green flanking me as I drove forward, white sky above. As the tires crunched along, it occurred to me that I was travelling the path Katherine Anne Porter followed when she came to visit in 1958. I was following Robert Giroux, O'Connor's editor and publisher; Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, longtime friends, editors and, at one point, landlords; Joe McTyre, the photographer whose camera captured images of both O'Connor and Andalusia in 1962; Maryat Lee, the playwright who declared her love to Flannery; Erik Langkjaer, the textbook salesman who broke Flannery's heart; and finally the reclusive Betty Hester, Flannery's faithful correspondent known for decades only as "A."

I was following the very path travelled by Alice Walker and her mother in 1974, years after Flannery's

# SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS: *A Trip to Andalusia*

death but long before the creation of the Andalusia foundation and the gift shop and the tours. Alice and Minnie Lou had not come from far away but simply from nearby Eatonton. Their arrival had been heralded by the infamous peacocks that “lifted their splendid tails for [their] edification.”

The Andalusia of today is not roamed by the many, many birds Flannery owned. Still, the road curves to the right then straighten as it always has, and then, in a glimpse soon obliterated by more bark and more green: Andalusia. I passed through yet another open gate and the view of the house was clear. White clapboard. Brick steps. Screened porch. Andalusia.

I parked the car in front of the area that had once been a horse barn, well within sight of both the house and the gate as I was determined to both see the former and not be trapped by the latter. I stepped out and moved forward, one foot in front of the other, my heart so very full, so glad to be alone. I did not want to share this moment with a tour guide, or an O'Connor scholar, or a gaggle of Flannery enthusiasts.

Though I was anxious to stand on the much-photographed steps of her home, I kept walking straight across that wide lawn toward the picnic tables. Reaching them, I noted a plaque that honored the donor but, in bending over to do so, saw something else: there, on the ground, was a pink, plastic Easter egg, color pale and surface slightly smudged by soil. Twisting the shell open, I saw the egg was empty.

This egg, I decided, was there for me.

Ridiculous, I know. As ridiculous, perhaps even as delusional, as thinking I am linked mystically and maternally to Flannery O'Connor. But the egg, stained with that sticky red Georgia earth, was real, real enough to wrap my fingers around as I walked toward the steps of the house in order to better to take in what O'Connor had described as “the whole scene...rimmed by a wall of trees.”

\*

Flannery O'Connor was no stranger to pilgrimages; she went to Lourdes with her mother in 1958 and bathed in the curative waters early one morning. But, despite her faith, she was not an enthusiastic pilgrim but, rather, one that grumbled and made her lack of enthusiasm known. “Lourdes was not as bad as I expected it to be,” she wrote to Elizabeth Bishop in 1958. “It is a beautiful village or would be if it weren't pockmarked with religious junk shops—one right after the other in an unbroken chain right up to the entrance of the grotto.”

One can only imagine her response to the presence of a gift shop in her home these days, taking the

space once reserved for the farm's business office. Where once Regina bustled about, updating inventory lists or wrangling over the price of a bull, the Flannery faithful consider tee-shirts, tote bags, mugs, and books. They buy prints and hand-painted peacocks and fridge magnets. They purchase bulbs that are descendents of the irises Regina herself planted. They take home Andalusia dirt.

“Do people really buy these?” I asked, holding up a vial to the docent.

“Yes,” he said. “And I can swear to their authenticity. I dug the dirt myself.” Milledgeville dirt, Andalusia soil, land that Flannery herself had walked on

decades before, foot and crutch.

Also for sale were bottles of well water, pumped on the property.

“Holy water?” I teased.

“I would not be surprised to learn that a baby or two had not been baptized with it.”

He likely would not have been surprised by the sight of me that morning, on my knees, briefly, behind the house, shielded by my open car door, as I pried a large lump of quartz from the ground.

That her home would one day become a shrine of sorts would have likely annoyed Flannery, not necessarily because she didn't seem the sort to put up with such foolishness but because, had she had her way, she would not have lived there. O'Connor may have grown up in Milledgeville,

but it was only because her father became ill with Lupus and could no longer afford their home in Savannah. And though only twelve, she most certainly would have been aware that Milledgeville was the site of an insane asylum. In her day, “going to Milledgeville” meant more than taking a trip to the center of the state.

O'Connor may have stayed in Milledgeville once her father died, but, really, why would she and her mother live anywhere else but the family's ancestral mansion? O'Connor may have “escaped” Milledgeville to study in Iowa, to live in the northeast, but it was in Milledgeville she lived after diagnosed with the same “Red Wolf” that had killed her father.

Not really Milledgeville, since the mansion could not accommodate Flannery's condition comfortably, but a farm outside the city limits. No, having gotten away only to be sucked back in, and on a farm at that, in a room that would have been a parlor if Flannery had been able to manage the stairs to the second floor bedrooms, a room that was separated by a shared door from her mother's room, O'Connor surely would find the silken cord across her bedroom threshold and the visitors (with their questions and photo snapping) it blocked, a bit of painful irony.

I cannot speak to the condition of Andalusia



Author **Katheryn Krotzer Laborde**



# SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS: *A Trip to Andalusia*

back when O'Connor lived there. In 2011, there were the cracks and peels that one would expect of an old home, particularly one that had not been lived in for many years (upon Flannery's passing, Regina moved back to the mansion). But I can speak to the respectful reverence of the docent as he guided me through the home and answered my questions. I can speak of the awe I felt standing before her bedroom, seeing a pair of crutches, and a typewriter, and her bed.

It's not so much that Andalusia is a shrine, but that so many affected by O'Connor's work feel the need to go there.

I followed the docent through the home – the front room (also cordoned off) where Regina served Sanka to the book club that met there on occasion, the kitchen where one half expects to see Mrs. Hopewell chatting with Mrs. Freeman, and the porch where Flannery and mother sipped margaritas.

Outside, I walked around the grounds, seeing the barn, so obviously the inspiration for Hulga's rendezvous with Manly Pointer, and the milk processing shed, where a defiant Asbury could drink all the warm glasses of unpasteurized milk he pleased. There was a water pump, and a water tower, a trench and, in the distance, a pond. There were shacks and sheds and a pen occupied by a peacock and two peahens.

I walked around the grounds the way O'Connor simply would not have been able to, disabled by not so much by the Lupus but the cortisone treatments that made her hip joints soft. In doing so I follow the path of those who have come before me, to see O'Connor, in flesh or, later, in spirit.

"When in Rome," O'Connor once wrote, "do as you done in Milledgeville." When O'Connor was in Rome, she received a special blessing from Pope Pius XII. When I was in Milledgeville, or close to it, anyway, I walked through her house, bought some souvenirs, and stole a rock. Once home, I would place the rock next to the egg.

\*

The sun was already bright in the morning sky when I drove into Memory Hill Cemetery. I stopped at the sight of men, local prisoners, on hand that day to tidy up the grounds. I drove past them slowly, and kept driving until I found a good place to pull over and park. I was not sure where to start.

The prisoners well behind me, I could have sworn I had the cemetery to myself when I stepped out of the car. But locking the door I was suddenly aware of a person walking toward me. She was tidy and tiny, an elderly woman walking an energetic Yorkie. She asked about my Mississippi plates, and I explained that I was not from there but Louisiana, and then explained the purpose of my visit.

"Well, I can tell you where she's buried."

I asked if she had known her, and it was then that Miss Jane, at seventy-nine a lifelong resident of Milledgeville, explained that everyone in Milledgeville had known Regina and Flannery. She had not known them

well, but well enough to nod hello when passing. Her parents had owned a dry cleaning store where Regina had been a customer.

"Flannery had a signing at a little gift shop right across the street from Mother and Daddy. So we went over there, and we got the book, and she signed it, and we got it home." She made a face that was not so much an expression as it was simply a moment of self-recognition. "I'm among some of the people who did not understand what she was writing. A lot of us compared it to Uncle Tom's Cabin."

I asked her how the two books were alike.

"I don't know!" she drawled. "It just didn't make any sense. I never read it through. We just put it somewhere. And years later, my mother met this boy in New York. And when she told this boy that she knew Flannery O'Connor, I thought he was going to have a stroke. And she said, 'Do you want a book?' And she said, 'Well, I'm gonna get you a book, and I'll go out there and get Flannery to sign it.' Well, Flannery signed the book, and my mother picked up a peacock feather and stuck it in the book, and mailed it to that boy up north. And it wasn't too long after that that Flannery died."

Her own copy had been lost years ago, likely tossed out by her mother during a closet-cleaning jag. "If it hadn't've got lost, I could've had some money!"

The Yorkie tugged at his leash and sniffed the wind. "Now," Miss Jane continued, gaining steam, "it's a lot of us in town who feel it's the Yankees who appreciate her book. I never read it. But the Yankees loved it. Well, you know. It wasn't Gone with the Wind. Let's face it."

The comment slapped me. Not so much because of the insult intended, but because I had heard the insult before, as it had been recorded by O'Connor herself. In Milledgeville, no nice young woman would write about preachers, prophets, and prostitutes, and a nice young lady like Miss Jane, who must have been all of twenty at the time, would never read a book like that all the way through.

"Flannery must have seemed odd around here," I said.

"She was an odd person and..." Miss Jane paused, clearly searching for words. "I don't know. When you see pictures of her, she looks kind of mousey."

It was another slap. "Well, she had been very sick..."

"I know. She was very sick. And I think she put her illness to a good advantage by writing books. But it's just that people in Milledgeville just don't dig 'em. That's okay. Other people dig 'em. Yankees love 'em. And they're making college students read them, whether they want to or not."

She glanced away, dabbing her face with a Kleenex she pulled from her pocket. "I'd like to sit in on your class and see what the hell you have to say about 'em. I might have to read one."

"But not now. Right now I'm reading Evanovich."

Her dog trotted merrily as we headed toward Flannery's grave. Once we were there, she bid me adieu

and I was alone to consider the graves in the O'Connor plot. Though Regina did not die until 1995, it is not her grave that is the last in the series, but her daughter's. And it is her daughter's that bore eleven pennies that morning. The coins are left by visitors on a regular basis, filling the interior of the cross engraved at the top of the stone. The docent comes by regularly to scoop up the pittance, putting every penny in a jar. On her birthday, he places feathers from Andalusia's remaining peacocks on the grave.

I add the penny I had found in the Atlanta airport.

When I drove through Milledgeville later that day on my way back to the hotel, I wondered about Miss Jane. I wondered where she lived. Wondered if she had ever married, and had she ever felt the urge to leave Milledgeville. How many times had she spoken to strangers about Flannery, and how many had she led to that mousey girl's grave?

It was thoughts like these that bounced around my head as I maneuvered through rush hour traffic. Waiting at a red light, I spotted a man holding a sign, facing one stream of cars then another. The sign he held proclaimed that End Days were near, and whether the scrawled chapter and verse offered hope or guaranteed doom was beyond my ken. The man looked sunburned, his eyes, vacant.

And I pictured Flannery sitting in a car, Regina at the wheel, coming back home from Mass, or the Piggly-Wiggly, or even a late lunch at the Sanford House. Sitting there as I was, seeing that man on the corner, and turning the chance sighting into an inspiration for a world she could build with words. A world far away from the likes of Miss Jane, and Regina, and all those who would damn her work for not glorifying the South. A world far from Milledgeville and, of course, Andalusia.

**Katheryn Krotzer Laborde** is a writer of prose, both fiction and nonfiction. Her essays about Hurricane Katrina evacuation and early recovery have appeared in *Fresh Yarn*, *Callaloo*, *CrossRoads: A Southern Culture Annual*, *noladiaspora*, *Connotation Press*, and *Poets&Writers*. Her general nonfiction book, ***Do Not Open: The Discarded Refrigerators of Post-Katrina New Orleans***, was published by McFarland in 2010; her oral history about a colossal painting by late African American Expressionist Frederick J. Brown was published by Xavier Review Press in 2012. Ms. Laborde is the recipient of the 2003 Louisiana Division of the Arts Artist's Fellowship award, a 2006 Louisiana Cultural Economy Grant, and the 2010 Gold Medal for the Novella awarded by the Pirates' Alley Faulkner Society. An associate professor of Xavier University of Louisiana, she teaches writing as well as courses on the fiction of **Flannery O'Connor**. Ms. Laborde is to present a paper on Flannery O'Connor during **Words & Music, 2013**.

## Recommended Reading: Faulkner House Favorites

Visitors to Faulkner House Books know to trust Joanne Sealy, the bookstore manager who greets you with a smile and recommendation. We've compiled a few of her favorites from this season:

**The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt** (Little, Brown and Company)

"*The Goldfinch* is a rarity that comes along perhaps half a dozen times per decade, a smartly written literary novel that connects with the heart as well as the mind....Donna Tartt has delivered an extraordinary work of fiction."—Stephen King, *The New York Times Book Review*

**Woman Who Lost Her Soul by Bob Shacochis** (Atlantic Monthly Press)

"Renowned through four award-winning books for his gritty and revelatory visions of the Caribbean, Bob Shacochis returns to occupied Haiti in *The Woman Who Lost Her Soul* before sweeping across time and continents to unravel tangled knots of romance, espionage, and vengeance. In riveting prose, Shacochis builds a complex and disturbing story about the coming of age of America in a pre-9/11 world."—Amazon

**The Circle by Dave Eggers** (Alfred A. Knopf/McSweeney's Books)

Mae Holland, a woman in her 20s, arrives for her first day of work at a company called the Circle. She marvels at the beautiful campus, the fountain, the tennis and volleyball courts, the squeals of children from the day care center "weaving like water." The first line in the book is: " 'My God,' Mae thought. 'It's heaven.' And so we know that the Circle in Dave Eggers's new novel, 'The Circle,' will be a hell."—NYT Book Review

**A Constellation of Vital Phenomena by Anthony Marra** (Hogarth)

"In this extraordinary first novel, Marra homes in on a people and a region that barely register with most Americans and, in heartrending prose, makes us feel their every misfortune. In rural Chechnya, during the second war, a small group of people struggle to survive in the bleakest of circumstances. Marra collapses time, sliding between 1996 and 2004 while also detailing events in a future yet to arrive, giving his searing novel an eerie, prophetic aura.

—Joanne Wilkinson, Booklist

Look for more recommended reading throughout *The Double Dealer!*



## Spiritual Journeys: Undoing The Dehumanization

By Naomi Benaron

Until recently, I had not consciously examined my work in the context of faith, but then, serendipitously, I was invited to two events whose themes dealt with exactly that intersection. The first was the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual MacBride Lecture on Faith and Literature at Oklahoma Christian University, and the second was the **2013 Words & Music Festival**, which involved writing a piece for *The Double Dealer* on how faith has shaped my work. As I sat down to write, I realized that rather than the stretch of imagination I had feared, I had a lot to say. Faith has always been a formidable presence in my writing. Beyond that, it has been a formative force, the fundamental reason I put pen to paper.

As someone who has spent much of her life as a scientist, I am in the habit of analyzing, dividing, and quantifying. Thinking about the role of faith in my work, I have come up with three categories. The first applies to every person who has faced the terror of the empty page. This is the faith that words will come, that characters will be born and take shape under my somewhat watchful eye, and that, eventually, these creatures of my imagination will become three dimensional and will lead me on the most surprising, inspiring, and enriching journeys. On those rare occasions when the energy of the universe lines up exactly right and words pour out of me, I can only call that feeling a connection to a higher power. This connection is, I think, what all writers seek. It is, ultimately, what makes our writing uniquely human.

The second category has to do with writing as an act of witness. It has to do with facing the worst that human nature has to offer and coming out whole enough to set what you have faced on the page. When I researched **Running the Rift**, I spent a great deal of time facing those horrors. I interviewed many survivors of genocide and read many more accounts. I stood inside churches and schools where Tutsi had gathered to seek safety only to be slaughtered, often by friends and neighbors. By relatives. I went to the 14<sup>th</sup> commemoration and witnessed the power of the event, how its rawness and pain and terror still lurked just beneath the skin.

What could I as a writer do with any of that? How could I take these sharp-edged fragments of a living hell and turn them into something whole and alive on the page? I came to the conclusion that the only bridge that takes you from the horror to some sense of beauty is the bridge of faith. Let me be clear; I am not talking

about finding beauty in the event but in transcending the horror by turning it into art. I am talking about the unshakable belief that creation trumps destruction every time.

Ask the survivors of Terezín Concentration Camp who—despite starvation, disease, brutality, and the constant threats of transports to the death camps—crowded into cramped attics and basements after long days of forced labor, ragged, freezing in winter, sweltering in summer, to hear performances of operas, classical and jazz music, plays and academic lectures. In one of those cramped rooms, a well-known conductor, Rafael Schächter, gathered together 150 inmates, and with only one copy of the score and a legless piano led the inmates in rehearsals for a performance of Verdi's *Requiem*. It was an act of defiance and salvation. It was an act of faith. "We can sing to them [the Nazis] what we can't say to them," Schächter said. Because what Verdi's *Requiem* says is that we will all be judged for our actions. We will all face our God.

Most artists interned in Terezín did not survive, but their work lives on. Today there are countless exhibits, performances, and films based on this work. Beyond that, every artistic work born from the horrors of war, Holocaust, or genocide affirms the belief that creation trumps destruction.

This brings me to the third part of the knot that faith and literature make. In the Jewish faith, there is a tenet called *Tikkun Olam*. It means, *Repair the World*. I did not grow up in a religious household, but I did grow

up in a house where I was taught that through our actions, we must repair the world. I grew up in the 60s, and at the time, we thought we could repair the world by marching. For a while, it seemed to work. How much longer would segregation have lasted without the marches of Dr. Martin Luther King? How much longer would we have remained in Viet Nam, fighting an unwinnable war? Times are different now. Instead of my feet, I use a pen for *Tikkun Olam*. And isn't that an act of faith? To stand amidst the wreckage that we human beings often make of the world and rather than be brought to our knees to say, "I will take this, and I will make art, and through that art, I will change the world one reader, one listener, one viewer at a time.

There's a quote from E.L. Doctorow, and I always think of it when people ask me if I outline my novels. He said, "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." I turned on my headlights the moment I first saw the green hills of Rwanda rise up beneath the wings of the airplane as we began our descent into Kigali. I thought I had come as a tourist, but soon the stories I heard from the people I met and



Naomi Benaron signs her prize-winning novel, **Running the Rift**.

the stories that spoke to me from those who could no longer tell them took hold in my heart, and they would not let me go. The next moment of illumination came when I went for an early morning walk on the shores of Lake Kivu. It was 2002, and beyond the capital, Kigali, the countryside still looked like a war zone. I was barefoot, and my foot hit something hard. When I bent down, I saw that it was a human sacrum. I saw, too, that the sand was littered with bones and teeth. I held a few of those bones in my palms and I realized that they were not just bones, they were stories and that if someone did not honor those stories, they would be lost forever.

That was the moment Jean Patrick Nkuba, the main character in **Running the Rift**, was born. He hopped into the passenger seat of my metaphorical car, but it wasn't long before he was in the driver's seat. And, then, he invited his whole family inside the car and, then, he saw by the side of the road a beautiful young woman named Bea. He stopped the car, and she got in.

As I watched the patterns of illumination that emerged from the shadows, I saw that what I was writing about was much bigger than the story of a family plunged into the events of genocide. It was the story of how one group—any group—of people can dehumanize another until a neighbor or friend can pick up an axe or a machete or a club or a gun and commit murder for no other reason than that the victim does not look like you or belong to your group or belief system or whatever excuse the powers that be have dreamed up. It was the story of Armenia. The Holocaust. Of Cambodia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sudan. And now of Sikhs murdered in a temple in Wisconsin and of a war in Syria that rages on without end. I saw, too, that by creating three-dimensional characters, by giving genocide a human face and a landscape of verdant hills with sights, sounds, tastes, and smells, I had allowed the reader to get involved, to care. Hopefully, to fall in love as I had done. In some small way, I had undone the dehumanization.

From this I learned that every act of injustice tilts the world out of balance, and that it is our moral, spiritual and human obligation to do what we can to right the injustice and bring the world closer to a state of balance. When I get emails from readers that say, "Thank you for writing this story. I want to get involved," I know that my path of *Tikkun Olam* through writing is indeed a small gesture to push the world toward balance.

Of course I know that my words will not bring an end to genocide, but if I let myself think of the enormity of the task and the small ripple that one voice makes in this turbulent sea of humankind, I would simply curl into a ball and never move again. Instead, I think of one foot, one word in front of the other. I think of marches in Washington and Selma and protests in Iran and Tahrir Square. I think of genocide survivors in Rwanda and Cambodia who are now turning their experiences into works of art. Because who knows who will read one particular book or see one particular film or hear a certain piece of music and be moved to become the next

Gandhi, the next Martin Luther King Jr. Art breeds hope, and hope breeds faith. In the end, what else do we have? **Copyright, 2013, Naomi Benaron.** This essay was adapted by the author from the 9<sup>th</sup> annual MacBride lecture on Faith and Literature, delivered at Oklahoma Christian University.

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*Before she began writing, Ms. Benaron worked as a seismologist and geophysicist for companies including Mobil Oil and JPL. "I spoke computer until the languages got away from me," she says. She has degrees in Earth Science from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Scripps Institution of Oceanography and she still loves rocks and waves—seismic, light, or oceanic, a love which weaves its through my writing. Like light, I consider myself both particle and wave.*

## **Spiritual Journeys: Excerpt From: Running the Rift By Naomi Benaron**

Jean Patrick closed his notebook and packed up his books. Father had kept the class late, so he needed to hurry or Coach would be mad. Charging toward the door, Jean Patrick nearly collided with him.

"I thought I'd find you here," Coach said. *PLAY TO WIN*, his football jersey proclaimed. He handed Jean Patrick a pair of green Nikes.

"What are these for?" They felt as light as air in Jean Patrick's hands.

"Try them."

Jean Patrick slid a foot into the sneaker. His body tingled. When his toes hit something hard, he tried to force them in. Coach laughed. "I forgot. There are socks inside."

The socks were thin and soft, and with them on, Jean Patrick's feet slipped into the shoes like gliding through butter. He took a few prancing steps. The soles were springy; he almost lifted from the ground with his



toe-off. The sides held his heels like a firm hand.

"Ko Mana. Like this I could run forever." He fingered the strange fabric, waiting for Coach to explain.

Coach explored a space between two teeth with his toothpick. "They're yours, so get used to them. I'm taking the team to a meet in Butare next month – a real track. I want you to qualify for Nationals next June in Kigali. You'll have some competition. It's going to be staged as a two-country meet: Rwanda and Burundi."

Nationals – the first solid step on Jean Patrick's Olympic journey! He tasted the word like the first bite of a pastry, savoring the anticipation of the sweet in the center.

Coach squeezed Jean Patrick's toes. "A little big, but at the rate you grow, they'll be fine by next week." He re-laced the shoes. "If your inyenzi friends would stop making trouble, it wouldn't be such a struggle to get you recognized."

"The RPF are not my friends. I don't want to make trouble. I just want to run."

"Let's go," Coach said. "You ride with me. We have a few things to discuss."

On the way to practice, Jean Patrick flexed and pointed his foot inside the Nikes – his Nikes. First the shoes and now this place of privilege in the cab. Each time he stole a glance, Coach's eyes were on Jean Patrick, his mouth frozen in his familiar, inscrutable grin. He knew Coach was toying with him, knotting the silence into a noose of anticipation. Coach sped up and passed a slow-moving car, barely avoiding a head-on collision with a bus. Jean Patrick's stomach rose to his throat, and instinctively he gripped the door handle. The bus horn's wail followed them.

Coach laughed. "I want you to concentrate on middle distance – specifically the eight hundred. Those



**Naomi Benaron**, author of *Bellwether Prize* novel, *Running the Rift*, is running a race herself. "I am a marathon runner and an Ironman triathlete. Speed is a thing of the past, but I still train. I will always train; it's in my blood as much as eating, breathing, writing. My best lines come to me when I am in motion. I will never win the Boston Marathon, but if I can run it one more time, I will be happy. I grew up two miles from mile 16 on the marathon course. Now that we are emerging, forever changed, from the Boston Marathon Bombings, these words have a new and deeper meaning. If I can get to the start line in 2014, I will do it."

stocky Hutu guys have more muscle in one calf than you have in your body, and they'll pound you into the ground for shorter sprints. You won't slow down no matter what I tell you, so you'll fade for anything longer, but with your determination, twice around the track you can hang on and win."

A cloud of dust swirled toward them, and Jean Patrick rolled up the window. It was *umuhindo*, the small rainy season, and in the hills, women planted beans, peas, and maize. Through the haze he picked out the treetops along the far wall of the stadium, then the rusty galvanized panels over the seats, the walls, and finally the white line of a goalpost. The afternoon sun stained the brick walls pink. Even after four years, this first glance caused an extra little skip of his heart.

"I like the eight hundred, but I can win any distance." Jean Patrick said and touched a fingertip to his Nike Swoosh for luck.

Coach parked the truck in a scrap of grass. "Let me do the thinking, eh? You just run." He took his stopwatch and whistle from the glove box, committed to forward motion before his foot hit the ground. The rest of the runners headed toward the track, feet swishing through the dirt. "I'll make a star out of you yet, but you have to listen to me," Coach

said. "Have patience." He aimed a finger at Jean Patrick's chest. "*Buhoro buhoro ni rwo urugendo*." Little by little a bird builds its nest. Jean Patrick recognized the proverb with a chill. It was the same one Uncle had quoted to describe how the Hutu would wipe the Tutsi off the face of the earth.

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## Rowing to Sweden *A Postmodern Confession of Faith*

**An Essay  
By Fredrick Barton**

The subject is God. It arises, today, this way:

It is early morning, and I am lying in bed, drifting toward wakefulness. My wife Joyce curls against me. Softly, mostly still asleep, she says, "I love you." I put my arm around her, and she repositions herself with her head on my chest. I brush my hand across her warm hip and nestle my face into her hair.

And I find myself praying.

I pray, "Thank you, God, for this woman, for the love we share, for the opportunity to know love and to understand its distinction from desire. Thank you that after thirty years with this woman my love continues to grow and to seem daily as wondrous to me as all existence must be to a new-born babe. Thank you for the life we have built together. Thank you for the security our love affords us."

This prayer is heartfelt and sincere. But then I am conscious of praying it, and I am shocked. For I do not believe in God.

Or if I believe in God, I do so only intermittently. And even when I believe in God, I do so only hesitantly. Always, I think, as applied to me, the words "wish for God" are more apt than the words "believe in God." And yet my wish for God is a constant force in my life. I wish for God frequently, find myself thanking God for my blessings regularly. And always I ask myself, "How can this be?"

What follows is one part autobiographical rumination, one part literary criticism, a layman's labored answer to the question, "How can this be?"

### II

The subject is God, His (or Her—I will use the masculine pronoun out of convention—actually, I think of God as without gender) existence, most important His presence and activity in the contemporary world. It arises, today, this way:  
I find myself giving thanks to God for my wife and for the astonishing blessing that is my love for her. And then I am conscious of my prayer and I am annoyed with myself. For, though my belief in Him is murky at best, I am irritated with God.

I am irked at God because I have recently been going through a bad time. The particular circumstances of this period of unhappiness are not really relevant—I have suffered other such periods in the past and will no doubt

suffer more in the future. But I will pause to say that my current situation involves the loss of a regular writing assignment that I have enjoyed outside my duties at the university for nearly three decades, an assignment that has provided me with a bit of extra income every year through work that I very much looked forward to performing. I am losing this employment, in my view, because immediate economic issues trump all else, because qualitative performance is insufficiently valued and loyalty no longer practiced. I find myself shockingly powerless. But much as I am angrily frustrated with my former employer, secretly, subconsciously, I blame God.

I blame God in whom I only dimly and only occasionally believe. And thus I remind myself of Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife from Joseph Heller's black comedy about World War II, *Catch-22*. Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife is an avowed atheist who gets into a violent argument with the protagonist, Yossarian, with whom she agrees that there is no God.

The God in whom Yossarian disbelieves is responsible for "such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay." "What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His," Yossarian asks Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife, "when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements?" And "Why in the world did he ever create pain?"

Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife responds to Yossarian's tirade with the illogical admission that "the God I don't believe in is a good God, a just God, a merciful God. He's not the mean and stupid God you make him out to be." And that's how I'm like Lieutenant Scheisskopf's wife. The God I don't believe in is the God of Jesus of Nazareth. He is a good God, a just God, and a merciful God. And I am angry at him for not recognizing that I am a fundamentally decent human being who does not deserve to be deprived of this instance of employment I so cherish.

As I lie awake in the early morning, having caught myself giving thanks for my wife, I suddenly know that I blame God for my recent period of pain because I have not once called upon Him for either solace or relief. I think, I guess, that if God is doing His job, He should know of my anguish. I should hardly have to remind Him that I don't want to be unfairly deprived of my job. Haven't I thanked God for the blessing of this employment often enough in the past for Him to be convinced that I love it?

I chide myself, of course, that my loss of this work can hardly rank as one of God's top priorities. No matter how much I enjoy it, it's a second job after all, a mere supplement to my income and not a significant one at that. I will survive quite nicely without it. It's not as if I'm going to be impoverished. It's not as if I'm physically maimed. There are, in other words, an infinite number of worse things that could happen to me. And an infinite number of worse things are obviously happening to other people every day, things God would surely give his attention before the loss of a college professor's supplemental



employment.

But then I examine my self-chastisement. It is based on the frustrating acknowledgement that my suffering is insignificant beside the suffering of others and thus the implication that I have little standing to call on God for relief. But isn't such a premise based upon a nettling assumption about God's presence and activity in the world? Does God have priorities? If God has priorities, doesn't that imply some limitation on His ability to act in the world? Doesn't that imply some limits to his power? And doesn't that call into question God's very godliness?

And so I reflect on what it is I think about God, on how I think about his godliness. I was raised in a religious family. My father was a Baptist minister, a New Testament professor at a Baptist seminary for many years. I was reared to believe in the God of Jesus Christ. "God is Love," I was told. "God is like Jesus." And so I believed in a God who was longsuffering, compassionate, and forgiving.

But I was also taught to believe in a God of power and activity in this world, a God who listened to our prayers and responded to them if our motives were pure and our requests unselfish. I was taught that God's designs for this world were complex, of course, that they were not always in keeping with those of His followers. I was taught that the ways of God were mysterious but that in the end all things were part of God's design, that all things worked together for good.

Certainly I was taught that God was omnipotent—all powerful—that there was no aspect of this world which He could not directly alter if it became part of His design to do so; and that God was omniscient—all knowing—that no aspect of existence in this world escaped His knowledge. And as a child these teachings were part of the security of my upbringing, to live in a world which was presided over by a God who cared for me, who knew my needs and who had the power to protect me from evil.

But then I grew up. The kinds of self-doubt that plague all teenagers were aggravated in my case, somewhat, by my family's two relocations between 1963 and 1965 and the result that I attended three different high schools and seemed forever to be starting over at the task of making friends and developing a social circle. Oddly, this was the period of my greatest religious devotion. My commitment to prayer has never been greater. I beseeched God to deliver me from my

adolescent suffering. And by the time I graduated from high school I was convinced that He had.

My years in college, however, would see that devotion wither and then die. My social life was no longer the problem. But all other aspects of my life were in turmoil, and God now seemed deaf to all my prayers. The moves my parents made when I was in high school were the result of my father's declining professional fortunes. He was both a political and theological liberal in a denomination noted for its staunch conservatism. By 1965 his career in teaching was over. By 1967 he was through as a Baptist. By 1968 my parents would divorce, their marriage destroyed in a domestic tornado spawned by the hurricane demolishing Father's professional life.



Author **Rick Barton**

I took all these developments hard. For a time I sought refuge in the old tenets that God's ways are mysterious but that His grand design is at work in the world, that all things work together for good. In that light I sought, with increasing difficulty, to believe that my father would somehow emerge from his trials purer and better able to serve, stronger for his testing in the purging fires of unwarranted suffering.

But as 1968 meandered on and my heroes Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy fell to senseless violence and Eugene McCarthy's message of peace and redemption got lost in a nation flirting at once with fascism on one hand and anarchy on the other, my prayers took on a desperate, demanding quality. What was God waiting for?

When was he going to banish the injustice that seemed to be crushing me and everything I believed in? 1968 was a fearful, fretful year in my spiritual life. At some point my belief in God disappeared. But for a time I was too timid to admit it.

Then, in 1969, I made the bitter leap to avowed atheism. The cause I remember with the clarity of a deed in progress. The method was human logic. I read an article in the newspaper about an event of inconceivable horror. Hurricane Camille had raged through my native Gulf South. Somewhere along the Mississippi coast, a young couple and their infant daughter had been caught by the storm with only their aluminum house trailer for shelter. Camille had snatched that flimsy refuge in her 200-mile-per-hour clutches and had flung it over a mile inland, upside down into a ravine. The adults were killed instantly, but, protected by her bassinet, the baby miraculously survived. She lived, coroners somehow later

determined, another forty-eight hours or so. And, they judged, still living, she was feasted upon by maddened river rats, crazed by Camille's flooding of salt water into their freshwater habitat. What kind of God, I asked myself, could allow such a thing?

And I was thus crushed by the illogic of such a notion as the God I had always been taught to believe in. If God was indeed omniscient, then He certainly knew of this little girl's circumstances. If He was omnipotent, then He possessed the power to have delivered her from such an unspeakable fate. And if He was merciful, if He was a caring, compassionate God, then He would certainly have done so. What manner of being with the power to have done so would have not?

No grand design imaginable, no process for good possibly at work required this obviously innocent child's unfathomable suffering. And so what to make of a God who had allowed it?

I was forced, it seemed, to choose between one of several unappealing alternatives. Either 1) God was not omniscient and so didn't know about the incident, or 2) He was not omnipotent and so, even if He knew, was somehow limited in His ability to relieve her suffering, or 3) He both knew and had the power to save her but chose not to and was, therefore, indisputably, not good, compassionate, and merciful.

I recognized instantly that if either 1) or 2) were true, then God was severely lacking in His crucial quality of godliness. What kind of god is a weak and impotent god? On the other hand, if 3) were true, if God were callous or perhaps even cruel, then why in the world was He worth believing in? And so I chose a fourth option: God did not exist.

I drifted for some years in the spiritual void of this grudging atheism, unable to solve Camille's riddle. I took to blunting attempts to draw me into serious religious discussions with the quip that, like Gandhi, "I might be Christian, except for Christians." But my background made me uncomfortable with what I no longer believed.

And I struggled, now, to answer new sets of questions that arose immediately upon God's demise. All my life I had known to behave in a certain fashion: the way God would have me behave. I should keep the Commandments. I should love my neighbor as myself. I should do these things because God had created me, had decreed these ways of behaving as good, would reward me if I did, would punish me if I did not. But what imperatives endured in the absence of God? Why was hedonism not a perfectly appropriate response to a world without God?

After a time I found answers to those questions, and considerable solace, in a strain of Existentialism that expresses itself in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. In that book Camus erects a model of human life at its most trying. Bubonic plague has broken out in the North African city of Oran. The city is quarantined. The citizenry is trapped. Deaths number in the hundreds every day. The suffering

of those afflicted is horrible. And medical science is powerless to heal or save or even alleviate pain.

The book's narrator and protagonist, Bernard Rieux, is an Oran physician. He is also an atheist. He regards the notion that the plague is an element of God's will as spineless nonsense. But he is gradually exhausted by his labors in fighting the plague. Nothing that he does makes a difference. He can't list a single patient that he's been able to help.

Still, he keeps up his hopeless struggle against the disease. He is incensed at those, black marketeers and other agents of corruption, who make a profit from the circumstances of the plague. He refuses to approve the determination of one acquaintance who wants to escape. He rejects the surrender of another who commits suicide. Choosing as his hero, Grand, a physically weak and intellectually limited clerk who possesses only "a little goodness of heart and the seemingly absurd ideal" to do everything in his power to fight the plague, Rieux evolves a personal existential ethic that requires humane action in a godless world.

It works this way: In a world without God, survival is as logical as suicide, and survival's product, life, however bleakly absurd, is superior because it is something while death is nothing. The only sensible imperative is to affirm life, to live in such a way as to support those forces which promote life's dignity. Life may indeed be short, repetitive, painful, and purposeless, but it is all we have.

Camus' metaphor for this approach to living he based on the Greek myth of Sisyphus, the mortal who rails at a divine order that requires his death. In the myth, the gods punish Sisyphus by granting his wish for eternal life and then condemn him to the singular, repetitive, monotonous, exhausting, pointless job of rolling a boulder up a hill, a hill too high to overcome in a single day, a boulder which the gods viciously push back to the bottom at the end of every day when a spent Sisyphus pauses to rest. Camus posits Sisyphus as a model for all human existence and then, radically, challenges us to see Sisyphus as happy.

An attractive defiance attends such an approach to life. And it sustained me through the rough times of the late Sixties and early Seventies. It is capable, I think, of sustaining me still. In an unjust world that ends in certain defeat, there is something powerfully compelling about an attitude that nonetheless refuses to concede, that defies fate to the very end as does the philosopher Bokonon in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, whose response to a ruined world reads: "I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who."

But there is an unavoidable bleakness to this approach. And though I was sustained by Camus and the Sisyphian model, I was also aware how its existential imperative, in the hands of writers, like Vonnegut, for instance, can become less a bugle call to righteous battle

and more the resigned dirge of “So it goes.” Defiance was adequate as a last resort, in other words, but I frequently hungered for something more, something for the times when the anger that defiance requires is inappropriate.

And then into my world came a sixth or an eighth or a tenth reading of Joseph Heller’s magnificent **Catch-22**. In the midst of that reading, suddenly I grasped something that I had never seen before. Through the infectious laughter of Heller’s dizzying humor, quite abruptly, I understood the difference between belief and faith.

As a college professor, who teaches **Catch-22** to my lit students, I had long been idly puzzled by the novel’s opening lines: “It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him.” I had always seen the chaplain as a thoroughly secondary character in the book, a symbol of religion’s impotence to be meaningful in the modern world.

Chaplain A.T. Tappman is a likable, earnest, decent human being with a genuine concern for his fellows and an almost total incapacity to help them. But at the end of the novel, I realized this time, he does something pivotal; he provides something that makes all the difference. And thus I realized why it was that Yossarian loved him and why he loved him “at first sight.”

As **Catch-22** wends toward its conclusion, Yossarian is caught on the horns of a wicked dilemma. Most of his friends are dead, killed flying the exorbitant number of combat missions required by Yossarian’s unscrupulously ambitious commander, Colonel Cathcart. Suffering from a version of battle fatigue, Yossarian has unsuccessfully sought for months to be rotated off combat status. With seventy missions under his belt, twenty more than required by any other commander, Yossarian finally refuses to continue flying. And coupled with Cathcart’s reluctance to prosecute him—Cathcart is afraid of the negative implications for his own career such a prosecution might mean—Yossarian’s one-man mutiny threatens to spawn a revolution.

So Cathcart and his executive aide, Lt. Col. Korn, fashion a deal that becomes Yossarian’s great temptation: they offer to promote him, award him a new medal, and send him home a hero. All he has to do is collaborate with their plans to jump the required number of missions from seventy to eighty—or even higher. In Col. Korn’s terms all Yossarian has to do is “Like us.” At first, selfishly, Yossarian agrees. But then in an unrelated incident he’s wounded, and while recuperating he reconsiders.

The novel reaches its climax with Yossarian in the hospital, facing his several unappealing options, each of which has been previously embraced by one of his friends or acquaintances. Major Danby informs Yossarian that the deal is still on and that to make sure he takes it, Cathcart and Korn have falsified a series of documents indicting Yossarian for every offense from blackmarketeering to espionage. Should he try to back out, they plan to court-martial him without endangering

themselves through a discussion of the number of missions they’ve required.

At first Yossarian considers the response taken by his friend Dunbar, who tried to enhance the seeming length of his life through activities that bored him. “I might stay right here in this hospital bed and vegetate,” Yossarian tells Danby. But the strategy hasn’t worked for Dunbar who first lost his laugh and ultimately disappeared. Dunbar’s lesson is that to cease acting in the world is to cease being human. And mere life without one’s humanity is hardly worth having.

But the alternative of collaboration, like that embraced by former pals Wintergreen and Milo, Yossarian can no longer abide. “It’s a way to save yourself,” Danby counsels. But Yossarian knows better. He thinks of the friends such an action would betray. He thinks of the way his compliance would be used to force cooperation from others lacking his aggressiveness. He doesn’t employ such language, but he thinks about collaboration’s implications for his soul. “It’s a way to lose myself, Danby,” he concludes. “You ought to know that.”

Yossarian could, of course, agree to return to his unit and fly more missions. But that is tantamount to suicide. All of his friends who continued to fly are now dead. Rejecting that, too, Yossarian arrives at the end of his rope. Earlier in the novel he has contemplated a violent course, joining Dobbs in a plan to murder Cathcart and Korn. But he has seen the way in which violence gets instantly out of control as Dobbs keeps adding potential victims to his death list and finally includes people Yossarian considers friends. Thus his options now are jail for defiance, survival through collaboration, inhuman vegetation, or suicide. And none of them are acceptable. In despair, Yossarian confides to Danby, “Then there is no hope for us, is there?”

“No, no hope at all,” Danby concedes. But then into this attitude of despair, the novel’s unquestioned low-point, bursts the chaplain “with the electrifying news about Orr,” Yossarian’s former roomie who was presumed drowned after his plane crash-landed in the Adriatic. “Sweden,” cries the chaplain. “It’s a miracle, I tell you! A miracle! I believe in God again. I really do. Washed ashore in Sweden after so many weeks at sea! It’s a miracle.”

But Yossarian, who knew Orr best, sees the event in slightly different terms. “Washed ashore, hell!” he declares. “He didn’t wash ashore in Sweden. He rowed there! He rowed there, chaplain, he rowed there!”

“Well, I don’t care!” the chaplain flings back with undiminished zeal, “It’s still a miracle.”

And indeed it is. It’s a miracle that refills Yossarian’s empty fuel tanks of hope. And he’s launched back into action. The example, of course, is absurd—that Orr has rowed a rubber life raft from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. And the action it inspires is equally absurd. Yossarian decides upon a fifth, previously unconsidered, option, to join Orr in flight to Sweden.

For years I saw this ending to **Catch-22** in purely



existential terms. There can be no question that Orr, the alternative, is the book's Sisyphean figure. Like Grand in *The Plague* he is a man of only modest abilities, but a man with an unlimited capacity for perseverance. Like Sisyphus he is undaunted by the unending need to start over.

But then on this sixth or eighth or tenth reading of **Catch-22**, I saw something new. I saw that the good news about Orr was brought by the chaplain, the man of religion, the man of the gospel. Yossarian may not see Orr's purported salvation in the chaplain's terms exactly. But he doesn't deny the chaplain's designation of Orr's survival as a miracle. And on the basis of that miracle, Yossarian is himself revived.

So what does all this mean for me and my life? And why do I think about it as I lie in a warm embrace with my wife and contemplate my annoyance with a God in whom I have trouble believing? I recall it today, as I always do in such circumstances now, because understanding the implications of *Catch-22*'s end brought me in from atheism's cold.

Following Camus' imperative to affirm life requires a venture into the void. One chooses to act as Dr. Rieux or Grand acts because one believes that life is something whereas death is nothing. But there's no unassailable logic to such a system. A nihilist could flail its inconsistencies as surely as I, with Camille's riddle, have religion's.

Who is finally to say that life is something? There are certainly those willing to argue that life is worse than nothing. The Existentialist conquers despair by making up his own life-affirming rules and then striving to live by them. It requires only a tiny adjustment to include in that process of rule-creating a belief in, or better faith in, a God who cares for us and has the knowledge and power to look out for us.

Does Yossarian know that Orr has safely rowed to Sweden? How can he? What evidence does he have for such an absurd notion? He has the chaplain's word. Does Yossarian believe the chaplain? Who knows? But he has faith in the chaplain's good news about a miracle. How do we know? He acts on it. And so does this mean that Yossarian, too, finds safe harbor in Sweden? We don't know.

But we do know that Yossarian has been saved all the same because he has been reborn to action. And it doesn't matter that his action is both absurd and based on faith in the word of a chaplain about an event which is itself absurd. For Yossarian is in every way better off than he was when confronted with his series of bleak alternatives. Adumbrating all the dangers Yossarian faces if he tries to join Orr, Danby concludes that "It won't be fun."

But Yossarian disagrees. "Yes it will," he maintains. Yossarian is saved by faith in a miracle. And today, in my most recent hour of need, so am I. I am surrounded by miracles. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is a miracle. Life is a miracle. Most powerfully, love is a miracle. My Sunday

School teachers were right when they told me that God is love. I would put it now: to know love, is to know God.

And so buoyed by the miracle of love, I am saved for still another day. My belief in God remains cloudy and troubled. But based on these miracles, my faith in God revives. I have long since chosen defiant survival over hedonistic collaboration or suicide. I have simply added another absurd element to that leap into the void. Given that nothing about human life makes logical sense, having faith in a benevolent God makes no less sense. We so need for a God of justice and mercy to be at the helm of mankind's fate that I will embrace the faith that He is there indeed.

### III

My wife stirs again and I know another day begins. I hug her to me and I conclude. Love is a miracle yet love most certainly exists. So I choose faith in the miracle of God's existence and activity in the world, too.

Acting on that faith, I will rise today. I will persevere. I will press forward. If my former employer casts away my services, then I will counter by finding the time to write this essay. And in writing it, I will celebrate love's incredible miracle. And that miracle will propel me to join Yossarian, rowing to Sweden.

***This essay is from the collection, *Rowing to Sweden*, and is reprinted here with permission of the author, Rick Barton.***

***Fredrick Barton, Director of the UNO Creative Writing Workshop, Fredrick Barton is the author of seven books, including the volume of essays, *Rowing to Sweden* and the novels *The El Cholo Feeling Passes*, *Courting Pandemonium*, *With Extreme Prejudice* and *A House Divided*, which won the William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition Gold Medal for Best Novel. His many other awards include a Louisiana Arts Prize; the Stephen T. Victory Award, the Louisiana Bar Association's prize for writing about legal issues; and the Award of Excellence from the Association of Religious Journals for his feature essay *Breaches of Faith* about New Orleans recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina. He has also won the New Orleans Press Club's annual criticism prize 11 times and the Press Club's highest honor, the Alex Waller Memorial Award. His fifth novel, *In the Wake of the Flagship*, will be published in 2014.***

## When An Accidental Life and Uncertain Faith Collide, The Mystery of Creation Becomes the Focal Point

**By Rosemary James**

In 1982 one of the world's best-kept secrets is about to explode publicly and the lives of two young New Orleans lawyers, both dedicated to their careers, will change dramatically.

The lawyers are Peter Jacobs, the Senior District Attorney of Jefferson Parish, the largest of the suburban communities in the greater New Orleans area, and his wife Rebecca Downer Jacobs, a glamorous woman of unbridled ambition.

As the novel opens Rebecca is at her desk in downtown New Orleans in the 16<sup>th</sup> floor offices of a major New Orleans law firm, Mangel & Morris. She is gazing out of her window with a view of the city's Central Business District, waiting to hear the results of a partners meeting, waiting to learn whether she has been made partner in the firm. She has worked hard for six years to get to this point but, then, so have others, including her best friend in the firm, Amalise Catoir, another associate, also waiting to hear the results of the meeting.

Waiting, she evaluates her chances and believes she has a good chance that the call she is waiting for will be one of the good news she believes she deserves. At the same time, she wonders what will happen to her friendship with Amalise if one of them is selected partner and the other is not.

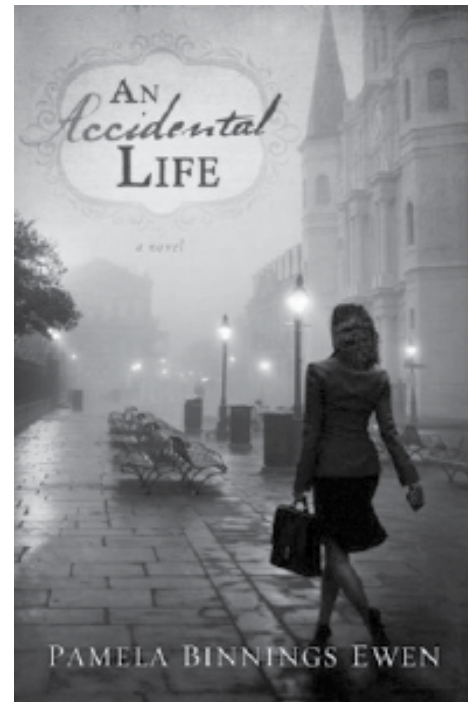
As she waits, she wishes she could pray. Amalise is among Christian believers and, strong in her faith, with an easy, conversational relationship with God, certain that when she prays, someone will be listening. Her spiritual relationship is a great comfort to Amalise, a fact that Rebecca realizes and envies for she has not yet been able to achieve a state of faith.

She is searching still.

Rebecca wants to believe, wants to be certain of what she believes, wants to understand how to reconcile her ambitions with faith. Her husband has an abiding faith in God and his Christian beliefs are at the root of who he is a man. Rebecca is deeply

in love with her husband but feels out of step with him.

She understands, for instance, that deep down, Peter wants children and she understands that he would be a wonderful father. Rebecca, however, wants a successful career in corporate law and is as driven to achieve this as Peter is in his desires to bring about justice for victims as a representative of the people in the complex, often unjust judicial system of Louisiana. She



wonders if he really can be happy about the decision they have made together not to have children because of their demanding careers.

These are the thoughts racing through Rebecca's mind when the phone rings and she learns that she has been voted in as a partner.

Concurrently, a new case has landed on Peter's desk. It concerns a child, a child who was made to die by the attending doctor after being born live during an abortion. As he and his investigator begin reviewing known facts and searching for more, he realizes that more than one child may be involved and that he is facing the most difficult and most controversial trial of his career both from the standpoint of the law and of his personal beliefs. He understands immediately that a political bomb has been dropped into his lap, as the case will undoubtedly pit the forces of both right to life and of women's rights to control over their own bodies against each other in a very public battle and that, one way or another, he easily become the sacrificial lamb politically. Trying the case or not is his decision will rest on the intricacies of existing laws on the books, such as Roe V. Wade, and his own judgement of what is right, what is just.

These are the basic elements of Pamela **Binnings Ewen's** latest novel, **An Accidental Life.**

Pamela Ewen is not a member of the Roman Catholic Church but her book deals in the universal truths addressed by most organized religions of the world, including the Catholic faith and **Archbishop Gregory M. Aymon of the Archdiocese of New Orleans** has endorsed it, saying the book is "... a

fine novel promoting the pro-life cause as it relates to the unborn. It deals with what might seem to be unusual circumstances, but today we are learning that these situations are more common than we think, namely the destruction of human life even after a live birth during an abortion procedure. The novel is a continued encouragement to defend all life from conception to natural death.

While Pamela's novels—and there have been five of them now, including this one—are not about religion *per se*, all of her novels have been inspired by incidents that have occurred during her own journey toward faith and in many instances draw on her own 25-year career as an attorney with one of the biggest law firms in Texas.

She writes with authority about the law always and the new novel—replete with examples of her firm grounding in the law and the kind of expert research lawyers do to win their cases—is a fine example of how one career can lead to and enhance a second successful and satisfying career.

Pamela, after years of the soul-grinding demands of a law career, began to question the value of what she was doing, searching for the meaning in it all and the first result of her own quest was the non-fiction book **Faith on Trial**, which was adopted as a text for a course in law and religion at Yale University Law School.

Why did Pamela give up the law?

“I loved practicing law, working toward common goals with teams of lawyers and clients, putting deals together, traveling, and solving problems. But sometimes over the years a thought would arise—as quick as the beat of a wing—just a stir in the air while I rushed through airports, hotels, conference rooms. Why are we here? That question began to loop through my mind after the tragedy of 9/11. I realized that everything that I had accomplished as a lawyer was of temporary value. Interest rates go up or down, business deals are modified, businesses change, their goals change. It all began to seem meaningless, really. There has got to be more to life than the pursuit of a career, I thought, and when my son was grown and happily living on his own, I decided to find the answer to my question: what is my purpose in life? What is the purpose in life generally. Today, confident in my faith, my energy is focused on writing, not law. If anything that I write has a lasting positive impact on someone else's life, or provides for him or her a moment of joy or hope, that will make me happy with the

life I have chosen.”

Asked if she believes in the concept of absolute truth as an objective measure of good and evil or believes that determinations of evil should be made by standards which are different for different cultures, Pamela replied:

*Secular philosophers have wrestled with this question for thousands of years. Some, like Kant, have reduced the idea to one rule for moral behavior, treat others as you would want them to treat you, a familiar underpinning of Christian faith. Some popular writers, like Ayn Rand back in the 60s and '70s, took the blatant position that the only objective standard for good or evil is*

*human selfishness, the instinct for survival. In my own books, I have tried to point out that they all are missing the point. It is **agape**—the ancient Greek word for the type of love and sacrifice for the good of others that exceeds self-interest. Great heroes exemplified **agape** on 9/11: the firefighters, police, and ordinary citizens who risked their lives for strangers with nothing personal to gain and everything to lose. In many cases they could have saved themselves instead. What keeps soldiers going in the face of battle and hardship and pain when one has a choice? I try to show that right and wrong exist outside of our 'selves', outside of our physical world, and that truth is absolute—no matter how we personally feel about a thing, like squares are squares, and one plus one will always equal two.*

*Acknowledging such truths is at the basis of choosing to live in faith or live with lies.*

After the success of **Faith on Trial**, it would have been something of a minor miracle if she had chosen to stick with the law for life, especially given the fact that she comes from a Louisiana family which has produced more than its fair share of successful writers, including her cousins, the bestselling authors James Lee Burke and Andre Dubus, III.

Just as her previous books of fiction have been inspired by incidents in real life, **An Accidental Life** is fiction based on fact. “The testimony of registered nurse Jill Stanek before a U.S. Congressional Committee inspired this book,” Pamela says. “Ms. Stanek confirmed that it was routine for doctors in Chicago's Christ Hospital to have nurses take infants born alive during abortions down to a “soiled utility room” and leave them to die.” Nurse Stanek's testimony led Congress to enact *the Born Alive Infant*





*Protection Act of 2001*, a federal-only law that still does not bind state run hospitals or private clinics.

“The fact remains that what happens to abortion survivors is one of the best kept secrets in the world,” Pamela says, “and I wanted to bring that dirty secret out into the public eye by dramatizing it in an accessible, easy to read, and understandable book of fiction.”

For reasons of personal faith I do not believe in abortion. Faith aside, I would be against abortion if only because over the years I have observed the toll it takes on women and their families in the aftermath. Concurrently, however, I do not believe that a bunch of over sun-tanned, gray-haired male hypocrites in Congress, who have no experience in what it feels like to be faced with pregnancy, should be determining a woman’s course of action.

We are talking about a moral issue here, an issue well-defined in the tenets of most organized religions. It’s a moral issue and in each case, a woman’s determination, should be based

on her own beliefs, the status of her health, the likelihood of carrying the child full-term and other health considerations. It is the woman herself who will have to face the consequences of her actions. That said, babies are human beings, regardless of the circumstances of their birth and should be protected not only by federal law but by state law.

Beyond that, in my opinion, the desires of nut cases like Ted Cruz to legislate morals are leading this country in a dangerous direction, one in which there is no separation between State and Church.

And we’ve all seen how successful that is!

Look at Iran, for instance. A total mess after 35 years of a cleric controlled government.

I state my opinions here as an example of the conflicting opinions and emotions of the mix of women who will be putting Pamela’s lead male character, Peter Jacobs, on trial himself if he goes to trial with his case involving live babies born during abortion being made to die by denying them the medical attention they deserve. In the end he will have to answer the question, to try or not to try the case within his own soul.

While Peter comes to grips with facing what he knows in his heart must be a passionate, spiritual battle against an evil with far-reaching consequences, the days for Rebecca, immediately after learning she has achieved partner status with her firm, are filled with the excitement of moving to a new, better office with a decorating budget, being singled out for interviews by the media. At the same time, she is having spells of dizziness and nausea, which she at first chalks up to the stress of the new workload piled upon her as a new partner. She starts to worry, however, and makes a doctor’s appointment. And what she learns will be the beginning of her journey toward faith.

*As an accidental life myself, I read **An Accidental Life** with high expectations of how the circumstances of survivors would be addressed in this book. My expectations were not only met, but exceeded. **An Accidental Life** is riveting, real and highly informative. Everyone needs to read this book. I guarantee that they will be both entertained and forever impacted.*

—*Melissa Ohden; The Abortion Survivors Network.*

## **An Accidental Life** By Pamela Binnings Ewen Excerpts

She was pregnant.

Driving home from the doctor’s office, Rebecca put the top down on her British Racing Green Jaguar convertible and let the wind blow through her hair. She switched on the radio to station **WTIX** and listened to music from the 60s, turning the volume up high. The news did not seem real.

When she reached home, she parked the car on her side of the two-car garage. Inside, holding onto her purse and the booklet that Dr. Matlock had given to her, she walked up the stairs to the master bedroom suite. There she kicked off her shoes. She took off her suit jacket and tossed it on the bed. She slipped the booklet into the drawer of the table nearby and sat on the edge of the bed, hands on her lap, feet flat on the floor. Minutes passed, and then her heart pounded as she opened the table drawer again and pulled out the brochure. Opening it quickly, before she could change her mind, she began paging through it, looking at the pictures and descriptions underneath. Each page had a photo of a blurry sonogram with captions underneath for week one, week four, week eight...she stopped there.

Studying the picture, without thinking she dropped her hand to her midsection. She studied the spine curving protectively, tucking in for the adventure. She studied the tiny arms and legs, and feet with toes already distinct. So soon? The fingers curled near the mouth and nose. And she could see an ear growing on the side of the profiled head.

She looked at the picture a long time. It was a personal choice she’d always replied when asked what she would do. Her own personal choice. Then she shut the booklet and stuck it back into the drawer.

There are options, Dr. Matlock had said. There was a choice to be made now, or so she told herself. She closed her eyes, not wanting to think of this.

Peter loved her as she loved him. But, as she stood there staring into the gloom, slowly, slowly the truth rose—who was she kidding. Peter’s entire career was devoted to protecting the innocent, to the sanctity of life in all its forms. There was no choice to be made. Not if she wanted to hold on to Peter’s love.

But, what about her career?

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Rebecca crossed the room, closed the door, and took a seat in a chair before Amalise's desk. Church bells from the Jesuit Church down Baronne street tolled 11 and the bells stirred something in her now. A melancholy feeling; the exuberance she'd felt after the *Spin-it* interview and the excitement of the trip to Italy next week vanished as everything came swooping back, bringing an acute sense of the dilemma she was facing. The thought of having a child terrified her, she suddenly realized. And those bells just made things worse, taunting her with the possibility of comfort in a faith that she didn't have, the comfort of knowing that an absolute truth existed, like Amalise believed.

Right now, she wanted a guide. She needed something like a menu with the choices labeled and stars placed near the favored dishes.

\*\*\*\*\*

She saw misery in Peter's face. Pushing aside the document that she'd been reading, she stood and met him on the other side of the table. Placing her hand on his cheek, she studied him. "What's wrong?"

He pulled her into his arms, resting his chin atop her head for an instant, then, he stepped back. "It's a case that Mac's working, Rebbe." He pulled out a chair. "Let's sit."

She sat down in her chair again. Peter slouched in, his legs stretched before him, elbows on the armrests, chin on his knuckles as he looked over her shoulder at the treetops and beyond that, the water. "The one you've been thinking about all week?"

He turned his eyes to her. "You noticed."  
"Sure. Tell me."

He nodded and looked off again as he told her about the Chasson case, what Mac had found out so far. Immediately, after she'd heard about Glory Lynn's abortion and hearing the infant's cry right after the surprising birth, she crossed her arms and rested them over the little bulge. Then she listened, remaining quiet as he told her of his fear that this wasn't an isolated case, his face taut with strain as he glanced at her then and wondered aloud how this could possibly be true.

And yet.

She listened, and she asked a few questions, offered a few words, trying to comfort him. But this case had struck Peter in some deep place and her words had no effect. Prosecutors were used to dealing with unthinkable crimes against innocent people, she told herself. Day after day they faced such horrors.

"It's all just so sad," he said.

She knew her decision to wait to tell Peter the news was the right one. There should be space between the Chasson infant case and her news. The

two subjects should not be intertwined.

\*\*\*\*\*

On Octavia Street, Rebecca sat in a rocking chair in the nursery, thinking of Peter's trial. He'd tossed and moaned all night in his sleep as he'd done for months now. The Chasson case had taken over Peter's life, she knew; he was obsessed with making people understand what he had learned—that babies born alive during induced abortion were being allowed to die.

She looked at the crib that Peter had set up. She thought of Daisy—or Gatsby—whichever arrived she would love. Day by day she'd felt her baby grow. Week by week she'd studied the pictures in the book that Dr. Matlock had given to her. And she'd begun to understand that life cannot be explained in human terms. That the creator exists, just as the witness John had written thousands of years ago, and that he listens and loves every little life on earth.

She hadn't spoken about these thoughts yet to Peter. They were too private, still. Too deep; too vulnerable, as yet. But she thought of Glory Lynn Chasson's baby and how he'd grown unloved, in contrast to her own. She spread her hands across the pages of Amalise's **Bible** open on her lap.

Amalise had left it open to these words:

*Life was in Him, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it.*

Darkness could not be conquered without hope, without revelation. And then she began to pray for something good to happen.

She prayed for the power of God to flow through Peter, so that he could help to shine that light.

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**Pamela Binnings Ewen**, after practicing law for many years in Houston, TX, exchanged her partnership in the law firm of Baker Botts, L.L.P, for writing. She lives near New Orleans in Mandeville, LA. In September, 2013, Ewen's novel, **An Accidental Life**, was released by B&H Publishing Group. Also, in September 2013, an updated, second edition of Ewen's best-selling non-fiction book, **Faith on Trial**, will be released, including a new 'User's Guide'. In addition to the new releases, Pamela is the author of four novels from B&H Publishing Group, including **Secret of the Shroud**, **The Moon in the Mango Tree** (a 2009 Christy Award Finalist), **Dancing on Glass** (a 2012 Christy Award Finalist, and winner of a Single Titles Reviewers' Choice Award), and **Chasing the Wind** a Romantic Times "Top Pick." **The Moon in the Mango Tree** recently was honored as winner of the 2012 Eudora Welty Memorial Award.

## The Sound to Come

By Terri Stoor

Ashtoreth danced beside the highway, a little ballet, some hip-hop, along the edge of the road and the mountain it wound through. This was northern Utah, near the state penitentiary with its signs posted admonishing drivers against picking up hitchhikers.

Not that he stuck his thorny thumb out anymore. His hair was tangled, shot with gray and dirt. His jacket had long ago given up any color, and his jeans sported holes like constellations. His wide, wide feet – common with demons – peeked out through the broken sides of his sneakers. With this appearance he found that those inclined to stop for him did, thumb or no.

A chain of cars had passed since his last ride ended. He wasn't sure those folks had noticed he left, screaming the way they'd been. It had gone startlingly well, escalating quickly to the point that the nice young man pulled over in the parking lot of a rundown Denny's so he could get at his pretty wife with his fists. Afraid glee might get the better of him, Ashtoreth slipped out of the car and went inside for a huge slice of lemon ice box pie and countless cups of coffee. Caffeine didn't affect him, but he liked playing with it, adding cup after cup of creamer and twelve or thirteen sugars before tossing each down in one great swallow.

In the old days he'd have stirred a pointed finger into the cup just to watch it boil, but the best he could manage now was a vague warming. His power relied on fervor and fear, and who could compete when humanity had become its own worst nightmare? Still, he did what he could.

Dusk deepened with a chill he could appreciate but not feel; his body ran hot. He was just considering burrowing into the brush to settle in for the night with the muscular snakes and oh-so-crunchy scorpions when a bottle green convertible slowed, brake lights radiant. He trotted toward it, smiling at his luck.

"Hey, thanks," he said, slipping inside.

The driver, forty-ish with close-cropped hair,

pulled back out onto the highway.

"No problem," he said. "I'm headed to Vegas. How about you?"

"Not sure, but I'll know it when I get there," Ashtoreth said. "So what's in Vegas?"

"What's NOT in Vegas," the man said, and laughed. "I'm meeting someone there, a woman. But it's not what you think," he added quickly. "I'm meeting my wife. She thinks it's a romantic vacation, but I'm serving her with divorce papers." There was a soft glee in his voice.

"Really?" the demon said.

"That sounds, I mean, to me, that sounds pretty harsh."

"Maybe. She travels so much I can never catch up with her." Ashtoreth could hear him smile. "We'll sure as hell catch up now."

"Why a divorce?"

The man shook his head. "It's just over. We never have sex, hell, we're never even together. When we are she's just a bitch. I'm over it."

Ashtoreth was silent, enjoying the air ruffling his hair, revealing his short horns in the growing dark.

"Aren't you worried?" he said.

"About what?" said the man.

"Being alone, not having anyone. Loneliness."

The man barked a laugh. "God, no. I can't wait to be on my own."

"I don't know," Ashtoreth began, "It's one of my greatest fears, growing old alone. Do you have children?" The man shook his head no. "That's good, I guess. Or bad – you'll have no one to care for you in

the end.

"Hey, it won't be like that! I'm still young, I'll meet someone new, I could still have a family. I'm not going to die alone."

The demon waited before replying. "Well, maybe," he said. "It could happen that way. What are you, 45, 48? That's not so young. To give up, cast off, even, someone who loves you – does she still love you?" he asked.

"She says she does."

"To cast off someone who loves you, dooming yourself to a solitary life, a desperate, lonely death, that's a terrible thing. Someone who could do that, man, I don't



*Terri Stoor, winner of the 2011 William Faulkner-William Wisdom gold medal for the short story, is a founding member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance, the New Orleans Chapter of the Words & Music Writers Alliance.*



know," he trailed off.

The car was quiet save for the rushing air.

"It wouldn't be like that, it won't," the man said at last. Ashtoreth tapped the man's wrist lightly with a fingernail, and watched him wince.

"It would," the demon said. "It would. And it sounds like it's already too late."

"Too late for what?" the man said. "She's excited, she thinks we're renewing our vows. It's not too late for anything."

"She likes you believing it's not too late. You don't think she knows what's up? I don't think you're the kind of fellow who'd marry a stupid woman."

"No, she's not stupid, but I swear she has no idea I'm even thinking about divorce," the man said.

"Oh, but she does," Ashtoreth said. "She's on to you. She may not even show up, you know. She may have bought a ticket to Paris, or Rio, probably with a lover, and is boarding a plane as we speak. She's nearly forgotten you."

The car slowed, and the man pulled to the side of the road. The headlights illuminated the black highway ahead. He turned to look fully into Ashtoreth's eyes.

"You think she's left me?" he asked. "You think there's someone else, and she's just left me?"

This was the moment. The demon looked into the man, holding him with his eyes, allowing them to glow just the slightest bit.

"I do," he said. He touched the man's shoulder briefly, briefly, but long enough. "It's over," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

He stepped out into the dust and sage, and began to walk away. When he heard the soft snick of the glove box opening, he grinned widely, his incisors gleaming in the fledgling moonlight. He did a little shuffle-off-to-Buffalo, ending in a delicate pirouette as he danced away, joyously anticipating the sound to come.

*Terri Stoor, winner of the 2011 William Faulkner-William Wisdom gold medal for the short story, is a founding member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance, the New Orleans Chapter of the Words & Music Writers Alliance. This past summer she was invited to and attended the inaugural Oxford American Summit for Ambitious Writers. Terri was also the second runner-up in the essay category of the 2011 Faulkner-Wisdom awards, and placed a short story on the short list for finalists in the 2010 Faulkner-Wisdom awards. In 2013, she was again an essay finalist. A former actor and comedian, she lives in French Quarter of New Orleans, where she is working on a collection of short stories and teaching her Labrador retriever to smile on command. Terri will read at the annual meeting of the Words & Music Writers Alliance on Wednesday, December 4, at The Presbytere.*



## The Sanctuary

A narrow Greek Revival building at 624 Pirate's Alley is where Nobel laureate William Faulkner wrote his first novel, **Soldiers' Pay**, and managed to have a rip roaring good time with pals like Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling finding his narrative voice. The building is now the home of Faulkner House Books, America's most charming independent book store. The book shop, of course, carries both reading and collecting copies of Mr. Faulkner's work. It is, in fact, however, a sanctuary for the work of all great writers—past, present, and yet to come—and for writers themselves, those who live in New Orleans and for our visiting authors.

## Faulkner House Books

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## A Conversation With Literary Superstar Dr. Reza Aslan About His New Bestseller: **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth**

By Geoff Munsterman

Reza Aslan wants to provoke you to think! As both a writer and scholar, Dr. Aslan aims to grab your attention and he knows how to do it. His latest work, the #1 *New York Times* Bestseller, **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth**, has made a lot of people mad. Most of them have not even read the book and are proceeding out of ignorance and, yes, hate to raise a ruckus.

In our post-Westboro, post-9/11 culture, the word “zealot” raises the hairs on the neck for the fundamentalist fringe. That Jesus, arguably the most influential figure known to the whole world, could be labeled zealot is enough to send fundamentalist Christians especially to the blogosphere ranting and raving about the evils of Dr. Aslan and his book. Obviously, these folks don’t even know the meaning of the word “Zealot.” Consulting several sources, I found “Jewish rebel against ancient Rome,” “Enthusiast,” “Evangelist,” “one who pursues with passion,”

Certainly Jesus was a rebel in ancient Rome challenging the very foundations of Roman government in Palestine, enthusiastically bringing his story of love and redemption as a passionate evangelist. “Zealot” is not a dirty word except for those of with a poor vocabulary.

Aslan’s first book is the International Bestseller, **No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam**, which has been translated into 13 languages, and named one of the 100 most important books of the last decade. He also is author of **How to Win a Cosmic War** (published in paperback as **Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in a Globalized Age**, as well as editor of two volumes: **Tablet and Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East**, and **Muslims and Jews in America: Commonalties, Contentions, and Complexities**.

Already a famous author known for his appearances on *The Daily Show*, *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *Rachel Madow Show*, and the ever-popular *TED*



Reza Aslan, author of **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth**

*Talks*, as well as various network news programs, where he is a frequent consultant on Middle East hotspots, the most famous (or infamous) appearance thus far of Dr. Aslan’s career is his interview with **Lauren Green**, chief religion correspondent **FOX News**. Of course, Lauren Green’s biggest gripe with **Zealot** wasn’t the book—she’s probably one of those who hasn’t bothered to read it, uninterested in knowledge, interested only in attacking someone who is not like her. Her interest was in attacking the author, making it all too clear that she does not believe Aslan has the right to study or write about Jesus. Her interview began:

*This is an interesting book. Now I want to clarify, you’re a Muslim, so why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?*

Prior to this hatchet job passing itself off as an interview, FOX’s website published a piece railing against Aslan the author, not once conceding his decades of scholarship or his various degrees in the field of religious studies, choosing to instead call Aslan’s **Zealot**, “...an educated Muslim’s opinions about Jesus.” For anyone who’s ever read a book review (or a book for that matter), it becomes clear that many of the objections to **Zealot** have nothing to do with the historicity of the book or the qualifications of its author. To put it in its distilled ugliness: Aslan is a Muslim, don’t trust him or anyone who supports or reads him. With fundatmentalists and creationists that that “interview” isn’t infamous for Green’s attack on Dr. Aslan. Rather, they hated that he had a reasonable man’s reasonable response to a discriminating

muckracker:

*Well to be clear, I am a scholar of religions with four degrees—including one in the New Testament, and fluency in biblical Greek, who has been studying the origins of Christianity for two decades...so it’s not that I’m just some Muslim writing about Jesus, I am an expert with a Ph.D. in the history of religions.*

When asked, yet again for some reason, why he would be interested in writing a book about Jesus of Nazareth, he replied:

*Because it’s my job as an academic...that’s what I do for a living, actually.*

It became very clear very quickly to educated people that the attacks on Aslan

# INTERVIEW WITH REZA ASLAN: *Geoff Munsterman*

were coming from people who obviously have never read a lot of literary work and especially not the work of celebrated Southern writer and National Book Award winner, the devout Catholic layman **Walker Percy**, whose complex but easy to comprehend philosophical positions included the distinction between knowledge (science and the humanities) and news, “the good news from across the sea” being religion, faith. Aslan makes the same point. He is interested in exploring history, knowledge, and, while he may analyze from a scholarly point of view a religion, he does not proselytize on behalf of any religion in his work. He’s not writing about the word of God, the Gospel or the Trinity, for instance. He is writing about the known, proven history of an historically important man of a certain era. He is not challenging anyone’s beliefs.

The early haters (those who get up early in the morning hating anyone who is not like them) would deny Aslan freedom of speech on the history of Christ because they hate Muslims. And that’s that. They don’t care that he’s a naturalized citizen, married to an American, and a distinguished scholar, teacher, and writer.

Aslan welcomes debate and he is likely to win in debate because he is more prepared for it than anyone who might care to take him on. Degrees include a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from Santa Clara University (Major focus: New Testament; Minor: Greek) , a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard University (Major focus: History of Religions), a PhD in the Sociology of Religions from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa, where he was named the Truman Capote Fellow in Fiction. While he enjoys the debate (it’s what he does for a living, actually), he also clearly delineates between arguments of faith and arguments of history. Faith and history exist on the same timeline, but only history exists as a verifiable entity. Faith comes from the heart and soul. Ever the academic, Reza Aslan isn’t concerned in his books with what he cannot study and prove. Even when it angers his detractors. He considers faith a personal matter and is not interested in debating it.

While his books’ titles—or the author’s personal background—may grab you, the works themselves warrant your rapt attention through the historicity of their arguments and lucid, lyrical prose. One chapter in and you realize Dr. Aslan’s personal biography fails to provide any valid reasons why he shouldn’t author a book about Christianity. In fact, were some of Reza Aslan’s critics willing to crack the spine of his book, they’d see his personal past makes him uniquely capable of telling the Nazarene’s tale. “When I was 15 years old,” Aslan begins his Author’s note, “I found Jesus.” The Jesus of Aslan’s youth was “less ‘Lord and Savior’ than he was a best friend, “someone with whom I could have a deep and personal relationship.” Over time Aslan’s relationship with Jesus became strained when he had to answer for himself difficult questions from both non-believers

and those of other faiths, when he had to face certain inconsistencies in the biblical teachings, when he had to defend refutations of his faith. Aslan’s story of losing admiration for organized religion is not a unique story. My father, for example, abandoned his Church allegiance after building churches here in New Orleans. Having to deal with the monied powers of the Archdiocese who treated him, a carpenter, like an illiterate fool, made their songs of praise on Sundays to another humble carpenter ring hollow for him.

Aslan’s experience as a young Christian in America differed heavily from the Muslim faith of his early childhood. “My faith was a bruise, the most obvious symbol of my otherness.” Aslan found himself by finding a faith that made him American and, at the same time, made him ask what being an American really is. Jesus of Nazareth, after all, wasn’t an American; he lived in Palestine. How Jesus of Nazareth became Jesus of Apple Pie, Mom, and Two-Car Garages is an enthralling story whose origins are foretold in the final chapters of **Zealot**. Just how exactly did a sect of Judaism in first century Palestine become the world religion we know as Christianity today? Dr. Aslan’s chief concern in his book, however, is not telling Christianity’s story. His subject is Jesus (not the Christ, but the man) and his subject comes to life in the hands of this gifted writer in a world that few of us can imagine.

The exhaustive research of Reza Aslan (whether you concur with his conclusions or not, he’s more than willing to discuss his findings) allows him to see it how life was in the time of Jesus and to relate with gorgeously evocative prose how it was, for instance, to enter the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and literally smell sacrificial blood exiting the necks of goats and pigeons—and see, perhaps for the first time in your life, the true story of someone with whom most of us at one time or another have had a deep, personal relationship.

Today, Reza Aslan, who lived for a while in New Orleans, before Katrina and its aftermath destroyed his residence here, today divides his time between New York and Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife (author and entrepreneur Jessica Jackley) and their twin sons and where he is Associate Professor of Creative Writing and Cooperating Faculty in the Department of Religion at the University of California, Riverside. I spoke with Dr. Aslan from Los Angeles after his book hit the bestseller lists.

## **A Conversation with Reza Aslan** **Geoff Munsterman**

**GM:** When did you originally start working on this book?

**RA:** I’ve been doing the research for this really ever since my undergraduate work in The New Testament, but I would say that I started the actual writing around 2010. Late 2009, early 2010.

**GM:** How did you know when you were done with the research and were ready to start the writing of it?



**RA:** Well, I don't really work that way. I do enough research that I have a pretty good sense of the story that I want to tell and then, as I begin that story, I delve much deeper into the research to fill in the information necessary to tell each part of the story.

**GM:** You had mentioned in your preface your own conversion to Christianity and your subsequent falling out with organized religion. Can you think to a specific time in your youth when a nonbeliever challenged your faith in Christ that made you question it?

**RA:** Throughout high school my closest friend was a Mormon who was very adept at the scripture, so when I tried to convert him or argue with him, he was able to always go to the scriptures, which then forced me to become much more adept at understanding the scripture. My study of the Testaments began not in college but in the debates and arguments with my friend in high school.

**GM:** The tone of the debates were friendly?

**RA:** Yeah, we were very good friends and I cared deeply about him, that's why I wanted to "save his soul" but it turned out that he knew far more about *The Bible*, about the *New Testament*, about the historical Jesus than I did and so, not only were my arguments not very successful but he had more success in convincing me that I did not know all that I thought I did.

**GM:** And so now when you face criticisms with *Zealot*, and I'm guessing that the tone of those are not nearly as friendly as your original conversations with your Mormon friend in high school, despite being able to turn to the texts and to your 20 years of scholarship, do you find that you still hit a wall when trying to get your point across?

**RA:** Well I'm always open to discussing the arguments of the book with anyone. What I'm *not* interested in is arguing faith with anyone. That's a very important distinction. There is nothing that I am going to say to a person who is arguing from a position of faith rather than scholarship or history that's going to change that person's mind. Nor do I want to change that person's mind. I have no interest in changing anyone's faith or challenging anyone's faith, but I also don't have any interest in engaging in a discussion about faith. So, you know, if someone says that my interpretation of Jesus is wrong because Jesus was God, well there's nothing to really talk about. There's no retort to that, not point of discussion.

**GM:** In fact, you say several times in *Zealot* that "we cannot know this" or "there is no historicity" or "it's a matter of faith." I think the book does a great service to people of faith to establish that you're not writing a book about faith.

**RA:** Right. When it comes to the history or scriptural interpretation, that's a discussion that I enjoy having. But

I'm not interested in having a faith conversation.

**GM:** One of the most interesting moments in the book is when you talk about the notion of history then and the notion of history now in relation to Luke writing his Gospel. You say: "The notion of history as a critical analysis of observable and verifiable events in the past is a product of the modern age; it would have been an altogether foreign concept to the gospel writers for whom history was not a matter of uncovering *facts*, but of revealing *truths*."

**RA:** That's right.

**GM:** Why do you think we crave factual understanding of history?

**RA:** I think that we are a product of the Scientific Revolution, which told us, "That which is true is that which can be empirically verified." And so people of faith, particular conservative people of faith, took that to mean that the only way **The Bible** could be true is if it could be empirically verified.

**GM:** When you've written a book on a figure known throughout the world, not exactly a subject that hasn't been written about before—in fact, there was a feature in *Publishers Weekly* discussing numerous books about Christ and Christianity that have come out or are forthcoming. Many of these books seek to discover Jesus of Nazareth away from Jesus the Christ. What do you think it is about Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus Christ, that is such an enduring topic?

**RA:** He's arguably the most important person in Western civilization over the last 2,000 years. Politically, socially, religiously obviously, economically. His words and teachings are used to justify great acts of compassion and creation as well as horrific acts of destruction and violence. I think that people are, for obvious reason, obsessed with who this man was what he meant. I don't see that interest waning. On the contrary, even as people are becoming less religious they are becoming more interested, particularly in alternative takes on Jesus of Nazareth.

**GM:** I found myself struck in *Zealot* by the idea that this is not a book that won't spawn other books.

**RA:** Yeah, I think that's actually already happened. Somebody published a book called **A Christian Rebuttal to Reza Aslan's *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth***. [In addition to Robert Alan King's book—King is an ordained minister—there is also **Jesus: Zealous Savior of the World - Some Answers for Reza Aslan** by James Snapp, Jr., another minister and self-proclaimed scholar.]

# INTERVIEW WITH REZA ASLAN: *Geoff Munsterman*

**GM:** Well I'll have to interview that author too.

The author is coming from a tradition of faith, and like I said.... He's not an academic engaging in the argument. He's a Christian saying that my vision of Jesus of Nazareth does not abide by Christian theology. Well, sure. Of course it doesn't. It's not Christian theology.

**GM:** Wasn't exactly the point of your book.

**RA:** Yes, right. That's precisely what I mean when I say arguing matters of history as opposed to arguing matters of faith.

**GM:** As a writer and teacher of creative writing, when looking at **The Bible** purely for its storytelling and then, as a academic going through those stories to refute them or dispute them: the virgin birth, Joseph going to his ancestral home of Bethlehem because of a required census by the Romans, John the Baptist. I was really saddened to see Salomé go because...

**RA:** It's such a great story. Just a story, yeah.

**DD:** Was there a particular story you were sorry to refute?

**RA:** Sure, I wish I could've written the story about Mary Magdalene. I wish I could've told the story about Judas Iscariot. But there's nothing to say about these people for the historian. There's nothing to say about them. The things that have been said about them were all conjecture, which is why they so often live in the world of fiction. So sure, as a storyteller, man, I would've *loved* to have told stories about these characters people are so fascinated by, but as a historian there's but nothing to say about them.

**GM:** One of the most compelling chapters in your book is "Who Do You Say I Am?" where you point to what you believe is the closest we as readers get to the actual Jesus. Jesus is often called the savior, the second coming, God on earth, etc. yet you show Jesus went out of his way to refrain from declaring himself a Savior.

**RA:** Really. It's a mystery, a complete mystery of what Jesus meant.

**GM:** A seemingly important mystery.

**RA:** Yes, I'd say the key to unlocking who he thought he was.

**GM:** Can you also talk about the moment you first started contemplating how this phrase is used and the subsequent scholarship you did into it?

**RA:** This is a title that has been debated and argued over for centuries because we just don't know. Nobody

used the phrase "The Son of Man" the way Jesus uses it. And there's a pretty good consensus that the phrase itself does come from Jesus, that it is historically something he called himself. Other than the fact that he may have been borrowing it from one particular verse in Daniel, we just don't know. What I try to do with it, what a lot of other scholars have done, is say well if we agree that he is borrowing the term from the book of Daniel, then let us figure out what it means in the book of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, it is very clear that the "Son of Man" character is being described as king. As king of all nations, in fact. My argument is that's what Jesus must have done, that he is using it as an alternative word for messiah, because 'messiah' is a toxic title in Jesus' time, it's one that almost immediately puts you into a certain category and leads you to death. It does not just mean 'messiah' but something very specific about messiah, which is his vision of Messiah as King.

**GM:** It's a death sentence to proclaim yourself that?

**RA:** To say you're the Messiah is basically to ask to be executed.

**GM:** What does the phrase mean to you personally?

**RA:** I really don't make a distinction to what it means to me personally or academically. I think it means 'King' but I acknowledge there are half a dozen different interpretations of it and some of them are pretty good. And I also acknowledge that in the end, this is one of those things we just don't know. We do not know. We don't know what Jesus meant when he says "The Son of Man." We don't know what the Jews heard when Jesus says "The Son of Man." We just don't know. There's a handful of mysteries when it comes to Jesus, and this is really right at the top.

**GM:** Even breaking down what it could mean, the Hebrew *ben adam* or the Aramaic *bar enash(a)*, both meaning "son of a human being." We suppose that maybe it was suppose to mean all things to all people, which is pretty clever, right?

**RA:** Yeah, right. Exactly.

**GM:** What do you think are the essential points of any work of nonfiction then, especially in a work of historical research?

**RA:** It's the story-telling. Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, your responsibility is to the story. The difference between fiction and nonfiction is that nonfiction is tethered to reality in a way that fiction is not, but insofar as the craft and the tools necessary in writing both, there's no difference. I think that's why people tend to enjoy my nonfiction, because I write it very much in the same way that I would write fiction. It's just that I'm

writing something that is historically accurate, not just a figment of my imagination.

**GM:** One aspect of any historical work, whether it's historical fiction or nonfiction, is that there's a lot of drama in the past. As a reader, to see someone weave that history, especially when focusing on a subject that's been turned over previously by scores of authors and make it new again is always rewarding.

**RA:** Thank you.

**GM:** Even the famous exchange of Jesus flipping tables on the money changers, it's a small passage in the book, but **Zealot** gives that moment a context that's never been there before.

**RA:** Exactly, yes.

**GM:** One thing **Zealot** does by chapter one is establish the political environ, the setting itself, the way the Holy Temple smelled and felt. Jesus is absent from the first three chapters, but you're placing him in a particular world fraught with all its specific elements so that we're ready for our main character by chapter three. Is there a moment when doing your research that you discover a particular line or phrase or some detail and think to yourself as a writer, "man, this'll make for great creation of mood, or...."

**RA:** Yeah! Yeah, I mean it was two points. One was the speech that Agrippa gives to the Jews right before the Jewish war, from which I borrowed the title of the fifth chapter: *Where Is Your Fleet to Sweep the Roman Seas?* Agrippa basically just lays it out in as clear a way as possible that this is a foolish revolt, you cannot win, you cannot beat Rome. Of course, the speech is for naught. Also, the speech that Eleazar the head of the Bandits holed up in Masada, the speech that he gives to the remaining rebels right before they all kill themselves. That is another speech that I think is just full of drama.

**GM:** Thinking about drama, the word "zealot" in popular culture has taken on a different, and far more pejorative, meaning than the days when the Zealots of 1 C.E. fought against the Roman reign of Jerusalem. While Jesus of Nazareth fit the term as it applied then, what do you think the title *Zealot* does to people before they've had a chance to read your book?

**RA:** It's a provocative title that has a historical definition, so to me it was the perfect title. I don't shy away from the fact that it's provocative, that it gets people's attention. I had hoped that it would, but the hope is that in getting people's attention to want to read the book that they then understand where the term 'zealot' comes from and why it is properly applied to Jesus.

**GM:** Do you think that 'zeal' should always be considered a pejorative?

**RA:** Not at all. I don't think that it should be a pejorative. I understand that 'zealot' can be a pejorative, but 'zeal' itself doesn't need to be.

**GM:** What the book does in terms of defining 'zealot' is to place *The Zealots* in a time of madness and murder where having a little zeal turned out being a powerful thing.

**RA:** Sure, yeah. I think it would come as a surprise to people to know that the vast majority Jews in Jesus' time would've probably referred to themselves as *Zealots for the Lord*.

**GM:** Do you think that being a writer and a scholar requires a certain amount of zeal?

**RA:** I think that writing a book is such a massive undertaking that unless you are truly zealous about the topic you might as well not even bother. I certainly believe that.

**GM:** And in terms of getting that book published, probably also true.

**RA:** In the publishing, the marketing, whatever you need to do to publicize it. You know, there are thousands upon thousands of really great books that are written every year that don't get a lot of attention. You really have to have a certain zeal for yourself and for your work to rise above the cacophony of the publishing industry.

**DD:** You're a teacher of creative writing. Is that zeal for your work and yourself the one thing you can't teach?

**RA:** Well, creative writing, or really any of the fine art, is as much an art as it is the craft. We don't teach the art. The art can't really be taught. But the craft can be taught. So what we take is people who already have a sense of what it means to be a writer and we help them shape their craft to be a better writer.

**GM:** And at the level of someone furthering their craft for their art, they should probably have a certain amount of passion and zeal?

**RA:** For certain.



## Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth (excerpt)

When I was 15 years old, I found Jesus. I spent the summer of my sophomore year at an evangelical youth camp in Northern California, a place of timbered fields and boundless blue skies, where, given enough time and stillness and soft-spoken encouragement, one could not help but hear the voice of God. Amidst the man-made lakes and majestic pines my friends and I sang songs, played games, and swapped secrets, rollicking in our freedom from the pressures of home and school. In the evenings, we gathered in a fire-lit assembly hall at the center of the camp. It was there that I heard a remarkable story that would change my life forever.

Two thousand years ago, I was told, in an ancient land called Galilee, the God of heaven and earth was born in the form of a helpless child. The child grew into a blameless man. The man became the Christ, the savior of humanity. Through his words and miraculous deeds, he challenged the Jews who thought they were the chosen of God, and in return the Jews had him nailed to a cross. Though he could have saved himself from that gruesome death, he freely chose to die. Indeed, his death was the point of it all, for his sacrifice freed us all from the burden of our sins. But the story did not end there, because three days later, he rose again, exalted and divine, so that now, all who believe in him and accept him into their hearts will also never die, but have eternal life.

For a kid raised in a motley family of lukewarm Muslims and exuberant atheists, this was truly the greatest story ever told. Never before had I felt so intimately the pull of God. In Iran, the place of my birth, I was Muslim in much the way I was Persian. My religion and my ethnicity were mutual and linked. Like most people born into a religious tradition, my faith was as familiar to me as my skin, and just as disregardable. After the Iranian revolution forced my family to flee our home, religion in general, and Islam in particular, became taboo in our household. Islam was shorthand for everything we had lost to the mullahs who now ruled Iran. My mother still prayed when no one was looking, and you could still find a stray Quran or two hidden in a closet or a drawer somewhere. But, for the most part, our lives were scrubbed of all trace of God.

That was just fine with me. After all, in the America of the 1980s, being Muslim was like being from Mars. My faith was a bruise, the most obvious symbol of my otherness; it needed to be concealed.

Jesus, on the other hand, was America. He was the central figure in America's national drama. Accepting him into my heart was as close as I could get to feeling truly American. I do not mean to say that mine was a conversion of convenience. On the contrary, I burned with absolute devotion to my newfound faith. I was presented with a Jesus who was less "Lord and Savior" than he was a best friend, someone with whom I could have a deep and

personal relationship. As a teenager trying to make sense of an indeterminate world I had only just become aware of, this was an invitation I could not refuse.

The moment I returned home from camp, I began eagerly to share the good news of Jesus Christ with my friends and family, my neighbors and classmates, with people I'd just met and with strangers on the street: those who heard it gladly, and those who threw it back in my face. Yet something unexpected happened in my quest to save the souls of the world. The more I probed the Bible to arm myself against the doubts of unbelievers, the more distance I discovered between the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus of history – between Jesus the Christ and Jesus of Nazareth. In college, where I began my formal study of the history of religions, that initial discomfort soon ballooned into full-blown doubts of my own.

The bedrock of evangelical Christianity, at least as it was taught to me, is the unconditional belief that every word of **The Bible** is God-breathed and true, literal, and inerrant. The sudden realization that this belief is patently and irrefutably false, that **The Bible** is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions—just as one would expect from a document written by hundreds of different hands across thousands of years—left me confused and spiritual unmoored. And so, like many people in my situation, I angrily discarded my faith as if it were a costly forgery I had been duped into buying. I began to rethink the faith and culture of my forefathers, finding in them as an adult a deeper, more intimate familiarity than I ever had as a child, the kind that comes from reconnecting with an old friend after many years apart.

Meanwhile, I continued my academic work in religious studies, delving back into **The Bible** not as an unquestioning believer but as an inquisitive scholar. No longer chained to the assumption that the stories I read were literally true, I became aware of a more meaningful truth in the text, a truth intentionally detached from the exigencies of history. Ironically, the more I learned about the life of the historical Jesus, the turbulent world in which he lived, and the brutality of the Roman occupation that he defied, the more I was drawn to him. Indeed, the Jewish peasant and revolutionary who challenged the rule of the most powerful empire the world had ever known and lost became so much more real to me than the detached, unearthly being I had been introduced to in church.

Today, I can confidently say that two decades of rigorous academic research into the origins of Christianity has made me a more genuinely committed disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than I ever was of Jesus Christ. In fact, my newest book, **Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth** is my attempt to spread the good news of the Jesus of history with the same fervor that I once applied to spreading the story of the Christ. Because I am convinced that one can be a devoted follower of Jesus without being a Christian, just as I know that one can be a Christian without being a follower of Jesus.

## Review: State, Religion, and Revolution in Iran, 1796 to the Present

By Behrooz Moazami

Behrooz Moazami's new non-fiction book is built around two basic assumptions that have shaped scholarly understanding of recent Iranian history:

One: Shi'ism is an integral part of Iran's religious and cultural landscape.

Two: The *ulama* (religious scholars) have always played a crucial role.

In his book, Moazami, Associate Professor of History and Founder and Director of Middle East Peace Studies at Loyola University New Orleans, challenges these assumptions and constructs a new synthesis of the history of state and religion in Iran from 1796 to the present while also refuting some of the existing theories of large-scale, permanent political transformations.

Moazami, an Iranian political activist, holds two doctorates, one in political science and one in sociology and historical studies. Before joining academia, he worked as a journalist, essayist, and co-editor of various dissident publications.

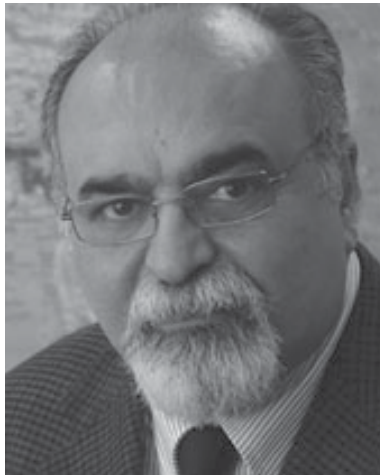
Arguing that the 1979 revolution has not ended, Moazami relates political and religious instability in Iran to the political chaos in the Middle East region and concludes that turmoil will continue until a new regional configuration evolves.

With Iran as a focal point of U. S. diplomacy right now, because of Iran's nuclear development and also because it has been the center of political unrest throughout the Middle East for a generation, it behooves Americans who would understand how we are being impacted by Iran to read Moazami's book and to read other works about Iran that lend insight into the current threat posed to America and its allies.

Behrooz, who has been teaching in New Orleans since 2007, writes from an historical perspective. He is not a practicing Muslim and his book is not a theological treatise.

He was born in Tehran, Iran into a family with a long history of involvement in public and political life. He entered semi-secret dissident reading and discussion circles when he was in high school and later immersed himself in the intellectual and political milieu of the late 60s and 70s when studying in the United States. After completing two years of college, studying math and

physics, he left college to live the passionate life of a political activist for more than two decades. Similar to many activists of his generation, he was an organizer, publicist and occasionally a writer. He worked for the overthrow of the last Shah. A day after the departure of the Shah from Iran, he got his passport back and was on the first plane that flew into Iran immediately after the revolution. He soon became disillusioned with the direction in which the country was going, however. Behrooz lived in Iran for four and half years after the revolution, two years clandestinely, but was forced to leave in 1983 and has been living in exile since, first in Paris and, since 1992, in the United States. Today, he remains opposed to a return of the monarchy in Iran but also is opposed to the cleric controlled government. He describes himself as liberal and secular in his Iranian politics.



**Behrooz Moazami**, author of the new book, **State, Religion, and Revolution in Iran, 1796 to the Present**

In his Parisian exile, he co-founded and co-edited *Andisheye Rahai* (Thoughts of Emancipation), a Persian-language theoretical and cultural quarterly review that was one of the most prestigious such journals of Iranian exiles of the time and he supervised many related publications. When political persecution forced him to stop publication, he entered graduate school at the age of 37 when a special committee of the political science Department at the University of Paris VIII concluded that his work as an essayist, journalist, and editor was strong enough to be admitted to a graduate program. This was the beginning of his academic formation.

His Ph.D. in Political Science and European Studies is from the University of Paris VIII and his Ph.D. in Sociology and Historical Studies from the New School for Social Research in New York.

Iran, formerly known Persia, is much misunderstood by westerners who frequently don't even understand the difference between the history and development of Arab countries and the history and development of Persia-Iran. Some historians have said that Iran has centuries-old a chip on its shoulder, placed there when Alexander the Great, King of Macedonia, defeated the Persians, marking the end of one of the great Empires of the ancient world. And they go on to theorize that visions of restoring Iran to empire status are a permanent part of the DNA of Iranian leaders, both clerical and secular, and they warn that the chip on the shoulder is not going to be removed any time soon.

Moazami's book takes in just a few years more than two centuries of Iranian political history. While Moazami does not take us back to the earliest days of Persia and its downfall, he takes us back far enough to more easily comprehend contemporary Iran and its role

in the chaotic conditions of the Middle East today. As a background initiative for reading the book, we present here just a compressed capsule of the political changes within Iran, which have impacted the outside world, including especially, the United States, during the last 35 years. The material has been assembled from major media reports, scholarly reports, and encyclopedic sources.

The destabilization of the Middle East has had much to do with the rule of the late **Ruhollah Mostafavi Musavi Khomeini**, who died in 1989 at the age of 87. Khomeini held the official title of **Grand Ayatollah**, was known as **Imam Khomeini** inside Iran and by his supporters internationally, and known in the West as **Ayatollah Khomeini**. The Iranian religious leader and politician was the architect of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which saw the overthrow of **Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**, the Shah of Iran. Following the revolution, Khomeini became the country's Supreme Leader, a position created in the constitution as the highest ranking political and religious authority of the nation, a position he held until his death.

Khomeini was a *Marja* ("source of emulation") in Twelver Shi'a Islam, the faith of the majority in Iran and Iraq, and was author of more than 40 books, but is primarily known in the West for his political activities. Before the revolution, he spent more than 15 years in exile for his opposition to the last Shah. In his writings and preachings he expanded the *Shi'a Usuli* theory of *velayat-e faqih*, the "guardianship of the jurisconsult (clerical authority)," to include theocratic political rule by the Islamic jurists.

This principle (though not known to the wider public before the revolution) was installed in the new Iranian constitution after being put to a referendum. He was named *Man of the Year* in 1979 by the news magazine *Time* for his international influence, and has been the "virtual face of Islam" in Western culture, where he remains an icon of unrest.

He was, for instance, known for his support of the hostage takers during the Iran hostage crisis and his fatwa calling for the death of British Indian novelist **Salman Rushdie**. Khomeini has been criticized for these acts and for human rights violations of Iranians, including the execution of thousands of political prisoners. He also, however, has been lauded as a "charismatic leader" and a "champion of Islamic revival" by Shia scholars.

He was Supreme Leader during all of the Iraq –

Iran War (Or First Persian Gulf War), which lasted from September 1980 to August 1988, making it the 20th century's longest conventional war. The Iraq - Iran War, considered one of the most violent conflicts since World War II, began when Iraq invaded Iran via air and land on September 22, 1980. It followed a long history of border disputes, and was motivated by fears that the Iranian Revolution in 1979 would inspire insurgency among Iraq's long-suppressed Shia majority as well as Iraq's desire to replace Iran as the dominant Persian Gulf state. Although Iraq hoped to take advantage of Iran's revolutionary chaos and attacked without formal warning, they made only limited progress into Iran and were quickly repelled. Iran regained virtually all lost territory by June, 1982 and for the next six years, remained on the offensive.

The war finally ended when a U.N.-brokered ceasefire was accepted by both sides. At the war's conclusion, it took weeks for Iranian armed forces to evacuate Iraqi territory to honor pre-war international borders. The last prisoners of war were not exchanged until 2003. The war cost for both sides was enormous in lives and economic damage: half a million Iraqi and Iranian soldiers, with an equivalent number of civilians, are believed to have died, with many more injured. And in the end, there were neither reparations nor changes in borders.

The conflict has been compared to World War I in terms of the tactics used, including large-scale trench warfare with barbed wire stretched across trenches, manned machine-gun posts, bayonet charges, human wave attacks across a no-man's land, and extensive use of chemical weapons such as mustard gas by the Iraqi government against Iranian troops, civilians, and Iraqi Kurds. At the time of the conflict, the U.N. Security Council issued statements that "chemical weapons had been used in the war." U.N. statements never clarified that only Iraq was using chemical weapons, and according to retrospective authors "the international community remained silent as Iraq used weapons of mass destruction against Iranians as well as Iraqi Kurds."

When the Ayatollah Khomeini died a year after the war ended, Shireen T. Hunter, then Deputy Director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., writing in *Foreign Affairs*, said:

*The death of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini on June 3, 1989, closed a turbulent chapter in Iran's long*



**Hassan Rouhani** (first row, 2nd from left) praying with the **Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini** and his followers in Neauphle-le-Château, France, 1978.



history and opened a new and still uncertain phase in its evolution as a nation. The passing of the man who branded America as the "Great Satan" also created expectations that a decade of U.S.-Iranian animosity will, in time, come to an end.

At the time there was some backdoor diplomacy in the works and there was reason to be hopeful that an end to turmoil in U. S. relations with Iran might at least be on the horizon. Most observers of Iranian affairs, however, had long expected that Khomeini's death would create a power vacuum in Iran, with intense infighting among its Islamic leadership factions. Developments during the months immediately preceding the Ayatollah's death only fueled these expectations. **Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri**, the designated successor as Iran's post-Khomeini spiritual leader, was abruptly and unceremoniously dismissed on March 28, 1989 signaling a reversal of any moderating trends in Iranian politics as did the outcry led by Khomeini against the controversial author **Salman Rushdie**. Radical figures appeared to have regained Khomeini's ear and favor.

At the time, Iran's leadership was engaged in a heated debate over the reform of its Islamic constitution, focusing especially on the respective roles of the president, the parliament and the prime minister. As it stood, the constitution, especially the division of executive power between the president and the prime minister, had made governing almost impossible, without even taking into consideration the clerical controls.

Although conflicts within Iran were anticipated, few reckoned that in addition to internal schisms within the factions of Iranian leadership, the hard line clerics and their designated secular leaders would begin taking steps that would put any hopes of achieving accord with the West completely out of the question for the predictable future.

**Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei**, still in power today, followed Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme leader, selected in 1989 by an 80-member Council of Islamic Experts. A Khomeini disciple, key revolutionary strategist, and an innovative president before elevation to Supreme Leader, Khamenei began advanced religious training at age 18 at Najaf, Iraq. He moved to Qom, Iran, in 1958, where he became a close student of Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1963 he was involved in the massive student protests against the Shah's Western-oriented reforms. The protests were brutally crushed by forces of the Shah, and Khomeini was exiled. Later, Khamenei continued his studies in Meshed, eventually achieving recognition as *hojatolislam* (authority on Islam), a rank only one step beneath ultimate esteem as an ayatollah. Khamenei's Farsi, Arabic, and Turkish language skills helped him as a literary critic and translator of works on Islamic science, history, and Western civilization. Khamenei's own books include a study of Muslims in the liberation of India.

Khamenei's teachings angered the Shah and his agents. Frequent arrests and three years of imprisonment

were followed by a year of internal exile in the Baluchi desert region. Undaunted, Khamenei returned in time to help orchestrate the nationwide street battles that resulted in the Shah's overthrow and the triumphant return of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.

An original member of the Revolutionary Council, Khamenei co-founded the Islamic Republican Party. He rose rapidly as clerics consolidated control of the revolution. He was designated the prestigious Friday prayer leader for the capital city of Tehran, and was elected to the *Majlis* (parliament). Khamenei also directed the ideological indoctrination of the military and the formation of the autonomous and ideologically driven Revolutionary Guards. Khamenei staunchly defended the militant students who held 52 American diplomats for 444 days. After Iraq invaded Iran, Khamenei was Khomeini's first personal representative on the powerful Supreme Defense Council, from where he helped discredit then President Abulhassan Banisadr for being inclined to accept Iraqi cease-fire offers, as Khamenei favored hard-line stands to help generate "born again" self-confidence in the Iranian people.

Scores of top revolutionary clerics and secular politicians had been killed by bombs planted by the **Mujahedeen-e-Khalq** (labeled by the Shah's forces as Islamic-Marxist guerrillas) and **Mohammad-Ali Rajai** was the president of Iran for just 21 days in August of 1981 after serving as Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs under Banisadr. He was assassinated in a bombing on August 30, 1981, along with prime minister **Mohammad-Javad Bahonar**. Khamenei was elected president on October 2, 1981, almost by default. Khamenei himself, in fact, barely survived a tape-recorder bomb; his right arm and voice remained damaged.

He has continued Khomeini's policy of playing one group off another, making certain that no faction grabs too much power. But, Iran watchers say, lacking Khomeini's charisma and clerical standing, he has resorted to developing networks inside the armed forces, the clerics administering the major religious foundations (*bonyads*), and seminaries. According to Iran scholar-watchers, he has brought many of the powers of the presidency with him into the office, turning it into what many describe as an "omnipotent overseer of Iran's political scene." Officials under Khamenei influence the country's various powerful, and sometimes bickering, institutions, including the parliament, presidency, judiciary, Revolutionary Guards, military, intelligence services, police agencies, elite clerics, Friday prayer leaders, and much of the media, as well as various nongovernmental foundations, organizations, councils, seminaries and business groups. Under him, the government is said to be more like an oligarchy of clerics than an autocracy. However, there is no doubt as to who pulls all of the strings.

**Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani**, an influential Iranian politician and writer, became fourth president of Iran. He also was a member of the Assembly of Experts

until his resignation in 2011. He is chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council of Iran.

During the Iran–Iraq War Rafsanjani was the de facto commander-in-chief of the Iranian military. Rafsanjani was elected chairman of the Iranian parliament in 1980, serving until 1989, when he was president. He served two terms and played an important role in the choice of Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader. In 2005 he ran for a third term in office, placing first in the first



**Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani,**  
fourth President of the  
Republic of Iran

round of elections but ultimately losing to rival **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** in the run-off round of the 2005 election.

Rafsanjani, reputedly the richest man in Iran, has been described as a centrist and a pragmatic conservative, who has supported a free market position domestically, favoring privatization of state-owned industries, and a moderate position internationally, seeking to avoid conflict with the United States and the West generally.

In 1997 during the Mykonos trial in Germany, it was declared that Rafsanjani, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Ali-Akbar Velayati, then foreign minister, and Ali Fallahian, Intelligence Minister, had a role in assassination of Iran's opposition activists in Europe. Iranian-Kurdish opposition leaders Sadegh Sharafkandi, Fattah Abdoli, Homayoun Ardalan and their translator Nouri Dehkordi were assassinated in a Mafia style hit at the Mykonos Greek restaurant in Berlin, Germany in September of 1992. **Abol Hassan Banisadr** took part in the trial as a witness. Banisadr became first President of Iran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the abolition of the monarchy. He served from 1980 until his impeachment just over a year later by the Parliament of Iran on charges of corruption. He testified that the killings had been personally ordered by Ayatollah Khamenei and

Rafsanjani and Fallahian. His power disintegrated when Iranians, angered by his wealth, back-room dealings and supposed involvement in the killing of the dissidents, nicknamed him "Akbar Shah," after the old Persian rulers who sat on velvet cushions in lush courtyards. Political rivals, jealous of his grip on the economy, seized on his support for reformists and labeled him an "aristocrat," a "capitalist" and a supporter of "American Islam"

In 2002, his political stock had fallen so low that he did not capture enough votes to win a seat in Parliament. He suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands



**Abol Hassan Banisadr,**  
former President of Iran

of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, and two of his children ended up in jail. His speech in favor of greater freedom during the 2009 protests alienated him from Iran's conservative clerics and military commanders.

**Mohammad Khatami**, an Iranian scholar, Shia theologian, and Reformist politician, served as the fifth President of Iran from 1997 to August 2005.

He also served as Iran's Minister of Culture in both the 1980s and 1990s. Little

known until that point, Khatami attracted global attention during his first election to the presidency when—running on a platform of liberalization and reform—he captured nearly 70 percent of the vote. Khatami's winning coalition was one of supporters described as "strange bedfellows, including traditional leftists, business leaders who wanted the state to open up the economy and allow more foreign investment, women, and younger voters. During his two terms as president, Khatami advocated freedom of expression, tolerance and civil society, constructive diplomatic relations with other states including those in the Asia and European Union, and an economic policy that supported a free market and foreign investment. Khatami is, perhaps, best known for his proposal of *Dialogue Among Civilizations*. The United Nations proclaimed the year 2001 as the United Nations' *Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations*, on Khatami's suggestion.

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, the Iranian politician who became the sixth Iran in 2005 and served until earlier this year, 2013, was principal political leader of the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, a coalition of conservative political groups in the country. An engineer and teacher from a poor background, Ahmadinejad joined the Office for Strengthening Unity after the Iranian Revolution. Appointed a provincial governor, he was removed after the election of President **Mohammad Khatami** and returned to teaching.

Then, Tehran's council elected him mayor in 2003. He took a religious hard line, reversing reforms of previous moderate mayors. His 2005 he became President when, supported by the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, he received 62 per cent of the runoff election votes. Ahmadinejad became a highly controversial figure within Iran and internationally. On the domestic front, he came under attack for his economic policies and alleged disregard for human rights.

On the international stage, he has been declared a "mad dog" for his wild posturing and aggressive hostility towards some countries, notably Israel, the



**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, sixth President of the Republic of Iran, formed in the wake of the revolution.**

United Kingdom, and the United States. Former President Khatami was an outspoken critic of President Ahmadinejad's government.

In 2007, Ahmadinejad introduced an unpopular gas-rationing plan to reduce the country's fuel consumption, and cut the interest rates that private and public banking facilities could charge. Concurrently, he stepped up his campaign against any foreign interference in Iran's nuclear program.

His election to a second term in 2009 was widely disputed, caused widespread protests domestically, and widespread international criticism. During his second term, Ahmadinejad came under fire not from his former supporters, reformers, but from traditionalists in parliament and the Revolutionary Guard, and even from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei over alleged corruption, Ahmadinejad's dismissal of Intelligence Minister **Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i**, and his support for his controversial close adviser **Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei**.

In March of 2012, Ahmadinejad became the first president of the Islamic Republic of Iran to be summoned by the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament) to answer questions regarding his presidency.

Limited to two terms under the current Iranian constitution, Ahmadinejad endorsed the candidacy of Mashaei, one of the most divisive of Iran's politicians. As a senior Cabinet member in the Ahmadinejad administration, he served as Chief of Staff from 2009 to 2013, and as the First Vice President of Iran for one week in 2009 until his resignation was ordered by Ayatollah Khamenei. Viewed by many Iranian clerics as an anti-establishment activist and secular-oriented nationalist. He was criticized by religious conservatives for alleged "deviant tendencies," such as elevating Iranian heritage and nationalism above Islam, criticizing the Assembly of

Experts and the theocratic doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists, and advocating that clerics remove themselves from the political establishment

Had he been elected, it was generally conceded that he would have torn apart the already strained political divisions between non-clerical populists, like his mentor Ahmadinejad, and loyal lieutenants of the Islamic theocracy. It was just four years after Iran had been rocked by widespread protests over Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election and the Supreme Leader, it is believed, was looking for a period of internal peace and reconsolidation.

Mashaei did not get a chance to run. The Guardian Council rejected his bid to be placed on the Presidential ballot. Mashaei who had advocated secular policies and had nationalistic sentiments was considered a threat to the clerics, and therefore they decided to bar his candidacy. That pleased most in the West who could not wait to see the last of Ahmadinejad and crowd. Former President Rafsanjani, trying to make a comeback, entered the race for the June, 2013 presidential election, too, but he, too, was disqualified by the Guardian Council. With Mashei and Rafsanjani pushed aside, the election became a competition between the two wings of the clerical oligarchy; the conservatives and the moderates and their reformist affiliates.

And in June of this year, **Hassan Rouhani** was elected seventh President as Ahmadinejad's successor and assumed office in August.



**Esfandiar Rahim Mashei, who was denied a place on the ballot by the Supreme Leader.**

Rouhani, born in 1948, is a Muslim cleric with the status of a *Shia Mujtahid*. He began his political activities as a young cleric, following the Ayatollah Khomeini during the beginning of the Iranian Islamist movement. In 1965, he began traveling throughout Iran making speeches against the government of the **Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi**, the Shah (king) of Iran. During those years he was arrested many times

and was banned from delivering public speeches.

In 1977, during a public ceremony held at Tehran's Ark Mosque to commemorate the death of Mostafa Khomeini (the elder son of the Ayatollah Khomeini), Rouhani used the title "Imam" for the Ayatollah Khomeini, the then exiled leader of the Islamist movement, for the first time. Since he was under surveillance by SAVAK (Iran's pre-revolution intelligence agency), the **Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti** and the **Ayatollah Morteza Motahari** advised him to leave the



country. Outside Iran he made public speeches to Iranian students studying abroad and joined Khomeini, who was himself in exile, in France.

He's a lawyer, academic and former diplomat, and had been a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts since 1999, a member of the Expediency Council since 1991, a member of the Supreme National Security Council since 1989, and head of the Center for Strategic Research since 1992. Rouhani also served as deputy speaker of the Fourth and Fifth terms of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majlis* or Iranian Parliament) and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2005. In the latter capacity, he also headed Iran's former nuclear negotiating team and was the country's top negotiator with the EU three - UK, France, and Germany - on Iran's nuclear program.



**Hassan Rouhani, New President of Iran**

When Rouhani registered for the presidential election that was held on June 14, 2013, he pledged that if elected, he would prepare a "civil rights charter", restore the economy and improve rocky relations with Western nations. Although Rouhani is viewed by many as politically moderate, Israeli Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** does not concur, and warns that nothing has changed in Iran except the tone of voice.

Other experts in Iranian affairs have cautioned that, while Rouhani's election was a surprise after eight years of hard-liners ruling the country in tandem with Ayatollah Khamenei, his election does not mean that hard-liners are out of power.



It is important to remember no political decision is lawful until the guardian jurist, the Supreme Leader, under the Iranian constitution, approves it. Even the taking of office by the democratically elected president is subject to the approval of the Supreme Leader. Ayatollah Khamenei, they say, is simply acting

out the role he carved out and has adopted for himself as the omnipotent referee of Iran's complex political system, taking actions to see that no one group or personality acquires too much power, sitting in judgment of the politicians he anoints to lead the country in what are often conflicting directions. They point out, for instance, that he blessed the reformist candidacy of Mohammad Khatami,

who relaxed some social restrictions and allowed more press freedom but, then, undermined Khatami's presidency, and in 2005 blessed the strident nationalist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who defied Israel by publicly asserting that the Holocaust had never existed, that it was an Israeli myth used to generate sympathy and gain power. He deliberately antagonized the West for all of his two terms, bringing the world closer and closer to war.

Rouhani assumed the Presidency of a country whose economy has been crippled by sanctions imposed by the West and is on the verge of war. With Israel becoming more and more aggressive as a result of Ahmadinejad's bombastic nuclear ambitions for Iran and Israel's fear of being annihilated by its neighbor, there is a global fear that if Israel attacks, the United States will be drawn kicking and screaming into a war that few Americans want and that other countries of the West may be drawn in as well.

Since taking office, Rouhani has been actively courting the United States. And Iran observers have said that for the moment Ayatollah Khamenei appears to be behind the diplomatic charm offensive. He could just as easily, however, decide to pull the rug out from under him, as he did during the 2003 negotiations with Western powers.

It is possible that **Mohammad Javad Zarif**, Iran's Foreign Minister, could be the key to solving Tehran's nuclear standoff with the West, having worked to resolve various crises in the Islamic republic since the 80s. It will be the 53-year-old diplomat's challenge to oversee Tehran's team of negotiators in meetings with world powers who are seeking an end to the nuclear program in Iran in return for relief from crippling economic sanctions by western nations. He has a few things to work with.

The first few months of President Rouhani's administration have been marked by a rare slowdown in nuclear progress. The report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the watchdog of the United Nations, covers most of the first three months in office of President Rouhani. Iran has continued to enrich uranium - the process that most worries Western negotiators because the material could be used to make a bomb if purified to higher levels. But it added only modestly to its stockpile, according to the report. And Iran appears not to have expanded existing enrichment capacity or installed critical components at its Arak heavy water reactor. Slowing Iran's nuclear program could add heft to the argument that Iran is serious about change. Iran insists that Khamenei has issued a fatwa saying the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam, yet proof of such a fatwa is not in evidence and its existence is widely disputed.

And while Rouhani and Zarif are walking the walk and talking the talk of peace, insiders in Iran have commented to major media, such as *Reuters* and the *New York Times*, that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, will never compromise. As far as he is concerned, the

United States remains the “Great Satan,” a mortal enemy that simply must be approached with different tactics at different times.

Given the facts of Iranian politics over the last 35 years, we recommend immersing yourself in scholarly studies of the country by such authors as **Behrooz Moazami**, so that the daily news cycle begins to make sense.

## What Others Say About the Book

*Adopting a longue durée perspective, Behrooz Moazami weaves the parallel yet interdependent narratives of state formation in Iran and the institutionalization of a differentiated religious field led by the ulama until they fuse dramatically in the Iranian Revolution: a revolution that remains unfinished as long as the fundamental tension between a theocratic regime and a citizens' republic remains unresolved. Moazami's comparative historical analysis challenges equally the historicist assumptions of Iranian particularism and the Universalist assumptions of Western social scientific paradigms.*

—**José Casanova**, Professor of Sociology and Senior Fellow, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, USA

*This is a sophisticated examination of the complex and tortuous relationships between state and religion, politics and theology, monarchy and clergy, secularism and Islam in the course of the last two centuries in Iran. It is a useful read for sociologists and political scientists, as well as historians of modern Iran.*

—**Ervand Abrahamian**, Distinguished Professor of History, City University of New York, USA

*Behrooz Moazami has written an excellent book that challenges prevailing theories of religion and politics in Iran. He presents a novel, convincing analysis of the parallel development of state making and building of religious institutions in Iran. It will be of interest to a broad audience within history, political science, sociology, and beyond.*

—**Misagh Parsa**, Professor of Sociology, Dartmouth College, USA

*Behrooz Moazami is Associate Professor of History and Director of Middle East Peace Studies at Loyola University New Orleans. From Tehran, Iran, Dr. Moazami joined Loyola's faculty after a life of political activism and academia. Dr. Moazami was raised in Iranian society and experienced the life of a revolutionary and has lived in exile in France and the USA. He has taught at several universities, including the New School for Social Science Research (NYU) and Tulane University. Dr. Moazami hopes to broaden our ideas of the Middle East and its culture. He says “the Middle East is not just a militant Islamic society with a violent past; it is more complex!” Dr. Moazami's courses will elaborate on this idea. He is currently engaged in creating the Middle East / Peace Studies*

*interdisciplinary minor program. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies, New York University.*

*His first doctorate was a study of state formation in Europe from the 19th century to the formation of the European Union (University of Paris VIII, France). It won him an EU postdoctoral fellowship at NYU. He completed his second Ph.D. in Sociology and History from the New School for Social Research (NY) in 2004. His thesis, “The Making of the State, Religion and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1796-1979),” won the Albert Salomon Memorial Award in Sociology for Doctoral Dissertations.*

## Recommended Reading: Faulkner House Favorites

Visitors to Faulkner House books know to trust the recommendations of Joanne, a bookseller and avid reader herself. Here's one of her recent favorites:

### **Island of Last Truth by Flavia Company** (Europa Editions)

“The Island of Last Truth is a story of many mysteries, principal among them, the true identity of the enigmatic Dr. Matthew Prendel. Legend has it that Prendel, an expert sailor, had been shipwrecked years before the story opens in contemporary New York. His boat was attacked by pirates. He survived thanks to an incredible stroke of luck, while his entire crew perished. But then found himself embroiled in a ferocious fight for survival between two castaways on a desert island. There, too, he was lucky and came out the victor. Or perhaps luck played no part in it. Perhaps something darker was at play. And at stake. The only thing sure is that Matthew Prendel disappeared for five whole years. He has been back in New York now for a couple of years. That's what they say at least. Though one should never rely entirely on hearsay...”

## The Jew In The Lotus

### Excerpts

By Rodger Kamenetz

#### Introduction

In late October 1990, I traveled to Dharamsala, a remote hill town in northern India. I came to write about a religious dialogue between a group of Jewish delegates and the XIV Dalai Lama of Tibet.

I was looking forward to this trip. I'd never been to India and the idea of shlepping mezuzahs and matzahs through remote corners of the Punjab appealed to me. I also thought I would learn a lot. I'd written about Jewish life before, but I had little knowledge of Buddhism. And though in recent years I'd become increasingly aware of the Dalai Lama's activities, as a personage in my consciousness, he seemed as fabulous as the Unicorn.

Before I left the United States, I studied the modern history of Tibet. Her great national tragedy began with the Chinese Army occupation in 1950, which overturned centuries of mutual non-belligerence. Years of empty negotiations followed between Tibetan and Chinese officials. Finally in March 1959 a dramatic uprising against Chinese rule broke out in Lhasa, the capital. Feeling the Dalai Lama's life was in danger, ordinary Tibetans surrounded his palace. Hoping to avert bloodshed, he fled to India. He has been joined in exile by more than 115,000 refugees. In that terrible month alone, Chinese soldiers killed 87,000 Tibetans in Lhasa. Since then the Chinese have continued a systematic effort to destroy Tibetan resistance. One out of ten Tibetans has been held in prisons or forced labor camps for ten years or more. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has repeatedly fired on unarmed Tibetan demonstrators. All told, an estimated 1.2 million Tibetans have died as a result of the occupation.

Destroying Tibet's religion has been a key Chinese policy. Public teaching of Buddhism is forbidden. Monks and nuns have been singled out for public humiliation and torture. Temples have been used for granaries and monasteries for machine shops. The huge Ganden monastery in Lhasa, once the world's third largest, has been reduced to a heap of rubble. The Chinese forces have systematically pillaged and then razed more than 6,000 Buddhist monasteries.

The Tibetans have lost their land, their temples, their leading religious teachers. And now they risk losing their identity as a people altogether. The Beijing government, by encouraging a massive influx into Tibet of Han Chinese settlers, is perpetrating a slow-motion genocide that escapes the notice of most of the planet. Today, in Lhasa, the ethnic Chinese outnumber the native Tibetans.

To anyone conscious of Jewish history, parallels to the Tibetan situation leap to mind. As Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, a member of our delegation to Dharamsala,

wrote, "This is what the destruction of the Temple must have been like in Jewish history." He referred to events two thousand years ago, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and expelled the Jewish people from their spiritual homeland, beginning 19 centuries of exile and dispersion. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner made a different parallel when he told the Dalai Lama in 1989, "The Chinese came to your people as the Germans came to ours."

Faced with the destruction of his people and their tradition of Buddhism, the Dalai Lama has been tireless in his efforts to bring freedom to Tibet. Restricted in travel by his Indian hosts and by difficulties obtaining a visa, he was not able to come to the United States until 1979. But since then, through personal appearances, and dialogue with religious and political leaders, he has gained increasing respect and notice for the Tibetan cause. In 1989, the same year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts, the Dalai Lama turned for the first time to the Jewish people for help. "Tell me your secret," he said, "the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile."

As my grandfather might have said, Who would have thought to ask?

Jews have survived 20 centuries of exile and dispersion, persecution and vilification, economic hardship, expulsion, forced conversion, Crusades, Inquisition, blood libel, pogrom—you name it, Jews survived it. But up until now few outsiders have ever looked upon this as much of an accomplishment.

In the Dalai Lama's eyes, and to many of the Tibetans, Jews are survival experts. The idea that Jewish history, with all its traumas, is relevant to another exiled people was inspiring.

But another attraction to Dharamsala was equally important. This dialogue would be an unprecedented meeting of two ancient religious traditions, an opportunity for leading religious Jews to immerse themselves in a living Buddhist community—that had never happened, as far as we knew, in thousands of years of Jewish and Buddhist. The

Dalai Lama is not only the head of the leading sect of Tibetan Buddhism, but its most innovative thinker. In exile, he has carefully directed the preservation of the spiritual treasures of the Tibetan people. Dharamsala itself, though a small town, has an extraordinary number of learned monks, abbots, and Buddhist sages and is a worldwide center for Buddhist study. The Dalai Lama is considered a spiritual master by most of the world's Buddhists. Another important feature of the dialogue was the Dalai Lama's re-request for teaching about kabbalah and Jewish meditation. And he in turn would respond to questions about Buddhist esoteric teachings and practices. This exchange of secrets proved to be even more powerful and fascinating than I could have imagined when I set out. The exploration of Buddhist tantra and Jewish kabbalah opened me to whole new ways of thinking and feeling.



The main organizers of the encounter in Dharamsala were two American Buddhists from Jewish backgrounds. And they in turn represented another important aspect of this dialogue. Over the past 20 years, many spiritually curious Jews have explored Buddhist teachings, and some have left Judaism altogether. A surprising number have become spiritual leaders, teachers, and organizers in the Western Buddhist community. Among them are Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Bernard Glassman Sensei (a Zen roshi), Stephen Levine, and Jeffrey Miller (Surya Das), the first Jew to become a Tibetan lama.

I was also aware that the Jewish community views with a mixture of fear, alarm, and regret the loss of such Jews to other religions. This dialogue would address that concern as well.

These were the prospects I had in mind as I made my way to Frankfurt for the first leg of our journey together.

But I could not have imagined then how the actual experience would be much more radical and transforming, not only for me as an observer, but also for the Jewish delegates.

What follows, then, is the story of a historic dialogue between Jews and Buddhists. It is also the story of the movement of some Jews toward Buddhism over the past twenty years, and what this has to tell us about the problems in Jewish religious life today. But most of all, it is a story of the possibilities for Jewish renewal as I first encountered them in Dharamsala.

## **Afterword**

I wrote **The Jew in the Lotus** to bear witness to a real event though looking back on it now it sometimes feels like a dream. Dharamsala is a magical place with snow topped peaks and huge green vistas, Hindu soldiers in khaki and monks in maroon and saffron robes. Against a backdrop of golden Buddhas, I saw a rabbi with a white beard and a Buddhist master with shaved head and bare arms, sharing divine conversation of angels and devas. Was it a dream? Yet Zalman Schachter and Tenzin Gyatso were also actual persons at an extraordinary intersection of two ancient religions meeting for the first time in recorded history.

**The Jew in the Lotus** is a spiritual travelogue of an implausible event. The story was received with a great deal of affection and hope. If Jews and Buddhists could overcome their obvious differences and come to a deeper understanding, could this not model other ethnic and religious dialogues? So over time the true story acquired a mythic aura and joined the late 90's zeitgeist. It had the scent of miraculous events to come: the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union, the liberation of South Africa, and the famous handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn. The rise of the internet, globalization of trade and exchange, and increasing environmental awareness all indicated a new way of thinking and feeling. Old boundaries were being taken down, old enmities resolved, and we looked forward to realizing the highest dreams of humanity as we moved together into a new millennium.

We all know what happened next.

The first American war with Iraq which loomed as we met in Dharamsala was followed by a second American war with Iraq which, at this writing, is still going on. Rabin was assassinated, new war erupted between Israelis and Palestinians, and the handshake was forgotten. 9/11 happened motivated by religious extremism. Globalization of communication and trade is inspiring, but globalization of fear and terror is traumatizing.

After his first session of dialogue, as we strolled together outside the Dalai Lama's temple, Rabbi Greenberg expressed the concern that "all religion might go down the tubes" if it began to be seen as the cause of violence and war. Now we are seeing it, for in the wake of violent fundamentalism abroad and narrow-minded religious based politics at home, there is a growing loss of faith in faith itself. In this darker moment, the very beautiful and profound Jewish-Buddhist dialogue may seem to some a charming relic of a lost era.

Yet the story of the Jewish Buddhist dialogue lives on, because, I think, people can read their own dreams into it. For some it is a magical tale like the Wizard of Oz, for others an all too realistic portrait of the Jewish world in miniature with all its fireworks and seams. For some it is all about the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism, for others it's a discovery of the hidden treasures of kabbalah or the joys of Jewish renewal. I simply tried to tell the story as I



experienced it, very personally, with feelings intact. I had no thought of writing a dispassionate account—because the place where such a dialogue registers most deeply is not in the intellect, but in the heart.

The Tibetan struggle with China was at the forefront of our hearts and minds in 1990 as the Dalai Lama asked the delegation for “the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile.” The hope the Dalai Lama shared with them of his own return to the land of Tibet, has been continuously disappointed. The Chinese government has proven tenacious and unyielding, and sometimes it feels as if the Dalai Lama’s approach of dialogue and nonviolence has produced few tangible political results. After all, he still lives in exile along with 131,000 Tibetans, and Tibet is still not free.

In its homeland, Tibetan religion endures under grave threat. Government forces have a strangle hold on monastic life. John Ackerly, president of the International Campaign for Tibet, reports that the religious oppression in Tibet is “invisible” to many tourists. The Chinese government has rebuilt the huge monasteries that in the past they destroyed, but every monk is required to forswear allegiance to the Dalai Lama—and must undergo periodic political “education”. Any monastic who steps out of line endangers not only himself or herself, but beloved senior teachers. Crimes include publishing a newsletter, peaceful demonstrations or even praising the Dalai Lama. According to the U.S. State Department report of 2006, “Overall, the level of repression in Tibetan areas remained high and the Government’s record of respect for religious freedom remained poor ...Dozens of monks and nuns continued to serve prison terms for their resistance to “patriotic” or political education.” In early October 2005, a 28-year old monk was found dead in his room at Drepung Monastery near Lhasa, following “a heated dispute with the monastery’s “work team” over his refusal to denounce the Dalai Lama.” Government officials claimed this young man’s death was due to natural causes.

The highest level religious figure in captivity is the Panchen Lama, Gendun Chokyi Nyima. After the Dalai Lama recognized him in 1995 the six year old boy was put under house arrest in Beijing, making him the world’s youngest political prisoner. The Panchen Lama’s traditional role is to ratify the next Dalai Lama. But now there are two Panchen Lamas, for the government has chosen their own. It’s clear the Chinese are maneuvering to create the next Dalai Lama.

Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama has continued his extraordinary worldwide diplomacy based on religious and intellectual dialogue and has received broad recognition as one of the most inspiring spiritual leaders on the planet. But he is shadowed wherever goes by Chinese diplomats who strenuously protest any hint of official recognition from a foreign government. However, there has been a diplomatic breakthrough. Since 2002 Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama’s special envoy, has met with Chinese officials four times, most recently in February

2006; he has traveled to Beijing, Lhasa, Shanghai, and Tibetan areas of Yunnan Province. Unfortunately, the pace of the discussion has been agonizing and as of the summer of 2007, there are no new talks scheduled.

In the end, the survival of Tibetan Buddhism can not depend solely on what goes on at the highest levels of the political and religious hierarchy, but also on the courage and resourcefulness of the people on the ground in Tibet. Here Rabbi Greenberg’s discussion with the Dalai Lama seems entirely relevant. Greenberg emphasized the importance of democratizing religion as one Jewish “secret of spiritual survival.” He told the Dalai Lama that after the destruction of the Temple 2000 years ago, the rabbinic sages retired to the hinterlands, raised many students and gave more responsibility to individuals and householders. In today’s Tibet, something similar has been going on.

In eastern Tibet<sup>1</sup>, near Serthar, a highly respected teacher, Jigme Phuntsok -- known by his title, “Khenpo” or abbot,—created a less formal teaching institution which for a time escaped the scrutiny of the government.

At Larung Gar—“gar” means “encampment”—instead of only focusing on producing a few teachers at the highest levels as in traditional monasteries, “Khenpo” trained a large group of paraprofessional monks in the essentials of Tibetan Buddhism and then sent them back to their villages to teach. Founded in 1980 with fewer than 100 students, by 2002 Larung Gar had over 8000, including several thousand Chinese Buddhists.

After a visit to the Dalai Lama in 1990, Khenpo came under increasing attack. A charismatic teacher, his travel privileges were revoked in 1994 and in 1998 he was interrogated three times by the Central Government’s Religious Bureau.

Alarmed by his popularity with both Tibetans and Chinese. in summer and autumn of 2001, government “work teams” forcibly expelled 7000 students, including 3000 nuns. After Khenpo’s death in 2004, access to Larung Gar was limited and in 2006, 83 homes built around the encampment were destroyed.

The story of Larung Gar has a gloomy ending, but if there’s a silver lining, it’s the indication of a growing Chinese interest in Buddhism. According to John Ackerly, thousands of Chinese Buddhists head to Tibet each year,[tk] and thousands already live and study Buddhism in Tibet. “It does offer some hope. It’s actually quite extensive, including some Communist party members, sons and daughters of influential leaders who are Tibetan Buddhist.”

When young Chinese tourists flock to the rebuilt monasteries in and near Lhasa, they may not be seeing the real thing, but their thirst for spiritual values is evident. Buddhism is historically the most important connection between Tibet and the people of China and may bring the two parties closer in the future.

In the meantime, those who wish the Dalai Lama well can continue to support the Tibetan cause financially and politically. We can play a very positive part as the negotiations between China and the Dalai Lama's representatives continue. We can contribute to the International Campaign for Tibet ([www.savetibet.org](http://www.savetibet.org)), and remind our representatives in Washington of our support for the Tibetan hopes in their dialogue with the Chinese government.

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These days *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) is a pragmatic Jewish response to injustice or need. Almost immediately on her return from Dharamsala, Blu Greenberg practiced *tikkun* by fostering a visit of Tibetan educators to Jewish summer camps, and in another program, to Jewish day schools. Both visits proved very helpful. The educators were very impressed by the warm informal relationships between teachers and students, as contrasted with the traditional formality of religious instruction conducted by Tibetans.

As word of the dialogue spread, the Dalai Lama was warmly received by major Jewish organizations across the spectrum of denominations, who also called openly for political support of the Tibetan cause. For instance, the Religious Action Committee of Reform Judaism, headed by Rabbi David Saperstein in Washington D.C. hosted a special seder for Tibet in the spring of 1997. I'd borrowed the idea from the Tibetan seder proposed by Rabbi Schachter on the way to Dharamsala. The event was attended by members of congress, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and other dignitaries, as well as Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys.

At the seder, I sat beside His Holiness who wore a black yarmulke and expressed real zest for matzah. As the four questions were recited by several kids, we called to mind the captive Panchen Lama, who that week was celebrating his eighth birthday in an unknown location. My daughter Kezia read from the diary of Anne Frank and we listened to a recording smuggled out of Tibet of a song of freedom. We heard the quavering voice of Phuntsok Nyidron, a brave Buddhist nun first imprisoned in 1989 at age 19. Because of this smuggled recording, her sentence was extended. In addition to singing a song of freedom, her other "crime" was chanting, Long Live the Dalai Lama. She was only released in 2004, having undergone brutal torture. Since that first seder in Washington, Seders for Tibet have been celebrated in Hillels and synagogues across the country. In the Seder Jews remember their own struggle for freedom. By joining that memory of the past with the current struggles for religious freedom in Tibet, I believe we honor the tradition and strengthen the bonds between Jews and Tibetans.

One of the Dalai Lama's hopes in meeting with

Jews in India was to foster a trip to Israel. In Dharamsala, Paul Mendes-Flohr was approached by several Tibetan officials to see what could be arranged and when he returned to Israel, he helped found Israeli Friends of the Tibetan people (Yativ) an organization that has facilitated the visit of Tibetans to Israel to study in educational institutions, mostly in the fields of technology and agriculture.

Since March, 1994, His Holiness has visited Israel three times. He has drawn large enthusiastic crowds, and according to Professor Mendes-Flohr, Buddhist studies have become extremely popular in Israeli universities. (Dharamsala is also frequented by Israeli travelers now, so much so there are street signs in Hebrew.) Before the dialogue in 1990, Yitz and Blu Greenberg were roundly criticized by some in the Orthodox community for meeting with an "idolator." So when Yitz joked with His Holiness about appointing him "Chief Rabbi of Israel," he probably could not have imagined that in February, 2006, the Dalai Lama would be personally received in Jerusalem by both the Ashkenazia and Sephardi Chief Rabbis. At that meeting the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Yona Metzger, called for the establishment of "a religious United Nations" representing the religious leaders of all the countries in the world-- with the Dalai Lama at its head.

The dialogue was also noticed widely in the Asian world, Professor Nathan Katz reminded me recently. Katz is now Professor of Religious Studies at Florida International University and directs the new Center for Spirituality there. Since Dharamsala, he co-founded and co-edits the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* and has published a book on the Jews of India. From Katz's perspective, the dialogue with the Dalai Lama anticipated a much wider trend, which he characterized as a "reorientation." "Jews are realizing their religion is Asian; Israel is realizing it is Asian." He cited as one recent development, a visit by the same Chief Rabbi Metzger to India for a conference with Hindu swamis. That's not a development we might have dreamed on the way to Dharamsala, but Dharamsala clearly made it possible.

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The story of the dialogue with the Dalai Lama has had a very large and lasting effect on the spiritual life of the Jewish community especially in North America. It led Jews to reassess their religion in a new way, and to try to find Jewish answers to the very profound Buddhist questions the Tibetan master was asking. His interest in Jewish techniques for "overcoming afflictive states of mind", and his affirmation of the esoteric, helped inspire an explosion of interest in Jewish meditation and kabbalah and Jewish renewal. The Dalai Lama's advice that Jews should make their esoteric traditions more widely available was taken deeply to heart. Kabbalah and meditation, which were once seen as highly esoteric



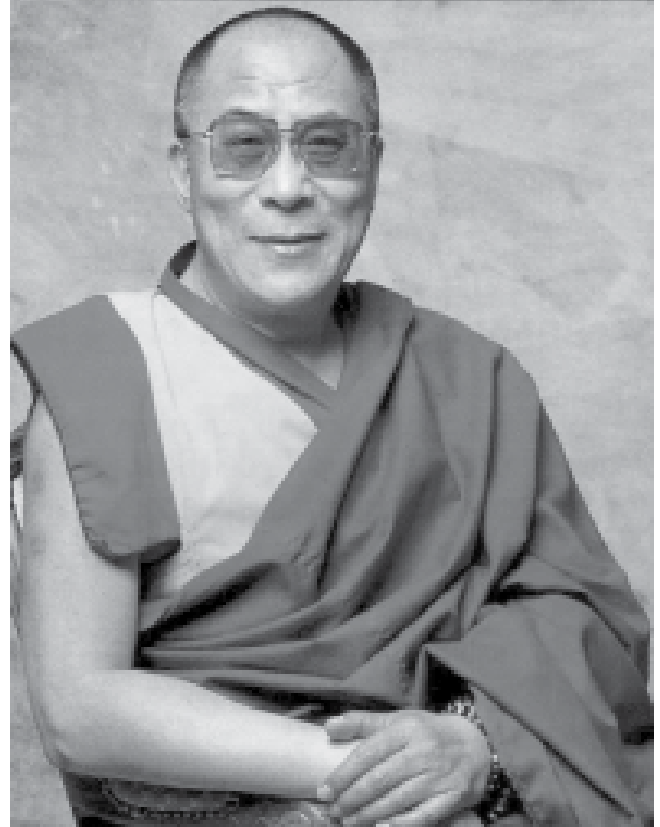
matters have been embraced by the mainstream, and have even become commonplace. Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man, who seemed like a lonely advocate for meditation in 1990, says now that “fifteen year ago, I was ten years ahead of my time.” He has retired from Metivta, but praises new organizations and teachers devoted to teaching Jewish meditation, among them Chochmat Halev in Berkeley. Rabbi Rachel Cowan heads up the Institute for Jewish Spirituality which sponsors meditation training and retreats for rabbis and cantors. Rabbi Joy Levitt was moved by her personal experiences with meditation to create Makom, a Jewish meditation center housed in the Manhattan JCC, the institution she now serves as executive director. Another who has discovered the value of sitting quietly is the ebullient Moshe Waldoks, who is in fact now Rabbi Moshe Waldoks of Temple Beth Zion in Brookline. On his return trip from Dharamsala during a long conversation with Zalman Schachter he first committed himself to being a rabbi after years as a vagabond scholar. “The discussion gave me the courage to come out as someone not affiliated with any one denomination. Our trip demonstrated the possibility of the denominations melting away into something much more organic and real.”

Jewish Renewal, which I found to be a meaningful response to the call to bring the esoteric to life within the heart of Jewish practice, is now extremely well organized as “Aleph” ([www.aleph.org](http://www.aleph.org)) with active training programs raising up a new generation of renewal rabbis and leaders, all under the watchful eye of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, whose amazing energy and mystical erudition continue to inspire. After moving to Boulder in 1995 to assume the Wisdom Chair at the Naropa Institute (America’s only Buddhist university), Reb Zalman retired in 2004, but is still at age 83 very active. The spirit of Jewish Renewal has energized Judaism from one end of the spectrum to the other.

Blu Greenberg remains at the forefront of the movement to reconcile feminism and Orthodox Judaism and in 1997 co-founded and served as first president of JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance. Rabbi Irving Greenberg is currently president of the Jewish Life Network, well known in Jewish circles for its “birthright Israel” program. From 2000-2002, Greenberg served as Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. He continues to write and think about dialogue especially between Jews and Christians.

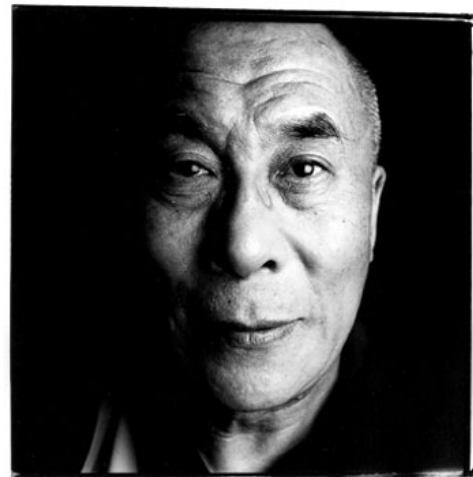
The most extensive new commitment to aid Tibetans has come from the chief organizer of the dialogue, my old friend, Dr. Marc Lieberman. In 1995 he created the Tibet Vision Project, with the main purpose of bringing advanced sight-saving eye care to rural Tibet, where it was sadly lacking. As he personally told the Dalai Lama shortly after the project began, “When you do return to Tibet—I want the Tibetans to be able to see you.”

The problem was great: large numbers of Tibetans living in rural areas suffer blindness due to



*All major religious traditions carry basically the same message: that is love, compassion and forgiveness should be part of our daily lives.*

—Dalai Lama



cataracts. It's a problem exacerbated by high altitude exposure to ultra-violet radiation. Rural Tibet lacked facilities, equipment, or surgeons trained in modern techniques. With his usual energy and fervor, Lieberman has visited Tibet twice a year for the past twelve years. He found doctors and nurses to train and hospitals to work in, raised funds to supply modern medical instruments and supplies. Operating under difficult conditions, he and his team have performed miracles—in one three day stretch his Tibetan surgeons reached the magic Buddhist number of 108 operations. His lasting contribution to Tibet has been to raise up from scratch a team of highly skilled native Tibetan eye surgeons. Their work, and the doctors they will train in the future, ensures that Lieberman's project will be a perpetual gift to Tibet.

Lieberman sees the Tibet Vision Project as the best answer to his old puzzle about Jewish roots and Buddhist wings. After the dialogue in Dharamsala, he says, "I no longer felt the need to resolve a conflict of identities. I just needed to integrate who I was. His Holiness inspires the comprehension that one can be engaged in the world but not of the world and that is where my heart wanted to go."

Call what he's doing *tikkun olam* or Buddhist compassion: either way, the results can be seen at [www.tibetvision.org](http://www.tibetvision.org) on the smiling faces of Tibetan men and women who experience "the indescribable joy of seeing once again." Equally moving to me, are the words of an old peasant blind for decades who had his sight restored. After the bandages were removed, he told Lieberman, simply, "Now I can see the road ahead of me."

As for my own road, I can say the dialogue also opened my eyes and lifted my horizons. I remain deeply impressed by the power of Tibetan Buddhist practice for transformation, so evident in the many Buddhist practitioners I've met in the person and in the teachings of the Dalai Lama, who Lieberman calls aptly this 'great four dimensional mensch.' But I did not become a Buddhist. I was led to ask, what is there in Judaism like this? I explored long lost Jewish meditative practices from leading teachers in the U.S. in **Stalking Elijah**, which received the National Jewish Book Award in 1997. Two years later, Laurel Chiten's documentary film **The Jew in the Lotus** was broadcast on PBS, spreading the word of the dialogue even further.

Simple sitting meditation for me was a great beginning, but in time I became even more fascinated with the way Tibetans used images for inner transformation. At first this seemed one area where Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism had little in common, but a remark Reb Zalman made in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives planted a seed. As we looked at a three dimensional display of a complex Buddhist visualization, he likened it to the visionary journey of the *merkavah* mystics, also known as the chariot riders. Could some remnant of ancient Jewish visualization practice have survived? I found the first clue in Jerusalem in the summer of 1995, working with Madame Colette, a teacher

of healing imagery with family roots in the old kabbalah of Gerona. From visualization, I was led to dreams. In 2000, I met a suave Tibetan master of dream yoga in Copenhagen, Tarab Tulku. Then nearer to home, I found Marc Bregman, a crusty, wholly American dream teacher living in northern Vermont.

For the past few years I've been exploring with him the oldest spiritual technology on the planet, the dream. It's a technology cultivated in a different way by Tibetans. But I think with the heritage of Jacob's ladder, Jews also can claim to be a people of the dream. For me it's a return to the simple roots of all religious experience, and to the stories of dreamers in Genesis.

It is not an entirely easy path, but its power and simplicity move me deeply. The encounter with Tibetan Buddhism, with its rich imagery, helped me see what had been missing. Religions of the word need imagination and soul, and dreams nourish them both. But that's a story for another day, another book, **The History of Last Night's Dream**.

These days, the dialogue feels like a dream that was also real. I remember still that beautiful Friday night on a mountain slope in Dharamsala, an evening shared with exiled monks and lamas of Tibet.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Joy Levitt led us in the psalm of Shabbat. It was the psalm Rabbi Greenberg had mentioned the day before. The Dalai Lama remarked, "So, it's a visualization." So it was. After we sang softly, "When God returned us to Zion from exile, we thought we were dreaming." the monks answered us with a dedication prayer. Our Hebrews kissed their Tibetans as we said farewell.

*Shabbat Shalom. Tashe Delek.*

Was it all a dream, or was it real?

The answer is, yes.

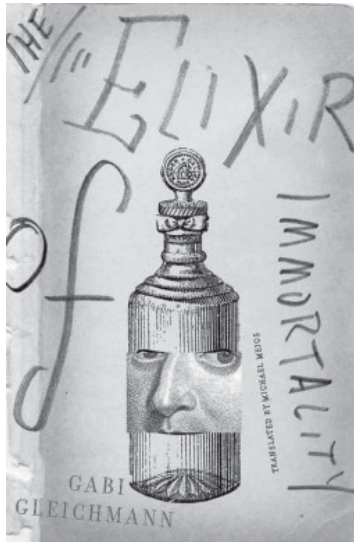
—New Orleans, 2007

*Rodger Kamenetz is author of 11 books including the international best-seller, **The Jew in the Lotus**, which became a PBS documentary, and **Stalking Elijah**, which received the National Jewish Book Award. **The History of Last Night's Dream** introduced a radical approach to dream work and was featured on **Oprah's Soul Series**, while **Burnt Books: Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka** is an exploration of the role of imagination in the Jewish spiritual experience. His six books of poetry include **The Missing Jew** and most recently, **To Die Next To You**. At Louisiana State University, he served as Professor of English and Religious Studies and founded the MFA Program in creative writing and the Jewish Studies program. He lives in New Orleans and works as a dream therapist. He writes songs and plays them in the band **Married Woman**. [kamenetz.com](http://rodgerkamenetz.com). A Selection from his new collection of poetry, **To Die Next to You**, will be found in this edition's poetry section. For more information, visit his Website: <http://rodgerkamenetz.com/>*

## RECOMMENDED READING: The Elixir of Immortality

By **Gabi Gleichmann**,  
translated from the Swedish  
by Michael Meigs

A mesmerizing debut novel that spans a thousand years of European and Jewish history seen through the beguiling members of the Spinoza family. Since the 11th century, the Spinoza family has passed down, from father



to son, a secret manuscript containing the recipe for immortality. Now, after 36 generations, the last descendant of this long and illustrious chain, Ari Spinoza, doesn't have a son to whom to entrust the manuscript. From his deathbed, he begins his narrative, hoping to save his lineage from oblivion. **The Elixir of Immortality** blends truth and fiction as it rewrites European history through comic, imaginative, scandalous, and tragic tales that prove "the only

thing that can possibly give human beings immortality on this earth: our ability to remember."

### Excerpt from *The Elixir of Immortality*

I was born in a world where the past had more meaning than the future. The shining promise offered to others by the new day meant nothing to us. Our golden age lay behind us and was wrapped in deep silence. Oddly enough, no one in the family talked about the fates of our many family members, either because no one could bear to relive the past or simply because everyone wanted to shield us children from the suffering of the Spinozas throughout the ages. We'd been struck by so many misfoWe'd been dogged by disaster as far back as anyone could remember. Almost everything that happened in the world turned out to be disastrous for us. The Middle Ages. The Enlightenment. The French Revolution. Emancipation. World wars. Catholicism. Nazism. Communism. Liberalism.

Life in our family was based on principles that had never offered us security in the past and might always be



subject to attack in the future. We were secular Jews who'd lost contact with traditional concepts of our faith and customs, Jews who never put down roots wherever we were living. That's why we were forever excluded from the benefits of joining any other community.

If it hadn't been for my great-uncle, a man who actually had no blood ties to us, Sasha and I would have grown up in that tyranny of silence. But Fernando knew how to conjure up our hidden legends and all the events and history that lay concealed deep within our genes, and he brought our heritage to life for us with his epic talent for storytelling. I'm convinced he understood what our family's willful suppression of our story was doing to us children, and he wanted to infuse us with vital force and courage by giving my twin brother and me something to be proud of: strong roots. That was why he taught us that the events themselves were to blame. None of it was our fault.

**Gabi Gleichmann**, born in Budapest in 1954, was raised in Sweden. After studies in literature and philosophy, he worked as a journalist and served as president of the Swedish PEN organization. Gleichmann now lives in Oslo and works as a writer, publisher, and literary critic. *The Elixir of Immortality*, Gleichmann's first novel,



## Pearl The Medieval Poem Which Transformed Religious Art & Architecture

By Loretta Victoria Ramirez

As a representative product of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval poem *Pearl* reflects the symbolic and physical rise of the Gothic cathedral as a form of narrative enlightenment. *Pearl* was written in a North-West Midlands variety of Middle English by the same anonymous composer of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Written in vernacular English rather than Latin, both *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* targeted a general audience. The *Pearl*-Poet is a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer, writer of **Canterbury Tales**. Additionally, he imbues allegorical significance into his idolized female character, the Pearl Maiden, which parallels the exalted courtly female found in many medieval narratives, the most celebrated being Dante Alighieri's Beatrice from **The Divine Comedy**, written the same century. Much like Beatrice, the Pearl Maiden appears as a guide through the heavenly realm, revealing the glory that awaits. Although the *Pearl*-Poet shares literary genres and contemporary worlds with Chaucer and Dante, he stands distinctly.

Recognized as one of the most intricately crafted poems in Middle English, *Pearl* provides a jeweler's artistry to form and precision—resulting in a most beautiful, gem-encrusted literary piece that radiates even within the vast medieval treasure box. The *Pearl*-Poet's writing is astounding in complexity. The poem consists of one hundred and one stanzas of twelve lines each with an original Middle English rhyme scheme ababababbcbc. The poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also consists of one hundred and one stanzas, indicating that the *Pearl*-Poet placed meaning in that number. Most lines contain alliteration of at least two stressed syllables. Additionally, each group of five stanzas is bound by a link-word which ends one stanza and becomes the first stress-word in the next grouping. Finally, the poem has a round arrangement, imitating the pearl as its ideal; the last stanza's link-word is repeated in the first stress-word of the poem's first stanza, thus forging a circular structure between the two ends of the poem.

The narrative opens in a graveyard, with a man mourning his two-year-old child, his lost *Pearl*. Overcome with grief, he faints, swooning into a dream-world experience. The Poet-Dreamer is transported to a vision of paradise. He smells a sweet fragrance, and his spirit rises with the joyful songs of a choir of birds. He first sees towering cliffs, and then discovers a river, radiant in reflective light. He journeys along this river until he notices an elevated city beyond the opposite

shore. The Poet-Dreamer desires to visit this city but cannot find a crossing. He then notices a crystal cliff, ablaze with light. At its base is his lost Pearl. She appears as an adult, as the Pearl Maiden, yet the man instinctively recognizes her to be a vision of his lost child.

She is saddened, however, aware that her father is the truly lost one, lost in grief. The Pearl Maiden then tries to help her father understand the glory that awaits in Paradise. "Thou hast lost nothing save a rose / That flowered and failed by life's decree: / Because the coffer did round it close, / A precious pearl it came to be."<sup>1</sup> The Pearl Maiden then allows her father a view of the heavenly city of New Jerusalem, as described in *The Book of Revelations*. According to the Pearl Maiden, a person receives admittance into New Jerusalem only after fulfilling the role that God has assigned him or her on earth. She insists, therefore, that the Poet-Dreamer not mourn her since she is now blessed in New Jerusalem; he should embrace all aspects of life and death as the will of God. However, the Poet-Dreamer fails to understand her wisdom, a failure that further separates mortal from immortal, father from daughter. "Behold, I am but dung and dust, / And thou a rare and radiant rose."<sup>2</sup> In the end, the Poet-Dreamer clings to earthly rules and disregards the words of his child. Thus, not ready for paradise, the Poet Dreamer is ejected from his vision. However, in the end, he does learn to tolerate his earthly role and is comforted that his daughter has escaped the toils of earth.

At the poem's end, the narrative emphasizes the feeble state of human awareness, as the Poet-Dreamer alters significantly yet not entirely. Additionally, the poem recognizes that the greater truths behind church doctrine routinely fail to reach the average father, the average man, the average person. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, this failure to spiritually fortify the masses was a problem. The bubonic plague reached England in 1348, mere decades before the creation of *Pearl*, and killed half of England's population, later to return in 1361 to kill an additional twenty percent. Among other issues, this led to labor tensions that culminated into the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, shaking the economic and social structure of serfdom. In such atmosphere of death and uncertainty, the Poet-Dreamer's despair, coupled with his inability to fully absorb church teachings, was not an uncommon experience. Yet, the desire to understand was powerful; and the ability to transform remained.

Throughout the poem, interaction with beauty is what transforms the Poet-Dreamer. In this manner, the *Pearl*-Poet created a narrative that promotes art and beauty as methods of instruction. There was much support for this development in art. The church sanctioned art as an instructive tool in the 1025 Synod of Arras, stating that whatever people could not grasp from Scripture should be taught through pictures.<sup>3</sup> This reinforced the letters of Pope Gregory the Great, who in the year 600 defended the use of images to assist the "illiterati"<sup>4</sup> to see "what they ought to follow."<sup>5</sup> A symbol

of the unsophisticated man, the Poet-Dreamer is exactly what the church would have referred to as illiterati, unteachable via traditional scholarship and philosophy. It follows that in the 1100s, Honorius of Autun, a popular theologian, would teach that church paintings had three purposes: to beautify the House of God; to recall narratives of saints' lives; and to be "the literature of the laity."<sup>6</sup> Abbot Suger, first patron of Gothic architecture, later applied Honorius' threefold goals to the design of cathedrals. He believed that cathedrals should represent the heavenly city of New Jerusalem, as depicted in *The Book of Revelations*;<sup>7</sup> and, thus, gave rise to the narrative impact of the building. Representing the illiterati, the Poet-Dreamer is, thus, the target of "instruct and delight" methods that medieval architects and artists perfected.

To bridge the divide between doctrine and everyday humans, artists increasingly sought ways to appeal to the hearts and minds of the unsophisticated viewer with images that elicited empathy.<sup>8</sup> In the late eleventh and early twelfth century, there was an increased emphasis on Christ's suffering to provide individuals with an emotional connection to their spirituality.<sup>9</sup> Later in the 1340s, the earliest known example of a new motif, the Madonna of Humility, would show Mary kneeling low to the ground as she nursed her child. This depiction of Mary grew in popularity since it allowed a more intimate connection with viewers. The Madonna of Humility was represented as feeling and acting as a person in the real world; therefore, a narrative of mercy and charity seems all the more plausible for the medieval people, after bouts of extreme disease and disruption. With art narrating Christ's suffering and the Madonna of Humility's mercy, all the while instructing Biblical lessons—the Pearl-Poet takes his cue to narrate the suffering of a man who receives divine mercy while attempting to decipher the ways of God.

The Poet-Dreamer is the symbol of the miserable and misguided earthly man. He is the everyday man of medieval England, a man that lacks the time and sophistication to develop his own spiritual clarity. Therefore, his soul is weak and he sinks literally into despair, crumpling at his daughter's graveside. He represents the illiterati. Yet, he is also a man who elicits sympathy. "Upon the spot my hands I crossed / In prayer, for cold at my heart caught, / And sudden sorrow surged and tossed, / Though reason reconciliation sought. / I mourned my pearl, dear beyond cost, / And strange fears with my fancy fought; / My will in wretchedness was lost."<sup>10</sup> Established as a grief-stricken man, perhaps worthy of audience compassion, the Poet-Dreamer finally finds comfort as he enters his dream-vision. "For the beauteousness of downs and dales, / Of wood and water and proud plains, / My joy springs up and my grief quails, / My anguish ends, and all my pains."<sup>11</sup> The Poet-Dreamer is surrounded by a world of sparkle and color, a bejeweled existence of never-ending song and light. It is as if he has entered a spiritual portal. In imagery, his journey into a realm of solace and joy matches the

intended experience of those who enter the Gothic cathedrals.

The Poet-Dreamer's first impression of his heavenly vision is of height and foliage. "I know not what might be the place, / But I looked where tall cliffs cleave the skies, / Toward a forest I turned my face, / Where ranks of radiant rocks arise. / A man might scarce believe his eyes."<sup>12</sup> Here, the poem parallels elements of cathedral façades. The tall cliffs represent the cathedrals' enormous towers which rose in defiance of gravity, losing their earth-bound quality while reaching toward the heavens.<sup>13</sup> In Biblical teachings, a high place symbolized God's dwelling, and the term "tower" has been used as a name for God, himself.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, cathedral exteriors possessed a vertical emphasis, with the interplay of pinnacles, towers, and spires leading both eye and spirit upward.<sup>15</sup> Just as the Poet-Dreamer's grief lifts as his gaze rises to the sky, medieval people could be similarly inspired by cathedrals. A sense of awe might overcome worshippers approaching a cathedral; and when they reached the cathedral portal, they would—again like the Poet-Dreamer—often be greeted by imagery of vegetation, representing the restoration of the Garden of Eden, and Earth's unification with heaven.<sup>16</sup>

Once through the portal, worshippers enter an environment that dazzles the senses. In *Pearl*, the Poet-Dreamer sees within the forest "crystal cliffs in shining row, / While bright woods everywhere abide."<sup>17</sup> These images correlate with the Gothic cathedral's inner vertical elements of columns, vaulted roofs, and stained-glass windows. The Poet-Dreamer then notices that the "gravel on the ground below / Seemed precious pearls of Orient," a description of floor mosaics. Finally, the "fruit fragrance fine and rare" and the birds that "sing together, all content," conjure the cathedral experience of incense and choir music. The Poet-Dreamer's senses are fascinated by this heavenly realm, an achievement that cathedral designers hoped to reach, where images, sound, and scent worked in conjunction with liturgical ceremonies to create in worshippers an overwhelming sense of introspection and awe.<sup>18</sup> And, it is this sense of awe that ultimately comforts the Poet-Dreamer. "The beauty of the hills so fair / Made me forget my sufferings."<sup>19</sup> The common medieval connection between beauty and goodness convinces the Poet-Dreamer that mercy and grace have finally found him.

The Poet-Dreamer's consolation from beauty is understandable as a reflection of popular Medieval philosophy. Beauty was considered the splendor veritatis, the radiance of truth; image was not illusion but revelation.<sup>20</sup> According to Alexander of Hales, a philosopher of the early 1200s, beauty is not physical material essence but rather the radiance that can exist in material.<sup>21</sup> Richard of St. Victor, one of the most influential religious thinkers of the late 1100s, stated that it is in such moments of ecstasy when viewing the radiance in material that the soul expands, uplifted by beauty, wholly absorbed in the object.<sup>22</sup> Radiance reflects goodness

and, ultimately, God. It is, therefore, reasonable that the Poet-Dreamer equates the beauty that he experiences as manifest of God's goodness. It is also because of this common belief in the divine glory of beauty that the builders of the emerging Gothic cathedrals created an atmosphere similar to that which awes the Poet-Dreamer in *Pearl*.

Arguably the most beautiful aspect of the Gothic cathedral is its expanded stained-glass windows. With the architectural invention of the flying buttress, vaulted rib, and pointed arch, the small windows of Romanesque cathedrals gave way to the enormous windows of the Gothic style. These windows created a house of color, a place filled with light, a heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> In *The Book of Revelation*, New Jerusalem is described as built upon a foundation of 12 levels of gems. As light passes through stained-glass windows, cathedral walls and floors take on the radiance of the heavenly city, itself. This celestial vision was intended to make worshippers forget that they were within a building of stone and mortar, since inwardly they had entered the heavenly realm.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, great financial and philosophical support encouraged the perfection of the manufactured heavenly light. Abbot Suger justified the expenses he allowed for the windows at the Abbey of Saint-Denis, by stating that contemplation of the windows leads to contemplation of goodness. "The loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven."<sup>25</sup> In *Pearl*, the Poet-Dreamer illustrates Suger's point.

Stained-glass windows were not merely a symbol of celestial beauty, but of heavenly wisdom. The image of God as light has an ancient pedigree.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, light passing through glass without breaking it signifies Christ's miraculous conception.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, medieval people considered light to represent illumination of the human experience through God's knowledge which penetrates its grace upon the world.<sup>28</sup> This concept of knowledge from light is most obviously represented through the narrative-rich cathedral windows. During the 1100s, a burst of elaborate narrative imagery sparkled across stained-glass windows in sequential formats that read like books.<sup>29</sup> Walking down the cathedral nave, worshippers passed windows depicting stories of the Ancestors of Christ, Stations of the Cross, and **Old Testament** and **New Testament** scenes. Narrative windows were an art form accessible to all educational levels and every position in society.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, worshippers were well versed in the interpretation of these narratives, understanding such subtleties as a raised hand or an extended finger as elements of story and instruction.

So pervasive was this use of art as enlightenment

that, outside cathedral walls, other art forms followed, including literature in narrative imagery and textual embellishment. Manuscript illuminations began to adopt architectural formats to illustrated bibles and prayer books—leading to a sense of a church contained inside a book for the person living out in the secular world.<sup>31</sup> Even further beyond the influence of the church, narrative images became useful for unsophisticated persons who found it easy to convey their beliefs into images; meanwhile, teachers could construct illustrations for ideas that ordinary people could not grasp in theoretical form. In short, there was a great campaign to educate people by appealing to their delight in narrative image and allegory.<sup>32</sup> *Pearl* participates in the Medieval concept that art, poetry, and architecture should be concerned with the goals of "instruct and delight." Literature, as an extension of narrative painting, should exhibit both the nobility of intellect and the beauty of imagery and eloquence,<sup>33</sup> as accomplished in *Pearl*.

After the Poet-Dreamer walks through the forest, he reaches a river, symbol of the narrative of life. "Within its bed fair stones lay deep; / As if through glass they glowed, as white / As streaming stars when tired men sleep / Shine in the sky on a winter night. / Pure emerald even the pebbles seemed, / Sapphire, or other gems that lent / Luster, till all the water gleamed / With the glory of such beauties blent."<sup>34</sup> Here, the Poet-Dreamer describes light reflecting off the gemmed riverbed but might also be describing gem-colored light gleaming off the floor of a cathedral's nave. The term *nave*, is derived from medieval Latin, *navis* (ship). Traditionally, the church is compared to an ark, as a place of refuge from the chaos of churning waters.<sup>35</sup> Similar to the river path in *Pearl*, the nave provides peace, while leading worshippers towards the sanctuary. In the poem, the Poet-Dreamer is compelled to walk along the river. "A swift stream down the valley hales / My feet along. Bliss brims my brains; / The farther I follow those watery vales, / The stronger joy my heart constrains."<sup>36</sup> Finding comfort in light and beauty, the Poet-Dreamer's mind opens to the teachings of the Pearl Maiden when she appears beside the river, much like cathedral worshippers would receive lessons from the narrative windows, running the length of the nave.

At first, the daughter greets the Poet-Dreamer as his child. "She spoke to me for my soul's peace."<sup>37</sup> However, she then puts on her pearl crown and begins a series of lectures to correct her father's mistakes: telling him not to mourn that which passes into greater glory, teaching him that God will reward all equally, revealing to him that earthly rankings and rivalries do not apply in heaven, and warning him that he is not ready to enter New Jerusalem. In short, the Poet-Dreamer must abandon earthly values to eventually secure the most precious of pearls, admittance to heaven. He must "Let the wild world rave, / But buy thee this pearl unblemished."<sup>38</sup> Throughout the lectures, the Poet-Dreamer is directed to look upwards for guidance and to follow God's design.



This parallels the cathedrals' teaching through stained-glass window narrative series, which provide direction and indicate celestial plan, as worshippers approach the cathedral sanctuary.

However, no matter the efforts made by the Pearl Maiden and the cathedral builders to enlighten visitors, the influence of worldly cares is often too powerful. Towards the end of *Pearl*, the Pearl Maiden arranges for her father, still on his side of the river bank, to witness a glorious procession through the streets of New Jerusalem, the holy city that sits on a mount. During this procession, the Poet-Dreamer sees the City's gem-foundations, angels singing in a continuous choir, church elders kneeling in devotion, one hundred and forty-four thousand brides of Christ parading in joy, the holy light of God saturating the city, and Christ sitting on his throne. The Poet-Dreamer is fittingly overwhelmed; however, all ecstasy stops when he notices that his daughter has left to join the procession. Unable to endure the separation, the Poet-Dreamer attempts to cross the river but is immediately returned to the graveyard. "Against my will was I exiled / From that bright region, fair and fain, / From that life, glad and undefiled, / And longing dulled my sense again; / I swooned in sorrow for the child."<sup>39</sup>

The Poet-Dreamer's experience of New Jerusalem parallels a cathedral's sanctuary. The sanctuary is designed as a microcosm of heaven, entered through a gate or rail, which separates the sacred space from the congregation.<sup>40</sup> This separation, like the river that the Poet-Dreamer cannot cross, creates a barrier between humans and the blessed, between earth and heaven. Additionally, the sanctuary is usually elevated, in emulation of the mounted city of New Jerusalem. As in the Poet-Dreamer's experience, processions begin and terminate here. This is also the site of the altar where many altarpiece paintings depicted Christ, enthroned and flanked by apostles and angels,<sup>41</sup> similar to the Poet-Dreamer's vision of Christ. Finally, just as the Poet-Dreamer is denied access to New Jerusalem, the physical separation of congregation from altar is a reminder that paradise remains elusive. The congregation and Poet-Dreamer are too human to secure more than a glimpse of heaven. They must leave paradise, and the cathedral, in order to fulfill their role in God's plan and eventually prove their worthiness to enter New Jerusalem. In this way, the Poet-Dreamer ends the narrative much like a gargoyle; while part of the cathedral, he belongs on the exterior, outside the heavenly kingdom.

However, being rejected from paradise and again separated from his Pearl does not destroy the Poet-Dreamer. While he remains in his "prison-pain," he is content that his daughter is blessed in the afterlife,

"crowned, secure from ill." The Poet-Dreamer accepts his role as a gargoyle in the cathedral of life. He belongs on the outside—for now. Spiritually fortified, he now vows to respect the order of life, death, and salvation. In this way, the Poet-Dreamer's progress is the cathedral's idea of success, concerning the Medieval everyday man or woman who, while best advised to practice faith, were also reminded of earthly responsibilities. In fact, the cathedrals were the center of urban life, not exclusively a refuge from it. Social functions gathered around cathedrals. Cathedral bells announced business day hours and reminded people of daily duties.<sup>42</sup> After all, life and toil are part of God's greater plan and should not be denied—a lesson that the Pearl Maiden emphasizes. People must fulfill their earthly role in an untarnished manner. Only then will they enter equally into New Jerusalem. "The court of the kingdom of God doth thrive / Only because of this wondrous thing: / Each one who therein may arrive, / Of the realm is either queen or king."<sup>43</sup> Here, the Pearl Maiden gives hope to her father and the audience of Pearl that hierarchies of feudal life do not continue in heaven. Mercy, charity, and equality await. Yet, when the burdens of life overwhelm, people can take a moment to allow their eyes to play upon the cathedral towers and soar upward in imagination to where a better existence awaits. This is the comfort that the Poet-Dreamer receives.

Ultimately, *Pearl* is a lesson of endurance. Its message is to live an untarnished life, always keeping the promise of a glorified afterlife in the forefront of earthly actions. The same message manifests in the architecture of Gothic cathedrals. The cathedrals' aim is to impart consolation and revelation—with the goal of fortifying a person to live a good life. And, here is where *Pearl* transitions from Medieval to Renaissance, as it takes on an early humanist role. *Pearl* allows a man to see the true nature of his condition; and it is through emphasizing this very human process of self-realization, that art can assist people through life. In the case of *Pearl* and the Gothic cathedrals, they have succeeded in their mission, bringing centuries of instruction and delight to people who discover the radiance of beauty in craft.



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## The Pearl

I

Pearl that the Prince full well might prize,  
So surely set in shining gold!  
No pearl of Orient with her vies;  
To prove her peerless I make bold:  
So round, so radiant to mine eyes,  
smooth she seemed, so small to hold,  
Among all jewels judges wise  
Would count her best an hundred fold.  
Alas! I lost my pearl of old!  
I pine with heart-pain unforget;  
Down through my arbour grass it rolled,  
My own pearl, precious, without spot.

Since in that spot it slipped from me  
I wait, and wish, and oft complain;  
Once it would bid my sorrow flee,  
And my fair fortune turn again;  
It wounds my heart now ceaselessly,  
And burns my breast with bitter pain.  
Yet never so sweet a song may be  
As, this still hour, steals through my brain,  
While verity I muse in vain  
How clay should her bright beauty clot;  
O Earth! a brave gem thou dost stain,  
My own pearl, precious, without spot!

Needs must that spot with spices spread,  
Where such wealth falleth to decay;  
Fair flowers, golden and blue and red,  
Shine in the sunlight day by day;  
Nor flower nor fruit have witherèd  
On turf wherein such treasure lay;  
The blade grows where the grain lies dead,  
Else were no ripe wheat stored away;  
Of good come good things, so we say,  
Then surely such seed faileth not,  
But spices spring in sweet array  
From my pearl, precious, without spot.

Once, to that spot of which I rhyme,  
I entered, in the arbour green,  
In August, the high summer-time  
When corn is cut with sickles keen;  
Upon the mound where my pearl fell,  
Tall, shadowing herbs grew bright and sheen,  
Gilliflower, ginger and gromwell,  
With peonies powdered all between.  
As it was lovely to be seen,  
So sweet the fragrance there, I wot,  
Worthy her dwelling who hath been  
My own pearl, precious, without spot.

Upon that spot my hands I crossed  
In prayer, for cold at my heart caught,

And sudden sorrow surged and tossed,  
Though reason reconciliation sought.  
I mourned my pearl, dear beyond cost,  
And strange fears with my fancy fought;  
My will in wretchedness was lost,  
And yet Christ comforted my thought.  
Such odours to my sense were brought,  
I fell upon that flowery plot,  
Sleeping,--a sleep with dreams inwrought  
Of my pearl, precious, without spot.

II

From the spot my spirit springs into space,  
The while my body sleeping lies;  
My ghost is gone in God's good grace,  
Adventuring mid mysteries;  
I know not what might be the place,  
But I looked where tall cliffs cleave the skies,  
Toward a forest I turned my face,  
Where ranks of radiant rocks arise.  
A man might scarce believe his eyes,  
Such gleaming glory was from them sent;  
No woven web may men devise  
Of half such wondrous beauties blent.

In beauty shone each fair hillside  
With crystal cliffs in shining row,  
While bright woods everywhere abide,  
Their boles as blue as indigo;  
Like silver clear the leaves spread wide,  
That on each spray thick-quivering grow;  
If a flash of light across them glide  
With shimmering sheen they gleam and glow;  
The gravel on the ground below  
Seemed precious pearls of Orient;  
The sunbeams did but darkling show  
So gloriously those beauties blent.

The beauty of the hills so fair  
Made me forget my sufferings;  
I breathed fruit fragrance fine and rare,  
As if I fed on unseen things;  
Brave birds fly through the woodland there,  
Of flaming hues, and each one sings;  
With their mad mirth may not compare  
Cithern nor gayest citole-strings;  
For when those bright birds beat their wings,  
They sing together, all content;  
Keen joy to any man it brings  
To hear and see such beauties blent.

So beautiful was all the wood  
Where, guided forth by Chance, I strayed,  
There is no tongue that fully could  
Describe it, though all men essayed.  
Onward I walked in merriest mood  
Nor any highest hill delayed

My feet. Far through the forest stood  
The plain with fairest trees arrayed,  
Hedges and slopes and rivers wide,  
Like gold thread their banks' garnishment;  
And when I won the waterside,  
Dear Lord! what wondrous beauties blent!

The beauties of that stream were steep,  
All-radiant banks of beryl bright;  
Sweet-sighing did the water sweep,  
With murmuring music running light;  
Within its bed fair stones lay deep;  
As if through glass they glowed, as white  
As streaming stars when tired men sleep  
Shine in the sky on a winter night.  
Pure emerald even the pebbles seemed,  
Sapphire, or other gems that lent  
Luster, till all the water gleamed  
With the glory of such beauties blent.

### III

For the beauteousness of downs and dales,  
Of wood and water and proud plains,  
My joy springs up and my grief quails,  
My anguish ends, and all my pains.  
A swift stream down the valley hailes  
My feet along. Bliss brims my brains;  
The farther I follow those watery vales,  
The stronger joy my heart constrains.  
While Fortune fares as her proud will deigns,  
Sending solace or sending sore,  
When a man her fickle favour gains,  
He looketh to have aye more and more.

There was more of marvel and of grace  
Than I could tell, howe'er I tried;  
The human heart that could embrace  
A tenth part were well satisfied;  
For Paradise, the very place,  
Must be upon that farther side;  
The water by a narrow space  
Pleasance from pleasance did divide.  
Beyond, on some slope undescried  
The City stood, I thought, wherefore  
I strove to cross the river's tide,  
And ever I longed, yet more and more.

More, and still more wistfully,  
The banks beyond the brook I scanned;  
If, where I stood, 't was fair to see,  
Still lovelier lay that farther land.  
I sought if any ford might be  
Found, up or down, by rock or sand;  
But perils plainer appeared to me,  
The farther I strode along the strand;  
I thought I ought not thus to stand  
Timid, with such bright bliss before;

Then a new matter came to hand  
That moved my heart yet more and more.

Marvels more and more amaze  
My mind beyond that water fair:  
From a cliff of crystal, splendid rays,  
Reflected, quiver in the air.  
At the cliff's foot a vision stays  
My glance, a maiden debonaire,  
All glimmering white before my gaze;  
And I know her,--have seen her elsewhere.  
Like fine gold leaf one cuts with care,  
Shone the maiden on the farther shore.  
Long time I looked upon her there,  
And ever I knew her more and more.

As more and more I scanned her face  
And form, when I had found her so,  
A glory of gladness filled the place  
Beyond all it was wont to show.  
My joy would call her and give chase,  
But wonder struck my courage low;  
I saw her in so strange a place,  
The shock turned my heart dull and slow.  
But now she lifts that brow aglow,  
Like ivory smooth, even as of yore,  
It made my senses straying go,  
It stung my heart aye more and more.

### IV

More than I liked did my fear rise.  
Stock still I stood and dared not call;  
With lips close shut and watchful eyes,  
I stood as quiet as hawk in hall.  
I thought her a spirit from the skies;  
I doubted what thing might befall;  
If to escape me now she tries,  
How shall my voice her flight forestall?  
Then graciously and gay withal,  
In royal robes, so sweet, so slight,  
She rose, so modest and so small,  
That precious one in pearls bedight.

Pearl bedight full royally,  
Adown the bank with merry mien,  
Came the maiden, fresh as fleur-de-lys.  
Her surcoat linen must have been  
Shining in whitest purity,  
Slashed at the sides and caught between  
With the fairest pearls, it seemed to me,  
That ever yet mine eyes had seen;  
With large folds falling loose, I ween,  
Arrayed with double pearls, her white  
Kirtle, of the same linen sheen,  
With precious pearls all round was dight.

A crown with pearls bedight, the girl



Was wearing, and no other stone;  
High pinnacled of clear white pearl,  
Wrought as if pearls to flowers were grown.  
No band nor fillet else did furl  
The long locks all about her thrown.  
Her air demure as duke or earl,  
Her hue more white than walrus-bone;  
Like sheer gold thread the bright hair strown  
Loose on her shoulders, lying light.  
Her colour took a deeper tone  
With bordering pearls so fair bedight.

Bedight was every hem, and bound,  
At wrists, sides, and each aperture,  
With pearls the whitest ever found,—  
White all her brave investiture;  
But a wondrous pearl, a flawless round,  
Upon her breast was set full sure;  
A man's mind it might well astound,  
And all his wits to madness lure.  
I thought that no tongue might endure  
Fully to tell of that sweet sight,  
So was it perfect, clear and pure,  
That precious pearl with pearls bedight.

Bedight in pearls, lest my joy cease,  
That lovely one came down the shore;  
The gladdest man from here to Greece,  
The eagerest, was I, therefore;  
She was nearer kin than aunt or niece,  
And thus my joy was much the more.  
She spoke to me for my soul's peace,  
Courtesied with her quaint woman's lore,  
Caught off the shining crown she wore,  
And greeted me with glance alight.  
I blessed my birth; my bliss brimmed o'er  
To answer her in pearls bedight.

V

“O Pearl,” I said, “in pearls bedight,  
Art thou my pearl for which I mourn,  
Lamenting all alone at night?  
With hidden grief my heart is worn.  
Since thou through grass didst slip from sight,  
Pensive and pained, I pass forlorn,  
And thou livest in a life of light,  
A world where enters sin nor scorn.  
What fate has hither my jewel borne,  
And left me in earth's strife and stir?  
Oh, sweet, since we in twain were torn,  
I have been a joyless jeweler.”

That Jewel then with gems besprent  
Glanced up at me with eyes of grey,  
Put on her pearl crown orient,  
And soberly began to say:  
“You tell your tale with wrong intent,

Thinking your pearl gone quite away.  
Like a jewel within a coffer pent,  
In this gracious garden bright and gay,  
Your pearl may ever dwell at play,  
Where sin nor mourning come to her;  
It were a joy to thee alway  
Wert thou a gentle jeweler.

“But, Jeweler, if thou dost lose  
Thy joy for a gem once dear to thee,  
Methinks thou dost thy mind abuse,  
Bewildered by a fantasy;  
Thou hast lost nothing save a rose  
That flowered and failed by life's decree:  
Because the coffer did round it close,  
A precious pearl it came to be.  
A thief thou hast dubbed thy destiny  
That something for nothing gives thee, sir;  
Thou blamest thy sorrow's remedy,  
Thou art no grateful jeweler.”

Like jewels did her story fall,  
A jewel, every gentle clause;  
“Truly,” I said, “thou best of all!  
My great distress thy voice withdraws.  
I thought my pearl lost past recall,  
My jewel shut within earth's jaws;  
But now I shall keep festival,  
And dwell with it in bright wood-shaws;  
And love my Lord and all His laws,  
Who hath brought this bliss. Ah! if I were  
Beyond these waves, I should have cause  
To be a joyful jeweler.”

“Jeweler,” said that Gem so dear,  
“Why jest ye men, so mad ye be?  
Three sayings thou hast spoken clear,  
And unconsidered were all three;  
Their meaning thou canst not come near,  
Thy word before thy thought doth flee.  
First, thou believest me truly here,  
Because with eyes thou mayst me see;  
Second, with me in this country  
Thou wilt dwell, whatever may deter;  
Third, that to cross here thou art free:  
That may no joyful jeweler.”

VI

The jeweler merits little praise,  
Who loves but what he sees with eye,  
And it were a discourteous phrase  
To say our Lord would make a lie,  
Who surely pledged thy soul to raise,  
Though fate should cause thy flesh to die.  
Thou dost twist His words in crooked ways  
Believing only what is nigh;  
This is but pride and bigotry,

That a good man may ill assume,  
To hold no matter trustworthy  
Till like a judge he hear and doom.

“Whate’er thy doom, dost thou complain  
As man should speak to God most high?  
Thou wouldst gladly dwell in this domain;  
‘T were best, methinks, for leave to apply.  
Even so, perchance, thou pleadest in vain.  
Across this water thou wouldst fly,—  
To other end thou must attain.  
Thy corpse to clay comes verily,—  
In Paradise ‘t was ruined by  
Our forefather. Now in the womb  
Of dreary death each man must lie,  
Ere God on this bank gives his doom.”

“Doom me not, sweet, to my old fears  
And pain again wherein I pine.  
My pearl that, long, long lost, appears,  
Shall I again forego, in fine?  
Meet it, and miss it through more years?  
Thou hast hurt me with that threat of thine.  
For what serves treasure but for tears,  
One must so soon his bliss resign?  
I reckon not how my days decline,  
Though far from earth my soul seek room,  
Parted from that dear pearl of mine.  
Save endless dole what is man’s doom?”

“No doom save pain and soul’s distress?”  
She answered: “Wherefore thinkst thou so?  
For pain of parting with the less,  
Man often lets the greater go.  
‘T were better thou thy fate shouldst bless,  
And love thy God, through weal and woe;  
For anger wins not happiness;  
Who must, shall bear; bend thy pride low;  
For though thou mayst dance to and fro,  
Struggle and shriek, and fret and fume,  
When thou canst stir not, swift nor slow,  
At last, thou must endure His doom.”

“Let God doom as He doth ordain;  
He will not turn one foot aside;  
Thy good deeds mount up but in vain,  
Thou must in sorrow ever bide;  
Stint of thy strife, cease to complain,  
Seek His compassion safe and wide,  
Thy prayer His pity may obtain,  
Till Mercy all her might have tried.  
Thy anguish He will heal and hide,  
And lightly lift away thy gloom;  
For, be thou sore or satisfied,  
All is for Him to deal and doom.”

VII

Doom me not, dearest damosel;  
It is not for wrath nor bitterness,  
If rash and raving thoughts I tell.  
For sin my heart seethed in distress,  
Like bubbling water in a well.  
I cry God mercy, and confess.  
Rebuke me not with words so fell;  
I have lost all that my life did bless;  
Comfort my sorrow and redress,  
Piteously thinking upon this:  
Grief and my soul thou hast made express  
One music,—thou who wert my bliss.

“My bliss and bale, thou hast been both,  
But joy by great grief was undone;  
When thou didst vanish, by my troth,  
I knew not where my Pearl was gone.  
To lose thee now I were most loth.  
Dear, when we parted we were one;  
Now God forbid that we be wroth,  
We meet beneath the moon or sun  
So seldom. Gently thy words run,  
But I am dust, my deeds amiss;  
The mercy of Christ and Mary and John  
Is root and ground of all my bliss.”

“A blissful life I see thee lead,  
The while that I am sorrow’s mate;  
Haply thou givest little heed  
What might my burning hurt abate.  
Since I may in thy presence plead,  
I do beseech thee thou narrate,  
Soberly, surely, word and deed,  
What life is thine, early and late?  
I am fain of thy most fair estate;  
The high road of my joy is this,  
That thou hast happiness so great;  
It is the ground of all my bliss.”

She said, “May bliss to thee betide,”  
Her face with beauty beaming clear,  
“Welcome thou art here to abide,  
For now thy speech is to me dear.  
Masterful mood and haughty pride,  
I warn thee win but hatred here;  
For my Lord loveth not to chide  
And meek are all that to Him come near.  
When in His place thou shalt appear,  
To kneel devout be not remiss,  
My Lord the Lamb loveth such cheer,  
Who is the ground of all my bliss.”

“Thou sayest a blissful life I know,  
And thou wouldst learn of its degree.  
Thou rememberest when thy pearl fell low  
In earth, I was but young to see;  
But my Lord the Lamb, as if to show  
His grace, took me His bride to be,

Crowned me a queen in bliss to go  
Through length of days eternally;  
And dowered with all His wealth is she  
Who is His love, and I am His;  
His worthiness and royalty  
Are root and ground of all my bliss."

## VIII

"My blissful one, may this be true.  
Pardon if I speak ill," I prayed:  
"Art thou the queen o' the heaven's blue,  
To whom earth's honour shall be paid?  
We believe in Mary, of grace who grew,  
A mother, yet a blameless maid;  
To wear her crown were only due  
To one who purer worth displayed.  
For perfectness by none gainsaid,  
We call her the Phoenix of Araby,  
That flies in faultless charm arrayed,  
Like to the Queen of courtesy."

"Courteous Queen," that bright one said,  
And, kneeling, lifted up her face:  
"Matchless Mother and merriest Maid,  
Blessèd Beginner of every grace."  
Then she arose, and softly stayed,  
And spoke to me across that space:  
"Sir, many seek gain here, and are paid,  
But defrauders are none within this place;  
That Empress may all heaven embrace,  
And earth and hell in her empery;  
Her from her heritage none will chase,  
For she is Queen of courtesy."

"The court of the kingdom of God doth thrive  
Only because of this wondrous thing:  
Each one who therein may arrive,  
Of the realm is either queen or king;  
And no one the other doth deprive,  
But is fain of his fellow's guerdoning,  
And would wish each crown might be worth five,  
If possible were their bettering.  
But my Lady, from whom our Lord did spring,  
Rules over all our company,  
And for that we all rejoice and sing,  
Since she is Queen of courtesy."

"Of courtesy, as says St. Paul,  
Members of Christ we may be seen.  
As head and arm and leg, and all,  
Bound to the body close have been,  
Each Christian soul himself may call  
A living limb of his Lord, I ween.  
And see how neither hate nor gall  
"Twixt limb and limb may intervene;  
The head shows neither spite nor spleen,  
Though arm and finger jewelled be,  
So fare we all in love serene,

As kings and queens by courtesy."

"Courtesy flowers thy folk among,  
And charity, I well believe.  
If foolish words flow from my tongue,  
Let not my speech thy spirit grieve.  
A queen in heaven while yet so young,  
Too high thou dost thyself upheave.  
Then what reward from strife were wrung?  
What worship more might he achieve  
Who lived in penance morn and eve,  
Through bodily pain in bliss to be?  
Honour more high might he receive,  
Than be crowned king by courtesy?"

## IX

"That courtesy rewards no deed  
If all be true that thou dost say;  
Our life not two years didst thou lead  
Nor learned to please God, nor to pray,  
No Paternoster knew nor creed,  
And made a queen on the first day!  
I may not think, so God me speed!  
That God from right would swerve away;  
As a countess, damsel, by my fay!  
To live in heaven were a fair boon,  
Or like a lady of less array,  
But a queen! Ah, no! it is too soon."

"With Him there is no soon nor late,"  
Replied to me that worthy wight;  
"True always is His high mandate;  
He doth no evil, day nor night.  
Hear Matthew in the mass narrate,  
In the Gospel of the God of might,  
His parable portrays the state  
Of the Kingdom of Heaven, clear as light:  
'My servants,' saith He, 'I requite  
As a lord who will his vineyard prune;  
The season of the year is right,  
And labourers must be hired soon.'"

"Right soon the hirelings all may see  
How the master with the dawn arose;  
To hire his labourers forth went he,  
And workmen stout and strong he chose.  
For a penny a day they all agree,  
Even as the master doth propose,  
They toil and travail lustily,  
Prune, bind, and with a ditch enclose.  
Then to the market-place he goes,  
And finds men idle at high noon:  
'How can a man stand here who knows  
The vineyards should be tilled so soon?'"

"Soon as day dawned we hither won,  
And no man hath our labour sought;  
We have been standing since rose the sun



And no one bids us to do aught.  
'Enter my vineyard every one,'  
The master answered quick as thought:  
'The work that each by night has done  
I will truly pay, withholding naught.'  
Among the vines they went and wrought,  
While morning, noon and afternoon,  
More labourers the master brought,  
Until the night must gather soon."

"Soon fell the time of evensong.  
An hour before the sun was set,  
He saw more idlers, young and strong;  
His voice was sober with regret:  
'Why stand ye idle all day long?'  
'No man,' they said, 'hath hired us yet.'  
'Go to my vineyard, fear no wrong;  
Each man an honest wage shall get.'  
The day grew dark and darker yet,  
"Before the rising of the moon;  
The master who would pay his debt,  
Bade summon all the hirelings soon."

X

"The lord soon called his steward: 'Go  
Bring in the men quick as ye may;  
Give them the wages that I owe,  
And, lest they aught against me say,  
Range them along here in a row,  
To each alike his penny pay;  
Start with the last who standeth low,  
And to the first proceed straightway,'  
And then the first began to pray,  
Complaining they had travailed sore:  
'These wrought but one hour of the day,  
We think we should receive the more.'"

"'More have we served,' they muttered low,  
'Who have endured the long day's heat,  
Than these who not two hours toiled so;  
Why should their claim with ours compete?'  
Said the master: 'I pay all I owe;  
Friend, no injustice shalt thou meet;  
Take that which is thine own and go.  
For a penny we settled in the street;  
Why dost thou now for more entreat?  
Thou wast well satisfied before.  
Once made, a bargain is complete;  
Why shouldst thou, threatening, ask for more?'"

"'What can be more within my gift  
Than what I will with mine to do?  
Let not thine eyes to evil shift,  
Because I trusty am, and true.'  
'Thus I,' said Christ, 'all men shall sift.  
The last shall be the first of you;  
And the first last, however swift,  
For many are called, but chosen, few.'

And thus poor men may have their due,  
That late and little burden bore;  
Their work may vanish like the dew,  
The mercy of God is much the more."

"More gladness have I, herewithin,  
Of flower of life, and noble name,  
Than all men in the world might win,  
Who thought their righteous deeds to name.  
Nathless even now did I begin;  
To the vineyard as night fell I came,  
But my Lord would not account it sin;  
He paid my wages without blame.  
Yet others did not fare the same,  
Who toiled and travailed there before,  
And of their hire might nothing claim,  
Perchance shall not for a year more."

Then more, and openly, I spake:  
"From thy tale no reason can I wring;  
God's righteousness doth ever wake,  
Else Holy Writ is a fabled thing.  
From the Psalter one verse let us take,  
That may to a point this teaching bring:  
'Thou requitest each for his deed's sake,  
Thou high and all-foreknowing King.'  
If one man to his work did cling  
All day, and thou wert paid before,  
Most wage falls to least labouring,  
And ever the less receives the more."

XI

"Of more or less where God doth reign,  
There is no chance," she gently said,  
"For, whether large or small his gain,  
Here every man alike is paid.  
No niggard churl our High Chieftain,  
But lavishly His gifts are made,  
Like streams from a moat that flow amain,  
Or rushing waves that rise unstayed.  
Free were his pardon whoever prayed  
Him who to save man's soul did vow,  
Unstinted his bliss, and undelayed,  
For the grace of God is great enow."

"But now thou wouldst my wit checkmate,  
Making my wage as wrong appear;  
Thou say'st that I am come too late,  
Of so large hire to be worthy here;  
Yet sawest thou ever small or great,  
Living in prayer and holy fear,  
Who did not forfeit at some date  
The meed of heaven to merit clear?  
Nay much the rather, year by year,  
All bend from right and to evil bow;  
Mercy and grace their way must steer,  
For the grace of God is great enow."

“But enow of grace have the innocent  
New-born, before the sacred shrine,  
They are sealed with water in sacrament,  
And thus are brought into the vine.  
Anon the day with darkness blent,  
Death by its might makes to decline;  
Who wrought no wrong ere hence they went,  
The gentle Lord receives, in fine;  
They obeyed His will, they bore His sign,  
Why should He not their claim allow?  
Yea, and reward them, I opine,  
For the grace of God is great enow.”

“‘T is known enow that all mankind  
At first were formed for perfect bliss;  
Our forefather that boon resigned,  
All for an apple’s sake, I wis;  
We fell condemned, for folly blind,  
To suffer sore in hell’s abyss;  
But One a remedy did find  
Lest we our hope of heaven should miss.  
He suffered on the cross for this,  
Red blood ran from His crownèd brow;  
He saved us by that pain of His,  
For the grace of God is great enow.”

“Enow there flowed from out that well,  
Blood and water from His broad wound:  
The blood bought us from bale of hell,  
And from second death deliverance found.  
The water is baptism, truth to tell,  
That followed-the spear so sharply ground,  
And washes away the guilt most fell  
Of those that Adam in death had drowned.  
Now is there nothing in earth’s great round,  
To bar from the bliss wherewith God did endow  
Mankind,—restored to us safe and sound,  
For the grace of God is great enow.”

## XII

“Grace enow a man may get  
By penitence, though he sin again;  
But with long sorrow and regret,  
He must bear punishment and pain;  
But righteous reason will not let  
The innocent be hurt in vain;  
God never gave His judgment yet,  
That they should suffer who show no stain.  
The sinful soul of mercy fain  
Finds pardon if he will repent,  
But he who sinless doth remain  
Is surely saved, being innocent.”

“Two men are saved of God’s good grace,  
Who severally have done His will:  
The righteous man shall see His face,  
The innocent dwells with Him still.  
In the Psalter thou may’st find a case:

‘Lord, who shall climb to Thy high hill,  
Or rest within Thy Holy Place?’  
The psalmist doth the sense fulfill:  
‘Who with his hands did never ill,  
His heart to evil never lent,  
There to ascend he shall have skill;’  
So surely saved is the innocent.”

“That the righteous is saved I hold certain;  
Before God’s palace he shall stand  
Who never took man’s life in vain,  
Who never to flatter his fellow planned.  
Of the righteous, the Wise Man writeth plain  
How kindly our King doth him command;  
In ways full strait he doth restrain,  
Yet shows him the kingdom great and grand,  
As who saith: ‘Behold! yon lovely land!  
Thou may’st win it, if so thy will be bent.’  
But with never peril on either hand,  
Surely saved is the innocent.”

“Of the righteous saved, hear one man say--  
David, who in the Psalter cried:  
‘O Lord, call never Thy servant to pay,  
For no man living is justified.’  
So thou, if thou shalt come one day  
To the court that each cause must decide,  
For mercy with justice thou may’st pray  
Through this same text that I espied.  
But may He on the bloody cross that died,  
His holy hands with hard nails rent,  
Give thee to pass when thou art tried,  
Saved, not as righteous, but innocent.”

“Of the sinless saved the tale is told,—  
Read in the Book where it is said:  
When Jesus walked, among men of old,  
The people a passage to Him made;  
Bringing their bairns for Him to hold,  
For the blessing of His hand they prayed.  
The twelve reproved them: ‘Overbold  
To seek the Master;’ and sternly stayed.  
But Jesus said: ‘Be ye not afraid;  
Suffer the children, nor prevent;  
God’s kingdom is for such arrayed.’  
Surely saved are the innocent.”

## XIII

“Christ called to Him the innocents mild,  
And said His kingdom no man might win,  
Unless he came thither as a child,—Not  
otherwise might he enter in,  
Harmless, faithful, undefiled,  
With never a spot of soiling sin,—For  
these whom the world has not beguiled  
Gladly shall one the gate unpin.  
There shall that endless bliss begin,  
The merchant sought, and straight was led

To barter all stuffs men weave and spin,  
To buy him a pearl unblemished."

"This pearl unblemished, bought so dear,  
For which the merchant his riches gave,  
Is like the kingdom of heaven clear;  
So said the Father of world and wave.  
It is a flawless, perfect sphere,  
Polished and pure, and bright and brave;  
As on my heart it doth appear,  
It is common to all who to virtue clave.  
My Lord, the Lamb Who died to save,  
Here set it in token of His blood shed  
For peace. Then let the wild world rave,  
But buy thee this pearl unblemished."

"O Pearl unblemished, in pure pearls dressed,  
That beareth," said I, "the pearl of price,  
Who formed thy figure-and thy vest?  
Truly he wrought with cunning nice;  
For thy beauty, above nature's best,  
Passeth Pygmalion's artifice;  
Nor Aristotle the lore possessed  
To depict in words so fair device.  
Than fleur-de-lys thou art fairer thrice,  
Angel-mannered and courtly bred,--  
Tell to me truly: in Paradise  
What meaneth the pearl unblemished?"

"My spotless Lamb, who all doth heal,"  
She answered, "my dear Destiny,  
Chose me in marriage bond to seal;  
Unfit, He graced me regally,  
From your world's woe come into weal.  
He called me of His courtesy:  
'Come hither to me, my lover leal,  
For mote nor spot is none in thee.'  
He gave me my might and great beauty;  
He washed my weeds in His blood so red,  
And crowned me, forever clean to be,  
And clothed me in pearls unblemished."

"Unblemished bride, bright to behold,  
That royalty hath so rich and rare,  
What is this Lamb, that thou hast told  
How for wedded wife He called thee there?  
Above all others dost thou make bold,  
As His chosen lady His life to share?  
So many, comely in combs of gold,  
For Christ have lived in strife and care,  
Must these to a lower place repair,  
That never any with Him may wed,  
Save only thyself, so proud and fair,  
Peerless Queen, and unblemished?"

XIV

"Unblemished," answered she again,  
"Without a spot of black or gray,

With honour may I this maintain;  
But 'peerless Queen' I did not say.  
Brides of the Lamb in bliss we reign,  
An hundred and forty thousand gay,  
As in the Apocalypse is made plain,  
Saint John beheld them on a day;  
On the hill of Zion he saw them stay,  
In vision his spirit looked on them,  
For the wedding clad in bright-array,  
At the city of New Jerusalem."

"Of Jerusalem in speech I tell;  
And what He is if thou wouldst see--  
My Lamb, my Lord, my dear Jewel,  
My Joy, my Love, my Bliss so free,--  
The prophet Isaiah writeth well  
Of His most mild humility:  
'Guiltless, when men upon Him fell  
For never a fault nor felony,  
As a sheep to the slaughter led was He;  
Quiet, the while the crowd contemn,  
As a lamb in the shearer's hands might be,  
He was judged by Jews in Jerusalem.'"

"In Jerusalem was my Lover slain,  
Rent on the rood by ruffians bold;  
To bear our ills He was full fain,  
To suffer our sorrows manifold;  
Buffeted until blood did stain  
That face so lovely to behold;  
He took upon Him all sin and pain,  
Even He of Whom not one sin is told;  
On the rude cross stretched faint and cold,  
He let men deride him and condemn;  
Meek as a lamb, betrayed and sold,  
He died for us in Jerusalem."

"At Jerusalem, Jordan and Galilee,  
Wherever Saint John came to baptize,  
His words with Isaiah's words agree.  
On Jesus he lifted up his eyes,  
Speaking of Him this prophecy:  
'Behold the Lamb of God!' he cries:  
'Who bears the world's sins, this is He!  
The guilt of all upon Him lies,  
Though He wrought evil in no wise.  
The branches springing from that stem  
Who can recount? 'T is He who dies  
For our sake in Jerusalem.'"

"In Jerusalem my Lover sweet  
Twice as a lamb did thus appear,  
Even as the prophets both repeat,  
So meek the mien that He did wear;  
The third time also, as is meet,  
In the Revelation is written clear.  
Reading a book on His high seat  
Midmost the throne that saints ensphere,  
The Apostle John beheld Him near;



That book seven sacred seals begem;  
And at that sight all folk felt fear  
In hell, in earth and Jerusalem."

XV

This Jerusalem Lamb had never stain  
Of other hue than perfect white,  
That showeth neither streak nor strain  
Of soil, but is like wool to sight;  
And souls that free of sin remain  
The Lamb receiveth with delight;  
And, though each day a group we gain,  
There comes no strife for room nor right,  
Nor rivalry our bliss to blight.  
The more the merrier, I profess.  
In company our love grows bright,  
In honour more and never less.

"Lessening of bliss no comer brings  
To us who bear this pearl at breast;  
Nor show they flaws nor tarnishings  
Who wear such pure pearls like a crest.  
Though round our corpses the clay clings,  
And though ye mourn us without rest,  
Knowledge have we of goodly things.  
Through the first death our hope we test;  
Grief goes; at each mass we are blest  
By the Lamb Who gives us happiness;  
The bliss of each is bright and best,  
And no one's honour is the less."

"That thou my tale the less may doubt,  
In the Revelation 'tis told, and more:  
'I saw,' says John, 'a goodly rout  
The hill of Zion covering o'er,  
The Lamb, with maidens round about,  
An hundred thousand and forty and four,  
And each brow, fairly written out,  
The Lamb's name and His Father's bore.  
Then a sound from heaven I heard outpour,  
As streams, full laden, foam and press,  
Or as thunders among dark crags roar,  
The tumult was, and nothing less."

"Nathless, though high that shout might ring,  
And loud the voices sounding near,  
A strain full new I heard them sing,  
And sweet and strange it was to hear.  
Like harper's hands upon the string  
Was that new song they sang so clear;  
The noble notes went vibrating,  
And gentle words came to my ear.  
Close by God's throne, without one fear,  
Where the four beasts His power confess,  
And the elders stand so grave of cheer,  
They sang their new song, none the less."

"Nathless is none with skill so fine,

For all the crafts that ever he knew,  
That of that song might sing a line;  
Save these that hold the Lamb in view;  
From earth brought to that land divine,  
As first fruits that to God are due,  
They serve the Lamb and bear His sign,  
As like Himself in face and hue;  
For never lying nor tale untrue  
Defiled their lips in life's distress;  
Whatever might move them, they but drew  
Nearer the Master, none the less."

"Nevertheless, speak out I must,  
My Pearl, though queries rude I pose.  
To try thy fair wit were unjust  
Whom Christ to His own chamber chose.  
Behold, I am but dung and dust,  
And thou a rare and radiant rose,  
Abiding here in life, and lust  
Of loveliness that ever grows.  
A hind that no least cunning knows,  
I needs must my one doubt express;  
Though boisterous as the wind that blows,  
Let my prayer move thee none the less."

XVI

Yet, none the less, on thee I call,  
If thou wilt listen verily,  
As thou art glorious over all,  
Hearken the while I question thee.  
Within some splendid castle wall,  
Have ye not dwellings fair to see?  
Of David's city, rich, royal,  
Jerusalem, thou tellest me.  
In Palestine its place must be;  
In wildwood such none ever saw.  
Since spotless is your purity,  
Your dwellings should be free from flaw.

"Now this most fair and flawless rout,  
Thronging thousands, as thou dost tell,  
They must possess, beyond a doubt,  
A sightly city wherein to dwell.  
'T were strange that they should live without;  
For so bright a band it were not well;  
Yet I see no building hereabout.  
Dost thou linger as in a woodland cell,  
Alone and hidden, for the spell  
Of rushing stream and shining shaw?  
If thou hast a dwelling beyond this dell,  
Now show me that city free from flaw."

"Not flawless the city in Juda's land,"  
That gentle one gently to me spake,  
"But the Lamb did bless it when He planned  
To suffer there sorely for man's sake.  
That is the old city we understand,  
And there the bonds of old guilt did break;

But the new, alighted from God's hand,  
The Apostle John for his theme did take.  
The Lamb Who is white with never a flake  
Of black, did thither His fair folk draw;  
For His flock no fenced fold need He make,  
Nor moat for His city free from flaw."

"To figure flawlessly what may mean  
Jerusalems twain: the first of those  
Was 'the Sight of Peace' as it is seen  
In the word of God, for the gospel shows  
How there our peace made sure hath been,  
Since to suffer therein the Saviour chose;  
In the other is always peace to glean,  
Peace that never an ending knows.  
To that city bright the spirit goes  
When the flesh hath fallen beneath death's law;  
There glorious gladness forever grows  
For His fair folk that are free from flaw."

"Flawless maid so mild and meek,"  
Then said I to that lovely flower:  
"Let me that stately city seek,  
And let me see thy blissful bower."  
That bright one said, "Thou art too weak,  
Thou may'st not enter to its tower;  
Yet of the Lamb I did bespeak  
This goodly gift, that He would dower  
Thine eyes with the sight for one short hour,--  
From without,--within none ever saw;  
To step in that street thou hast no power,  
Unless thy soul were free from flaw."

## XVII

"This flawless sight I will not hide;  
Up toward the brook's head thou must go,  
While I will follow on this side,  
Till yonder hill the city show."  
And then I would no longer bide,  
But stole through branches, bending low,  
Till from the summit I espied,  
Through green boughs swaying to and fro,  
Afar, the city, all aglow,  
That brighter than bright sunbeams shone.  
In writing it is pictured so,  
In the Revelation of St. John.

As John the Apostle saw the sight,  
I saw that city, standing near  
Jerusalem, so royal dight,  
As if from Heaven alighted here.  
The city all of gold burned bright,  
Like gleaming glass that glistens clear.  
With precious stones beneath set right:  
Foundations twelve of gems most dear,  
Wrought wondrous richly, tier on tier.  
Each base was of a separate stone  
As, perfectly, it doth appear

In the Revelation of St. John.

John named the stones that he had seen,  
I knew the order that he made;  
The first a jasper must have been,  
That on the lowest base was laid,  
Beneath the rest it glinted green;  
A sapphire in the second grade;  
Chalcedony, from blemish clean,  
In the third course was fair arrayed;  
Fourth, emerald, of greenest shade,  
Fifth, sardonyx, was raised thereon;  
The sixth a ruby, as is said  
In the Revelation of St. John.

John joined to these the chrysolite,  
The seventh gem in that basement;  
The eighth, a beryl, clear and white;  
The topaz, ninth, its luster lent;  
Tenth, chrysophrase, both soft and bright;  
Eleventh, the jacinth, translucent;  
And twelfth, and noblest to recite,  
Amethyst, blue with purple blent.  
The wall above those basements went  
Jasper, like glass that glistening shone;  
I saw, as the story doth present,--  
The Revelation of St. John.

I saw, as John doth clear devise:  
The great stones rose like a broad stair;  
Above, the city, to my eyes,  
In height, length, breadth appeared four-square;  
The jasper wall shone amber-wise,  
The golden streets as glass gleamed fair;  
The dwellings glowed in glorious guise  
With every stone most rich and rare.  
Each length of bright wall builded there  
For full twelve furlongs' space stretched on,  
And height, length, breadth all equal were:  
"I saw one mete it," writeth John.

## XVIII

As John doth write more met mine eye:  
Within each wall were set three gates;  
Twelve in succession I could spy,  
Portals adorned with bright gold plates;  
Each gate a single pearl saw I,  
A perfect pearl, as John relates.  
On each a name was written high  
Of Israel's sons after their dates,  
The oldest first, as the story states.  
Within those streets by night or noon,  
Light beams that not one hour abates;  
They needed neither sun nor moon.

Of sun or moon they had no need;  
For God Himself was their lamp light,  
The Lamb their lantern was indeed;

From Him the city shone all bright.  
Through wall and dwelling my looks might speed,  
Such clearness could not hinder sight.  
Of the high throne ye might take heed,  
With draperies of radiant white,  
As John the Apostle doth endite;  
High God Himself did sit thereon.  
From the throne a river welled outright  
Was brighter than both sun and moon.

Sun nor moon shone never so sweet  
As the full flood of that bright stream;  
Swiftly it swept through every street,  
Untainted did the water gleam.  
Chapel nor church mine eyes did meet;  
Therein is no temple as I deem;  
The Almighty is their minster meet,  
The Lamb their sacrifice supreme.  
The gates with neither bolt nor beam,  
Wide open stand at night and noon;  
To enter there let no man dream  
Whom sin hath stained beneath the moon.

The moon may there win no least might,  
She is too spotty, grey and grim;  
Therein, moreover, is never night,  
Why should the moon fill full her rim  
To rival the all-glorious light  
That beams upon the river's brim?  
The planets are in poorest plight;  
The sun itself is far too dim.  
Beside the stream trees tall and trim  
Bear living fruits that none doth prune;  
Twelve times a year bends low each limb,  
Renewed with fruitage every moon.

Beneath the moon full well might fail  
The heart of mortal to endure  
The marvel that did mine eyes assail,  
Fashioned the fancy to allure.  
I stood as still as a startled quail,  
For wonder of its fair figure,  
I felt no rest and no travail,  
Ravished before such radiance pure.  
I say, and with conviction sure,  
Had the eyes of man received that boon,  
Though wisest clerks sought for his cure,  
His life were lost beneath the moon.

XIX

Now, even as the full moon might rise  
Ere daylight doth to darkness fall,  
Sudden I saw with still surprise  
Within that shining city-wall,  
The streets full-thronged in wondrous wise,  
Silent, with never a herald's call,  
With virgins in the selfsame guise

As my beloved, sweet and small.  
Each head was crowned with coronal,  
Pearl-wrought, and every robe was white;  
On each breast bound, imperial,  
The Pearl of Price with great delight.

With great delight together going  
On glassy golden streets they tread;  
To a hundred thousand swiftly growing,  
And all alike were they garmented:  
The gladdest face who could be knowing?  
The Lamb did proudly pass ahead,  
His seven horns of clear red gold glowing,  
His robes like pearls high valued.  
On toward the throne their way they thread,  
None crowded in that band so bright,  
But mild as maidens when mass is said,  
So fared they forth with great delight.

The great delight His coming gave,  
It were too much for me to tell.  
When He approached the Elders grave,  
Prone there before His feet they fell;  
Legions of summoned angels brave  
Swayed censers of the sweetest smell;  
With music like a mighty wave,  
All sang in praise of that gay Jewel.  
The hymn might strike through earth to hell  
That with joy those hosts of heaven recite;  
To praise the Lamb I liked full well,  
Amid the group in great delight.

Delighted, I would fain devise  
His loveliness, with mind intent:  
First was He, blithest, best to prize,  
Of all on whom man's speech is spent;  
So nobly white His draperies,  
Such grace His simple glances lent;  
But a wide, wet wound my gaze descries  
Beneath His heart, through His skin rent;  
Down His white side the blood was sent.  
Alas! I thought, what scorn or spite  
Could any human heart have bent  
In such a deed to take delight?

The Lamb's delight might no man doubt,  
Though that wide wound His hurt displayed,  
From His fair face looked lovely out  
Glad glances, glorious, unafraid,  
I looked upon His shining rout,  
With fullest life so bright arrayed,  
My little queen there moved about,  
I had thought beside me in the glade.  
Ah Lord! how much of mirth she made!  
Among her peers she was so white!  
The stream I surely needs must wade,  
For longing love, in great delight.



XX

Delight that flooded eye and ear  
 My mortal mind beatified;  
 When I saw her, I must reach my dear,  
 Though she beyond the brook abide.  
 Nothing, I thought, could keep me here,  
 No crippling blow hold my strength tied;  
 I would plunge, whatever interfere,  
 And swim the stream, though there I died.  
 But ere the water I had tried,  
 Even as I would my vow fulfill,  
 From my purpose I was turned aside;  
 It was not to my Prince's will.

My wilful purpose pleased not Him,  
 That I with headlong zeal essayed;  
 Though I was rash of thought and limb,  
 Yet suddenly my deed was stayed.  
 As I sprang forward to the brim,  
 The action in my dreaming made  
 Me waken in my arbour trim.  
 My head upon the mound was laid  
 Where my pearl to the grass once strayed.  
 I stretched my body, frightened, chill,  
 And, sighing, to myself I said:  
 "Now all be to the Prince's will."

Against my will was I exiled  
 From that bright region, fair and fain,  
 From that life, glad and undefiled,  
 And longing dulled my sense again;  
 I swooned in sorrow for the child,  
 Needs must my heart cry and complain:  
 "O Pearl, dear was thy counsel mild,  
 In this true vision of my brain!  
 If very truth divide us twain;  
 If thou goest crowned, secure from ill,  
 Well for me in my prison-pain  
 That thou art to the Prince's will."

To the Prince's will had my heart bent,  
 And sought but what to me was given,  
 Held fast to that, with true intent,  
 As my Pearl prayed me out of heaven;  
 Did I to God my thoughts present,  
 More in His mysteries had I thriven.  
 But a man will seek more than is sent,  
 Till from his hand his hope be riven.  
 Thus from my joy was I forth driven,  
 From the life upon that holy hill.  
 Oh, fools, that with the Lord have striven,  
 Or proffered gifts against his will!

The Prince's will to serve aright  
 The Christian may full well divine;  
 For I have found Him, day and night,  
 A God, a Lord, a Friend in fine.

Upon this mound my soul hath sight,  
 Where I for piteous sorrow pine;  
 My Pearl to God I pledge and plight,  
 With Christ's dear blessing and with mine,--  
 His, who, in form of bread and wine,  
 The priest doth daily show us still.  
 His servants may we be, or shine,  
 Pure pearls, according to his will.

**Editor's note:** The version of *The Pearl* presented here is *The Project Gutenberg Ebook of The Pearl*, the Middle English poem in a modern version in the metre of the original by Sophie Jewett, Associate Professor of English Literature at Wellesley College, 1908, licensed to Loretta Rodriguez by Project Gutenberg.

(Endnotes)

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## Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell: The Real Man for All Seasons?

*Hilary Mantel* knows what to select, how to make her scenes vivid, how to kindle her characters. She seems almost incapable of abstraction or fraudulence; she instinctively grabs for the reachably real.... In short, this novelist has the maddeningly unteachable gift of being interesting. —James Wood, *The New Yorker*

### By Alessandro Mario Powell

**Thomas Cromwell** is perhaps the ideal subject for a novelist. Born a blacksmith's son, becoming a soldier of fortune, a *Condottiere*, on behalf of Italian princes, an English lawyer, advocate of the English Reformation, supervisor of the breakaway Church of England, chief minister to King Henry, VIII from 1532 to 1540, and tireless Renaissance reformer of the English way of life, Thomas Cromwell was one of those bigger than life characters. If you created him purely as an imaginary character, he might not be believable. So, it's a miracle, really, that only in the 21st century did a writer take him on as the central character of not one but two long, dense, and compelling novels, with a third in sight on the horizon.

While the informational syncopation of his life, mostly public and documented, could create a nightmare for a biographer, it has proven a dream to a dedicated historian and gifted fiction writer, England's Hilary Mantel. Mantel is the only woman to win the Man Booker Prize twice. And each award was won for one of the first two volumes of her Cromwell Trilogy, **Wolf Hall** and **Bring Up the Bodies**. It would be fair to predict that she will be a contender for a third Booker Prize when the third volume, **The Mirror and the Light**, is released soon.

Just as Robert Bolt selected Cromwell's contemporary Sir Thomas More as the central character for his powerful play, **A Man for All Seasons**, Mantel, equally fascinated by the drama of the Tudor era, was drawn to Cromwell instead. More is portrayed as the ultimate man of conscience and Cromwell as his tormenter by Bolt, while Mantel portrays Cromwell far more forgivingly than others who have written about him. Her More is true to the Church of Rome but certainly no saint, rather something of an ill-tempered tyrant with his family, a vile inquisitor, a man deeply concerned with his personal faith and destiny, less concerned about humanity in general. Bolt's play was a compelling testament to the contests of will between the real life characters of the early Tudor era, a hymn to a single



*Thomas Cromwell, subject of Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall*

man, while Ms. Mantel's exploration of the character of Thomas Cromwell is must reading for those who would understand the brutal day to day life and politics of Tudor England and the tightrope walk of staying alive within the dangerous crucible of splintering a Church to satisfy a King's lust and his Kingdom's desire for a male heir.

Although not a practicing attorney, Mantel read law at University, and her background in the law is obvious in the structured approach of her novels about Cromwell. If Bolt held a trial for the much demonized Earl of First Essex, Mantel constructs the acquittal with her (soon to be) trilogy.

Mantel, obviously intrigued by the strength of the man and his refusal to stay down when knocked down, treats Thomas Cromwell as the quintessential modern statesman, loyal to his King but always with one eye on the welfare of ordinary people and, concurrently looking over his shoulder, wary of the dangerous paths he was treading.

Bolt took the title for his play from a description of More by one of his contemporaries, Robert Whittington, who said of More:

*More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons.*



Mantel's position in her Cromwell books is essentially that the same...and more, much more ...can be said of Cromwell. It is Cromwell, after all, who from his position of power as the King's man, succeeds in pushing England from the barbarism of the Dark Ages kicking and screaming into an era of greater sophistication and cultural achievements in the upper reaches of society and a higher quality of life for the Kingdom's common man. As he pulled himself up to greater and greater heights, the least fortunate of his countrymen were able to commence their own ascension. And if the path to the greater good was strewn with the bodies of other sinners, including a Queen and a man who sought the glorification of martyrdom, then so be it.

Cromwell may himself have been a sinner, but he managed to turn dirty water into potable drink and multiplied the fishes for the Common Man nonetheless.

And Mantel, although born a Roman Catholic and educated as a child by convent Catholics, is possibly the first to give the man his due, highlighting the charitable, foresighted, innovative sides of his nature.

As portrayed by Mantel, the political moral of the life of Thomas Cromwell

would be that the ends indeed justify the means. In fact, Cromwell's particularly efficient, amoral brand of politics could be a missing link between Machiavellian political philosophy and utilitarian ethics. Still, the reforms he originated, pushed through, and maintained did much to improve the English commonweal.

Mantel recreates a Cromwell, who is neither black nor white. He is simply a man faced with excruciating challenges, beginning life with a father who beat him unmercifully, practically crippling him, who overcomes all odds against him to rise to greater and greater power, becoming the second most powerful man in England for a decade, second to a man whose loyalty could be counted on, perhaps, for a day or two.

By the time Henry VIII gets to chopping off his head, presumably to be addressed in the as yet unreleased third installment of Mantel's trilogy, St. Peter will have quite the dilemma on his hands. Medieval notions of good and bad become trickier in the face of an evolved, modern man.

Mantel's trilogy addresses the question, of what is

a man made. His individual acts? Or his enduring legacy?

Mantel's Cromwell is a man of contrasting sympathies and actions. He loved and respected his mentor Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, for instance, the first man who offered him work, security, protection, education, training as a lawyer, although he never truly embraced the Church Wolsey served. When Henry VIII became King of England in 1509, Wolsey became the King's almoner. Wolsey's affairs prospered, and by 1514 he was the controlling figure in virtually all matters of state and extremely powerful within the Church. The highest political position he attained was Lord Chancellor, the King's chief adviser. In that position, he enjoyed great freedom, and was often depicted as an alter rex (stand-in for the king). Within the Church, he became Archbishop of York, the second most important seat in England, and then was made a Cardinal in 1515, giving him precedence, even over the Archbishop of Canterbury.

As **Wolf Hall** begins, forces are coming together against Wolsey and the young Tom Cromwell watches the demise of his revered protector, his surrogate father, unfold. He watched and never forgot what he saw.

Throughout the novels, the political turmoil of Henry VIII's England serves as backdrop for Cromwell's own developing skills as a political survivor and manipulator, a man driven by a need to exact revenge for deeds done to Wolsey and, thus, to him, and, above all, a man of abiding faith in the potential of the common man, the class from which he came, a man bound and determined to make life beautiful, clean, and healthy for all.

Thomas Cromwell's political maneuvering was unparalleled for his day. With compulsive fervor, gradually Cromwell brought down his late mentor's foes and over and over again, those of the King, demonstrating a deep and engrained loyalty to those he served, those who had opened the doors to a better life for him, making it possible in turn for him to open doors to a better life for the ordinary Englishman.

The man who replaced Wolsey with the King, Sir Thomas More, achieved similar heights of power.

The **Wolf Hall** series offers a highly palatable version of a man of many faces, often two-faced, both friend and foe. Mantel portrays Cromwell, for instance, as understanding as a man the bewitching qualities of Queen Anne Boleyn and as the King's man, her danger, as in this passage:

*His relations with the queen as the summer draws to its official end are chary, uncertain, and fraught with distrust. Anne Boleyn is now a full 35 years old, a dark woman with a refinement that makes mere prettiness seem redundant. Once sinuous, she has become angular. She retains her dark glitter, now rubbed a little, flaking in places. Her prominent dark eyes she uses to good effect, and in this fashion: she glances at a man's face, then her regard flits away, as if unconcerned, indifferent.*



*Sir Thomas More*

*There is a pause: as it might be, a breath. Then slowly, as if compelled, she turns her gaze back to him. Her eyes rest on his face. She examines this man. She examines him as if he is the only man in the world. She looks as if she is seeing him for the first time and considering all sorts of uses for him, all sorts of possibilities, which he has not even thought of himself. To her victim the moment seems to last an age, during which shivers run up his spine. Though, in fact, the trick is quick, cheap, effective, and repeatable, it seems to the poor fellow that he is now distinguished among all men. She smirks. He preens himself. He grows a little taller. He grows a little more foolish.*



King Henry VIII

He understands her power over men, her French, coastal demeanor of loose ways, and feels some sympathy for those she seduces but his loyalty is to the King and he uses court gossip against her, tricking the Court bard Mark Smeaton into confessing to an affair with the Queen, for instance. Cromwell was never so naive as to believe his sovereign would grant clemency to any one of his wife's alleged lovers. Yet, he was the King's man and the King insisted that it be done: The Boleyn family, especially Anne, had to be removed to ensure a reliable heir. Thus, the few were sacrificed at the altar of the King's peace.

Few enough clues remain as to how this blacksmith's son was able to outflank England's most seasoned bloodlines. The mystery of his ascent is rivaled, perhaps, only by the mystery of the man Shakespeare. To even begin to understand the many faces of Cromwell, knowledge of his time in Italy is essential.

Cromwell fled to Italy to escape the intolerable, inhumane conditions he lived in at home in England. When he returned from Italy, he had been transformed from the victim of a hateful bully and brutal abuser, his father, to a man of proven courage, knowledge, and good taste, a man who understood the basics of modern economics and how to make economics work in favor of individuals and their surrogate, the state. He returned to England with an understanding of the value of education and the arts, and the underlying principle of good public health, cleanliness. And as literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve once wrote: "The loveliest, holiest, most poetic thing in the world is to be healthy."

The most important facets the transformed Cromwell gained from his experience as a *Condottiere* were, essentially, his sense of professionalism and

his forever after sense of and craving for order. He learned the basic rules of war such as rights of burial, necessary for reasons of both respect for the brave and the environment. Although he later was responsible for political deaths on behalf of Henry, as a soldier, he learned to despise killing and would thereafter seek compromise first. In **Bring Up the Bodies** Cromwell muses, "one should not desire the death of any human creature. Death is your prince, you are not his patron." He understood that bodies can make martyrs, as in the case of Catherine of Aragon. Mantel's Cromwell understood that some are more dangerous dead than alive. And if somebody really needs to die, best not to dance upon their graves. Henry, who had neither need nor right to acquisition of his wife Catherine's possessions after she died, would not be swayed and nearly fomented a revolution because in his greed he wanted to dispossess the dead!

When the King demanded the death of Sir Thomas More for refusing to go against Rome, Mantel's Cromwell, who despised More—especially for his role as inquisitor—but felt great sympathy for More's family, went to great lengths to find a path of compromise that both More and the King could accept, not only because he personally hated killing but because he understood that the results would not be favorable to the King's cause. And he was right, of course. More—although a talented man of erudition, a humanist, and author of the classic work, **Utopia**, a man who believed in education, including education for upper class women, did little to improve the lot of humanity generally. Nevertheless, More was, much later, canonized by the Church because he stuck to his guns in the end, refused to deny his belief that only the Roman Catholic Church held the keys to the Kingdom of God. Even though it was centuries before More was canonized, he immediately was proclaimed a Catholic martyr. Cromwell failed in the attempt to save More from death, but he had learned that, if killing is the only resort, then kill with respect for the doomed man. And he demanded respect be paid, especially by all in his household.

He was a stickler. When Dick Purser, who had once served under More, asks to attend his old lord's execution, Cromwell commands the youth: "Get yourself a livery coat and remember to wash your hands and face in the morning." He warns the young man not to disgrace himself or Cromwell's household by failing to show the proper respect.

During his years in Italy, the Renaissance was in full swing there. When he returned from Italy, England still remained bogged down in the Dark Ages. By burning books and burying priceless knowledge of the Ancients,



Cardinal Wolsey at Christ Church

the corrupt within the Roman Catholic Church in England had forestalled centuries of progress, maintaining control of the masses by keeping them illiterate. London looked something like Venice, except instead of picturesque canals, Cromwell walked parallel to open sewers and on all manner of filth and feces in the streets. And rats ruled. His countrymen were

relegated to short, dark, odorous, diseased lives.

Rather than jugglers or mimes, plague victims and lepers shuffled corner to corner. Due to the strongly evolved tenant system—an after effect of Church of Rome's amalgamation of communal country lands, driving the displaced poor into towns—entire swaths of London were nothing short of shantytown slums, ever on the verge of bursting into flames and threatening the whole of London with destruction by fire.

The English way of life, Cromwell immediately comprehended upon his return, was filthy in every aspect, not fit for humans. Cromwell was a born fixer, however. To emphasize this, in **Bring Up The Bodies**, Mantel paints a post-war incident in Italy when Cromwell has put in a long day's work by as a busboy:

*He sits down to a stop, nearly weeping with pain. He looks around him. All he has is this floor. This floor is his world. He is hungry, he is thirsty, he is over seven hundred miles from home. But this floor may be improved.*

And appalled at what he sees back in his native England, Cromwell set out on a lifelong mission of renovating the Kingdom.

He imported the Renaissance to England and that cannot have been easy for any number of reasons.

First, English life was very much a Celtic and Anglo-Saxon affair before Cromwell. He did not consider himself as English as the peerage, far from it, and this worked against him. Sir Thomas More, in fact, had actually accused Cromwell of being an Italian. And Cromwell admitted there is more to identity than birthplace or blood. Unlike More, however, he was never Italian enough to pay homage to the Princes of the Roman Church.

With the exception of the Church's educated administrators and lawyers and those hand picked by them for education and professional training, the English were in Cromwell's time still basically an ignorant lot with their ignorance breeding suspicion about everything

foreign. A prime example of English bias against foreign influence lies in the treatment of Cromwell's mentor Cardinal Wolsey, who was deposed for personally manifesting a foreign jurisdiction, that of the Holy See, in England.

But Cromwell was successful in planting the Renaissance eventually in spite of his ignorant, suspicious, stubborn, and multi-phobic countrymen, leading them into a better life by personal example—showing them, for instance, how to line their pockets more effectively, instructing them in the pleasures of the decorative arts and architecture, the satisfaction of a good table, the advantages of educating the masses and paying them well, and above all, the excellent results of cleanliness.

Cromwell learned accounting and banking in Italy, along with a mysterious memory system he acquired there. He never forgot anything. He understood instinctively the French and Italian concepts of profit and how to improve things so that profit is magnified. And applying strict rules of economics and accounting to his own household and holdings, he demonstrated to the self-important nobles who looked down on him because of his low birth, how they could improve the return on their own estates. He runs his own household like an army with all of the team intent on the ultimate goal of maximized potential at lowest cost. And the success he demonstrates with his own happy household sways others to follow in his footsteps. This talent of his proved effective in his political journey:

"A number of noblemen are indebted to him, not just for arranging loans, but for making their estates pay better."

He basically was a practical man, who understood that for capitalism to be functional and healthy, producing profits, opportunities must be created for all. A benevolent Capitalist, Cromwell instituted his own New Deal, à la FDR. "He thinks, also that people ought to be found better jobs." And he sees fulfillment of their need as a means of improving the overall well-being of the country. To achieve this "New Deal" he appeals to the selfish fears of the ruling class. "Look at any part of this kingdom, my lord bishop, and you will find dereliction, destitution... There are men and women on the roads. The sheep farmers are grown so great that the little man is knocked clean off his acres and the plowboy is out of house and home. In a generation these people can learn to read."

Cromwell saw a great opportunity to increase the productivity of the average English laborer and for the establishment of institutions that might lead to technological advancement in the future. His investment in the future of the State, of course, would take some time to pay off. And it did, serving as the economic base for Britain's Empire.

That his efforts have been overlooked, or worse, attributed to fortune, has been a shortcoming of our historical memory, due at least in part to the effort to make a saint of More. Mantel clearly aims to set history



straight.

In **Bring Up the Bodies** Cromwell puts words to his own capitalist-humanist philosophy: "It is better not to . . . force them into desperation. Make them prosper; out of superfluity, they will be generous. Full bellies breed gentle manners. The pinch of famine makes monsters..." Cromwell would enact his own version of the New Deal in England, putting masses to work building roads, bridges, walls. "We could pay them, if we levied an income tax on the rich...and their employment would keep them from becoming pickpockets..."

He showed the advantage of education by educating his own staff and demonstrating how far superior those in his service were, as a result. In the need for expanded education, he was in agreement with Thomas More and Wolsey, who built colleges and expanded others, except that Cromwell wanted to broaden the base drastically, he want to see universal education for all classes.

The quintessential patron of the arts, Cromwell bestowed civilization upon his countrymen, all the while allowing himself the pleasure of his love of and talent for interior decoration and architectural renovation, taking his cue not only from the Italians but from his mentor Cardinal Wolsey, a creature of Rome, who created the magnificent palace Hampton Court for his residence in London. And he instilled his own appreciation for the arts in all classes of society. He brought live theatre into vogue with the lower classes as well as the Court, for instance. Cromwell initiated trends by decorating his own establishment with fine paintings, draperies of imported silks and velvets, beautiful table furnishings, candelabra, comfortable hand carved chairs. When guests saw, admired, and desired, he arranged commissions with artists, imported fine textiles, and furnishings for them.

At elegant, well-planned private dinners in his home he taught his friends and colleagues, even his enemies, the pleasures of perfectly prepared, delicious food and the proper utensils for consuming it.

No element of style and taste escaped his attention. Some of Mantel's finest prose dedicates itself to the wardrobe of Cromwell. "...he threw his cloak around himself. A scatter of raindrops flew from it, baptized the scene." And who would Cromwell choose to adopt for his apprentice? The youngster whose most memorable trait is his stylish, if misguided, spiked haircut. Cromwell understood that once you have got people's sense of style under your thumb, it is no stretch to touch their hearts and minds.

In short, Thomas Cromwell used his private life as a laboratory for creating his influence in the public sphere.

There is much to admire in Cromwell. While he was by no means an inventor, he was an incredible innovator and facilitator, who understood the power of imagination.

In **Wolf Hall**, Cromwell even declares at one point that you don't get ahead through originality. He was a

Jack-of-all-trades, a brilliant curator, reaching out to other more advanced societies and cherry picking inventions, art, philosophical ideas, fashion, social notions such as the importance of education and cleanliness to the general well-being of mankind. He picked the best of the best, chose which artists, scholars, and performers, which fashions to import after he worked to lift the cultural blockade. Then he collated them to revive the Dark Ages exhibit that had been English life, to make life in England worth living.

Finally, Cromwell came back from his Renaissance experiences in Italy with a knowledge of the power of cleanliness, which became a driving force in his life.

An often over looked facet of the Italian Renaissance was its emphasis on cleanliness in all forms. In **The Culture of Cleanliness in Renaissance Italy**, it is noted that Dante translated Cicero. As well as affirming traditional Greek traditions of cleanliness, Cicero is especially vehement against the use of expletives and the debasement of language. Cromwell shares the Greek ideals, especially with regard to language and the visual and decorative arts. "Anything that is precise is beautiful, anything that balances in all its parts, anything that is proportionate is beautiful."

Cromwell's nemesis is the unclean, of both body and tongue, of both home and public places.

In Mantel's novels Cromwell's perceived foes are portrayed as embodiments of England's unsanitary, uncivilized, uncouth past full of dark deeds, sins against humanity. For Mantel's Cromwell, this is especially true of More, "with his slanderous pamphlets and dastardly torture apparatus...the tide of filth never abates. . . his mouth is like the world's anus. . . no one has rendered the Latin tongue so obscene."

His contempt for More and other such enemies and the political wars he waged, however, were but symptoms of Cromwell's main concern: what a damned filthy place London was to live in—compared to Florence, say, or ancient Athens.

Once again, it is by personal examples that he gets across the point, clean up your act and life will be, if not a bed of roses, certainly a whole lot more pleasant and a whole lot healthier than the cesspool you live in today.

When Cromwell was first given the Austin Friars property, which became the building block from which he created his London estate, he found it not only empty but filthy beyond. "St. Agnes, bless, her, would be knocked over by the smell of the privies." His first order of business, instead of furnishing the place, was to clean it himself to his satisfaction.

He saw the plight of the average citizen of London facing an early death from one dread disease or another, diseases carried by filthy water filthy houses, bites from diseased pests. He began battles to clean up the water and, then, he attacked the dreaded plague. He knows that the disease is carried by fleas on rats, and he mounts a

mammoth battle against rats, their fleas, and, thus, the plague, which took an enormous public relations, public re-education campaign. For emphasis, Mantel has Cromwell muse from time to time over the filthiness of even his own monarch, filthiness in his morals and in his lack of personal hygiene, and later over the King's body, stinking from infection and open sores, the result of years of dirty living.

The great tragedy of his life was that he was unable to save his beloved wife, Elizabeth, his only daughters, too, in spite of the religiously clean conditions in their private environment, they did go out in public. They contracted the plague and died.

After their deaths, his need for order, for cleanliness, for public sanitation, and end to the rule of rats approached fanatical, symptomatic heights.

In a sense, plague made Cromwell what he was, the public man, because it killed off the essence of his private life, the women he loved. Hilary Mantel does pencil in a brief affair with Mary Boleyn as well as her proposal to the statesman. Cromwell did not take her up on it. He would not be tied down, certainly not to a Boleyn. Disease took away his humanity, so Cromwell, became a zealot in a merciless campaign against the plague, becoming a Pied Piper to take it out of the lifestyle equation, changing England, Europe, and the world in the process. That's progress.

If he were in therapy today, no doubt he would be diagnosed with a form of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, a condition not without origin, starting with the abuse by his father, then the horrors of war, then losing those he loved.

His resulting compulsion for revenge on the disease which claimed his joy in life became our redemption.

Within a couple generations the impetus Cromwell provided had Englishmen washing their clothes, as well as themselves, carefully, chewing their food and washing it down with potable water rather than a never-ending font of ale, which they drank instead of water, fearing the fevers caused by dirty water. Because of the groundwork laid by Cromwell, they began eating with cutlery instead of dirty hands, and practicing some restraint in their public actions. In the words of Cromwell "...one must exhibit at all times a public restraint." That was easier to achieve when the subjects were not perpetually intoxicated. Practically, it is more difficult to rule a drunken populace or control the whims of an inebriated monarch. Intoxicated, they became less predictable, less human.

The great strides Cromwell made in his mission to make England over were possible because he captured the imagination of the King, became the master of Henry's dreams, and was able to convince Henry that he, too, was a Renaissance man, a man who believed in the things Cromwell was selling. In **Bring Up the Bodies** Mantel highlights Cromwell's Classical inspiration: "Erasmus says you ought to praise a ruler for those qualities he lacks. Flattery leads him to think, and he

might get to work on them."

The man had a monopoly by default on the imagination of Henry and as Napoleon Bonaparte wrote in his **Elements of Character**, imagination rules the world.

And he did not attempt to seize power, rather he manipulated others into willingly granting him power and with each increase in his base of power he improved his holdings. He promoted people from his household to positions in government, clearing the paths to success for them and in the process clearing the path for him to hold a majority in the King's Privy Chamber, his department, that select few which had the ear of the King, his household, his entourage.

With a King like Henry, his old on power was never really secure, and in the end, the Mantel version of which has not been given to us yet, the King does to Thomas Cromwell what he had done to the two Toms before him in the same position, Thomas Wolsey and Thomas More, he forgets loyalty and accomplishments on the Kings's behalf and he kills him.

What a bloody awful bunch those Tudors were!

In lesser hands, a dilation of the private life of Thomas Cromwell could have degenerated into speculative fiction (like the annual, bad telenovellas on Jesus on cable TV. Mantel's exhaustive research into Cromwell's public affairs as well as the current events of his time, however, counter-balances any gray areas. Her research is, in fact, so exhaustive that the trilogy, when completed, may well serve as a quasi historical document. She offers a fresh perspective on what may well be the most extensively profiled of western dynasties. In fact, nobody but the gifted fiction writer with a mania for careful research would have been so equipped to paint this redemptive portrait of Henry VIII's draconic lawyer. Thanks in no small part to the efforts by those intent on making a saint of Sir Thomas More, history had all but sealed Cromwell's fate until Ms. Mantel came along.

In her novels, Cromwell becomes a symbol for the human struggle. This remarkably accomplished man was held in low regard by most aristocrats of the realm and the Church because of his low birth. Cromwell had no high-born ancestors to worship, and his surrogate father, Wolsey, another self-made man, was thrown to the wolves by Rome.

He put his faith in mankind over either State over Church. In fact, the combined actions of Cromwell and Martin Luther no doubt led to the formation of the Council of Trent and helped force overdue reforms in the Church of Rome.

Cromwell's own lasting legacy, however, would become the renewed will of the people.

Not only did he bring the Renaissance to the British Isles, he made sure that the same cultural revolution trickled down to the masses. Hence, the Enlightenment. Hence, the modern, self-made man.

Like Prometheus, he gave the gift of fire to humans and was punished for it.

## Spiritual Journeys: Ignatius Reilly as the Knight of Faith

### W. Kenneth Holditch

Despite the broad and outrageous humor of **A Confederacy of Dunces**, readers should be aware that this novel is a philosophical and even a religious one. Certainly, readers may be amused at Ignatius Reilly's antics or may marvel at the collection of bizarre characters, the flamboyant language, the unique dialects, and the improbable events, but ultimately its primary significance lies on the level of Ignatius's world view.

Ignatius considers himself a medievalist trapped in an age devoid of "proper geometry and theology," lost in a time he does not understand and of which he does not approve, "a seer and philosopher cast into a hostile century." His radical friend from New York, Myrna Minkoff, aptly envisions him as a monk, who has chosen to shut himself off from the modern world and live without love in his own medieval world-view.

Ignatius writes in one of his many Big Chief school tablets that "With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy." He proclaimed the Middle Ages to be a time during which the western world had enjoyed "order, tranquility, unity, and oneness with its True God and Trinity." Then, he says, Fortuna's wheel — alluding to Boethius, a favorite philosopher of his — took a spin, "the luminous years of Abelard, Thomas à Becket, and Everyman dimmed" and an age of mercantilism followed, an age in which "What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale."

Ignatius holds the age of Enlightenment in contempt, because it put the western world on "the disaster course that history has taken for the past four centuries." Ignatius's philosophy could very well have been articulated by Henry Adams, author and historian, who argued in his two major works, **Mont St-Michel and Chartres** (1904) and **The Education of Henry Adams** (1907, 1918), that in Western Europe, the Middle Ages produced an abundance of original thought and art, including the great soaring cathedrals. This age was characterized by unity — unity of religious belief, unity of philosophy, unity of life styles. Adams believed that solidarity emanated from devotion to the Virgin Mary. The 19th and 20th centuries, in contrast, were eras of multiplicity during which power had been dissipated in all directions. Religions and philosophies of life had proliferated, and people were no longer certain of anything.

A cathedral, Adams argued, would not, could not be constructed in such an age, lacking as the age did devotion to such a common unifying and power-generating factor as the Virgin. In his notebooks, Nathaniel Hawthorne remarks on a similar inclination, noting that Herman Melville appeared hungry to believe, but was unable to do so.

The marked distinction between Henry Adams and Ignatius Reilly is, however, the fact that while Ignatius is a believer, Adams remained unconvinced. Despite his intense devotion to the Middle Ages and what it had accomplished, Adams seemed to passionately yearn for faith while Ignatius nourished his belief.

Seeing himself as a total anachronism in his unfriendly and heathen century, Ignatius continually berates the world around him. He deplores what has happened to the Roman Catholic Church as well as to the Office of the Pope. Although not named in the novel, Ignatius is probably referring to Pope John XXIII, who instigated major liberal changes in the church. When his dog Rex died, his mother recalls, Ignatius "goes over to the priest and asked him to come say something over the dog." When the priest refused, Ignatius conducted the ceremony himself and subsequently abandoned the Church.

The character of Ignatius certainly contains elements, albeit usually of an ironic and oblique nature, of what we know of several historical, religious icons, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Hroswitha, the German nun-poetess, Ignatius Loyola, and, from a later period, poet and polemicist John Milton.

Like Aquinas and Luther, Ignatius is a pioneer and innovator — although in his case in a perverse way — rebelling against the status quo. Those two medieval thinkers and religious philosophers, on opposite sides of the great theological debate, were not afraid to bring new ideas to the forefront in the face of widespread rejection. Similarly Ignatius, almost in a parody of Aquinas and Luther, launches his attack on those institutions — the church, popular culture, the political establishment — that he deems to be inappropriate to the faith. Although Ignatius would seem to be at odds with Aquinas's piety and devotion to Roman Catholicism, Walker Percy perceives a relationship between the two when he refers to Ignatius as "a perverse Thomas Aquinas . . . an Aquinas gone to pot." His protagonist's connection to Martin Luther is even more ironic and "perverse," and Ignatius is something of a reverse image of his namesake, Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, who advocated an austere ascetic life. Finally, both Ignatius and Luther publicly displayed their printed protests against the current state of religion and both suffered from bowel complaints.

Hroswitha was a tenth-century German nun, abbess,



W. Kenneth Holditch on the veranda of his Faubourg Marigny residence.



and poet — the first known German female poet — who wrote using various poetic forms, including epics. Ignatius identifies her as “a sybil of a medieval nun,” whom he views as a guide. He tells Dorian Green that Hroswitha “could have predicted” that Green and his gay friends would take over the world. Hroswitha was also a playwright, who reputedly started writing dramas in order to combat the popularity of the Latin author Terence, whose comedies, sensual and erotic, were offensive to her and, she felt, too popular with other nuns. Thus Ignatius invokes her as one who would, because she represents for him the best and most spiritual elements of the medieval world, be opposed to the popular entertainments of his day — movies and television. Ignatius’s protest, of course, takes a very strange, even bizarre direction. He watches television shows featuring teenaged dancers that offend his sensibilities almost as if deliberately to drive himself into a rage. He relishes contemporary movies such as **Jumbo** with Doris Day and Jimmy Durante, and romantic comedies, starring Doris Day and Rock Hudson while at the same time railing against them. Ironically, he decides not to go to the Prytania Theater where a “Swedish drama of a man who is losing his soul” is playing, an allusion to the Ingmar Bergman film, **The Seventh Seal**, set in the Middle Ages. This movie is the artistic sort that Ignatius might be expected to relish, given his propensity for the medieval, but he is always, if anything, unpredictable, and therein lies a facet of his uniqueness as a character.

Another medieval element in **A Confederacy of Dunces** and influence on the character of Ignatius is Dante’s **Divine Comedy**. As Walker Percy observes, the novel itself is “a commedia,” surely in the same sense as Dante’s epic. **The Readers’ Companion to World Literature** defines commedia as “progress from grief to joy,” from “damnation to heavenly bliss,” an apt definition of the **Divine Comedy**. Although the conclusion of the novel finds Ignatius Reilly in a state of bliss, it hardly seems heavenly; the narrative does move from the grief of the tumult in front of D.H. Holmes Department Store and the subsequent automobile wreck and its uproarious, slapstick aftermath to the joy Ignatius experiences as he sucks on Myrna’s pigtail while she drives the two of them out of the City of New Orleans.

New Orleans, or at least the French Quarter, comes to represent Hell for Ignatius, as it does for characters in other novels, notably John Rechy’s **City of Night**, and **A Confederacy of Dunces** frequently alludes to **The Divine Comedy**. While Ignatius pushes a *Paradise Vendors* hotdog wagon through the French Quarter, Toole often refers to infernos and purgatories throughout the book.

Ignatius views the French Quarter both as Sodom and Gomorrah and as “an allegorical forest of evil” in which a bus named Desire almost hits him. Ignatius, speaking of the “degenerates and wrecks and drifters” in the Quarter who buy his hotdogs, sees himself as “trapped in a limbo of lost souls.” He sympathizes with them to a degree, he says, because “I have always been forced to exist on the fringes of its society, consigned to the Limbo

reserved for those who do know reality when they see it.” These derelicts are “resounding failures in our century” and he imparts to “them a certain spiritual quality,” since for him, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an abomination. “For all we know,” he writes, “they may be — these crushed wretches — the saints of our age.” However, this remark is undercut by a humorous aside: “whatever spiritual qualities it might possess, skid row is definitely sub-standard in the matter of physical comfort.” In the spirit of the medieval era that he so admires, Ignatius sees New Orleans as one continuous allusion to hell.

Moving to the other end of the Christian spectrum, Ignatius has a medieval devotion to saints that verges on hagiology, though in an ironic, even comic sense. During his campaign to organize the factory workers at Levy Pants, he prays to “St. Martin de Porres, the patron saint of mulattoes,” who “is also invoked against rats.” He envisions Batman as a “modern media saint “who tends to transcend the abysmal society in which he’s found himself” through his “rather rigid” moral code. Ignatius writes in his *Journal of a Working Boy* that as he pushes his hotdog cart through the French Quarter, “Many a loud prayer rose from my chaste pink lips, some of thanks, some of supplication.” For Mr. Clyde, his employer, he prays to St. Mathurin, who was the patron of lepers and clowns, and because of his own digestive complaints, he invokes “St. Medericus, the Hermit, who is invoked against intestinal disorders.” He prays as well to St. Zita of Lucca, who was devoted to household chores, to aid his mother “in fighting her alcoholism and nighttime roistering.” This “interlude of worship,” he imagines, has strengthened him, and he feels “like a Crusader” as he proceeds into “the allegorical forest of evil.”

Ignatius is likewise devoted to the work of the Roman philosopher Boethius (480-525 A.D.), whose ideas influenced Dante and other medieval authors and thinkers. The most famous work of Boethius, **The Consolation of Philosophy**, provides the major image and symbol of **A Confederacy of Dunces**, the *Wheel of Fortuna*. Ignatius insists that “a blind goddess spins us on a wheel,” the *rota fortuna*, and that “our luck comes in cycles” In the **Consolation**, the power of Fortuna upon human destiny is described by Boethius:

*So with imperious hand she turns the wheel of change*

*This way and that like the ebb and flow of the tide,  
And pitiless tramples down those once dread kings,  
Raising the lowly face of the conquered—  
Only to mock him in his turn.*

His obsession for “geometry” leads Ignatius to write of “small” cycles “within the larger bad cycle” for the “universe,” which is “based upon the principle of the circle within the circle.” Boethius was a Christian convert whose world view was founded on a combination of faith and reason, and from the latter he derived a method of thought that paved the way for St. Thomas Aquinas. Ignatius quotes Christian apologist and author G.K. Chesterton as saying

that Boethius “truly served as a guide, philosopher, and friend to many Christians, precisely because while his own times were corrupt, his own culture was complete.” Ignatius surely sees himself in a similar role, guiding Dorian Green and his degenerate friends in the development of a new political “movement.” His self-image is, after all, that of “a seer and philosopher cast into a hostile century

On the other hand, he also states that “Boethius will show you that striving is ultimately meaningless, that we must learn to accept, an axiom that certainly does not govern Ignatius’s actions.

The religious strain in Ignatius’s character is conveyed in many oblique ways. In the opening scene of the novel, Ignatius judges his clothing to be “acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards,” a passage that sets the tone for his view of himself as a spiritual person throughout the novel. Myrna reminds him that on one occasion he launched a project “to nominate a candidate for president by divine right,” drawing on a decidedly medieval notion. Throughout the novel, he judges the world around him and its inhabitants, including himself, in theological terms. He creates a cross to use for his planned revolt of the workers against the management of Levy Pants but ironically uses gold leaf to inscribe “God and Commerce” on the symbol. After the factory rebellion fails, he notes that he did not complain “since Pride is a Deadly Sin which I feel I generally eschew,” a statement in which his doubts about his own infallibility are embedded. Surprisingly, given the havoc he wreaks at the plant, Mr. Levy retrospectively comments on Ignatius’s idealism, stating that he believes his bizarre ex-employee really loved the plant and wanted to improve it.

Like the Catholic Church, Ignatius, despite “his absurdities and tics and postures and excesses,” struggles over and over again to become a “spiritual instrument” for the other characters — and indeed, strange as it seems, does sometimes succeed. In his lecture on Toole and **A Confederacy of Dunces**, Robert Coles conceives of Ignatius as “a representation of the Catholic Church itself, struggling in the midst of a crooked and unjust and often enough quite crazy world.” Toole saw that church in the 1950s, Coles asserts, as still lacking and yet desiring “theology and geometry,” a comment from the novelist that conveys, according to Coles, a message of “order, hierarchy, structure, interdependence — all under Heaven’s exceedingly alert eyes. Coles draws a parallel between Toole’s creation and the ideas of Simone Weil, whose idea of “gravity and grace” is similar to the “geometry and theology.” Coles interprets Weil’s use of “gravity” as “the ever-present ‘weight’ of our minds, our bodies,” while grace is exhibited in “moments... of transcendence, strange moments, even unexpected ones.” He is intrigued by analogies between Weil’s “love for the Greek mathematicians,” as well as love for the medieval church and an “adamant theology” with Ignatius’s insistence on the need for geometry and theology. Coles concludes his analysis by insisting that we must remember “the wonderfully astute” Toole was “a dialectician in

the Augustinian tradition, able to envision the Devil as a prodding if not provocative ally,” thus authoritatively categorizing

**A Confederacy of Dunces** as a novel in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Despite the obvious connections between Ignatius and religion, his relationship to the church itself is ambivalent. When Irene Reilly “forced him to accompany her to mass on Sunday he had collapsed twice on the way to the church and had collapsed once again during the sermon about sloth.” Ignatius broke with what he called “the modern church” when the parish priest refused to bury his dog, Rex, and he observes on one occasion, “I have learned to expect little from today’s clergyman.” The reason that he “cannot support the Church” is the fact that the priest does not require more penance of his mother for what Ignatius sees as her egregious offenses. When Mr. Robichaux advises Irene to consult a priest about her obstreperous son, she replies that “Ignatius won’t listen to no priest. He calls the priest in our parish a heretic,” and she states on another occasion that “Ignatius don’t like novenas either.” He is outraged that his mother buys beads supposedly containing water from Lourdes from the Jewish Lenny’s store on Magazine Street, which Ignatius views with a jaundiced eye: “Never in my life have I seen a shop filled with so much religious hexerei. I suspect that that jewelry shop is going to be the scene of a miracle before long. Lenny himself may ascend.” On Santa Battaglia’s television sits a statue of the Virgin Mary purchased from Lenny, which she names “Our Lady of the Television.”

Toole was fascinated and amused by the New Orleans version of Catholicism, which included veneration of saints, including St. Expedite, St. Zita, and St. Odo of Cluny. Like his mother and father, Toole grew up in the Church, but by the time he went to college, both he and his parents seem to have abandoned regular attendance. Like many modern Catholics, they seem to have been devout in their own ways, while eschewing close association with the church or clergy. Thelma Toole once remarked to Joel Fletcher, a family friend, “that whenever she had to deal with a nun or a priest she always got a headache.”

However, rejecting childhood faith is not an easy task, and Toole’s fiction shows the strong influence of his upbringing. These attitudes again suggest the parallels between Ignatius and the views of Martin Luther and John Milton. Ignatius’s catalog of the offenses of modern-day religion is a sort of ironic version of Martin Luther’s theses, extending beyond the local priests to include the “current Pope” who is not his idea of “a good authoritarian Pope.” All the broad satire of religion in the novel serves finally as a serious comment on faith and theology in a world filled with dunces, as Ignatius and perhaps his author believe.

If Ignatius disparaged Catholicism, however, he reserved his most vehement attacks for Protestantism. When Myrna brands Protestants as “a class of humans who as a group specialized in ignorance, cruelty, and torture,” he replies, “I am not too fond of them myself.” Although he says on more than one occasion that he emulates

John Milton, the English poet and Protestant apologist, “spending my youth in seclusion, meditation, and study to perfect my writing skill,” just as Milton had done he holds the Protestant faith of those like Milton in contempt. He abhors “spirituals and those deadly 19<sup>th</sup> century Calvinist hymns,” preferring, of course, the medieval music of the lute. The black factory workers he organizes at Levy Pants sing:

*Oh, Jesus, walk by my side,  
Then I always, always be satisfied  
You take my hand  
And I feel grand  
Knowing you walking  
Hearing me talking*

Ignatius is offended by what he considers their “egregious blasphemy,” even though he is not above using it for his own purposes.

Medieval thought is not the only Christian influence on Ignatius, for two contemporary authors — Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor — had a marked effect on his world view. What may have attracted Walker Percy to the novel, among other elements, was the fact that he recognized in it the same Christian Existentialist strain that was an integral part of his own fiction. Fittingly, Percy rescued **A Confederacy of Dunces** from oblivion, since John Kennedy Toole counted Percy, along with Flannery O’Connor, among his favorite writers. What must have drawn Toole to the works of these two seemingly disparate but philosophically similar authors is the fact that both are Christian writers. O’Connor, indeed, has been characterized by Jacques Barzun as a “Medieval Christian,” whose work can only be understood if the reader puts her in the context of religion before St. Thomas Aquinas brought reason to bear upon it. Ignatius perceives of himself as a philosopher, and like the original thinkers in any age, he is an outsider, looked upon by many of those around him as a freak.

Similarly, Flannery O’Connor’s true believers, Francis Marion Tarwater in **The Violent Bear It Away**, for example, and Hazel Motes in **Wise Blood** — two unlikely “knights of faith,” to use Soren Kierkegaard’s phrase in **Fear and Trembling** — are perceived as fanatics, whose behavior seems bizarre, even lunatic to the well-adjusted social types. These characters are reminiscent of some of the Old Testament prophets and of St. John the Baptist, outcasts from society but bearing the truth to those who will accept it. Perhaps viewing Ignatius in the same terms is a stretch, but Toole appears to have been impressed by those outcasts in O’Connor’s fiction, as their religious faith is ultimately what matters. On the desperate trip across the country and back that preceded his suicide, he apparently made a pilgrimage to Milledgeville, Georgia, where O’Connor lived and is buried.

All three of these writers were strongly influenced by Soren Kierkegaard, who is generally acknowledged as the father of Christian Existentialism. The Danish philosopher argued that the modern human being who

was a true believer, who has taken the leap of faith from the physical to the spiritual, to belief in God, becomes a Knight of Faith.” As such, his actions might seem absurd to those not committed to belief, but he must persevere, much as T.S. Eliot at the end of *The Waste Land* suggests that to be a believer in the modern world is to be considered a fool and absurd. In the conclusion of the poem, Eliot uses a line from 16<sup>th</sup> Century English dramatist Thomas Kyd’s work, **The Spanish Tragedy** — “Why then Ill fit you. Hieronymo’s mad againe” — in which the character acknowledges that he will assume the guise of insanity to achieve his desired end. For Hieronymo, that desired end is revenge against those who killed his son, while the persona of *The Waste Land* is set on the quest for personal salvation, believing that source of salvation will “set my lands in order,” regardless of what the mass of humanity may do. Kierkegaard left the church because he felt that the institution had strayed from the path of truth, and Ignatius follows a similar pattern. Kierkegaard’s consideration of faith exerts a clear influence on **A Confederacy of Dunces**. In his journal, the philosopher wrote, “Faith therefore hopes also for this life, but, be it noted, by virtue of the absurd, not by virtue of human understanding, otherwise it is only practical wisdom, not faith. Faith is therefore what the Greeks called the divine madness.” Kierkegaard advocated a life of self-examination in which the human being is not content to be resigned to things as they are but is rather committed to saving the soul. This attempt “to save my soul,” he argues, is what makes one a knight of faith who may be forced to wear “the motley of the fool” but will not be deterred from his quest. Through recognizing the absurdity and paradoxical nature of the world, one is set upon the right path. “The Christian heroism,” he insists, “is to venture to be oneself, as an individual man, this definite individual man.”

Abraham was Kierkegaard’s greatest hero because he was capable of putting aside conventional ethics and heed the voice of God when it told him to slay his own son.

Throughout **A Confederacy of Dunces**, Toole hints that he was familiar with Kierkegaard, most notably in Ignatius’s commitment to the absurd and his insistence on acting by his own lights, regardless of how foolish or even mad he may appear to others. In a reference to Original Sin, Ignatius tells Myrna Minkoff that he refuses to believe in the positive and eschews optimism as a philosophy. Humanity, since the fall of man, is doomed to suffering. When Myrna replies that she is not miserable, Ignatius assures her that she is though she may not know it, reflecting Kierkegaard’s belief that most human beings live in despair and that “the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.”

Significantly, Walker Percy uses the quotation for the epigraph of his novel, **The Moviegoer**.

For Kierkegaard, despair is the natural state of the human being. Living any sort of meaningful life is impossible unless the state of despair is recognized.

Similarly, Walker Percy’s characters struggle to free themselves from the malaise that everyday life imposes upon their existence. None of Percy’s characters behave



in a manner quite as outrageous and unorthodox as does Ignatius Reilly, and yet in their recognition of the absurdity of the world in which they live, they reflect many of the ideas Toole developed. Binx Bolling in **The Moviegoer** withdraws from active participation in much that was held sacred by his family because he felt it forced an identity upon him. In **The Last Gentleman** Will Barrett ponders the fact that life in the modern world has become progressively more meaningless, so his ancestors beliefs and the actions they took mystify him. In Lancelot, the protagonist, after discovering that his wife is unfaithful and that his child was fathered by another man, commits murder and is confined to a mental hospital in New Orleans, where he concludes that in an insane world, only the insane man is at home. All Percy's protagonists, in short, recognize the confederacy of dunces, and although their reaction to the vicissitudes of modern existence are not as drastic as that of Ignatius, they are nevertheless alienated by the absurdity of the world around them.

Although attributing the belief of any character in a novel to its author, clearly Toole shared the faith of his creation, Ignatius, even if he was not so vehement in expressing his own views. Emilie Dietrich Griffin wrote about the time she spent in New York with the novelist: "Ken was a Catholic. In those days, I wasn't. We didn't talk much about religion, yet I knew being Catholic meant something to him — as a cultural stance if not on the level of belief." She recalled that he once wrote on the blackboard at Hunter College, "Anticatholicism is the antisemitism of the liberal," obviously having sensed some prejudice against his religion among the students, many of whom were Jewish. Griffin notes that Catholics were automatically considered non-intellectual in New York, whereas in New Orleans, quite the opposite was true: "I knew Ken cared about being Catholic, enough to get mad when he was patronized for it; enough to defend Catholicism as an intellectual stance; enough to write defensive slogans on the blackboard at Hunter." On the other hand, Griffin believed that Toole was not committed to religion: "Perhaps the only act of faith that Ken was capable of making was to write. I'm sure that writing is an act of faith." Griffin's analysis of her friend's relation to religion is valid, but I would argue that both intellectually and spiritually, the novel **A Confederacy of Dunces** demonstrates that he felt himself, consciously or unconsciously, to be a part of the church in which he had grown up and to share in the faith it espoused.

## Notes

1. It is obvious that these are the actors and the movies that Ignatius is watching, although Toole does not specifically name them.
2. The streetcars that ran on the Desire line were removed in 1948, and the "bus" seems an acknowledging nod on the part of John Kennedy Toole to Tennessee Williams, who is the one writer most responsible for creating the literary myth of the French Quarter.

W. Kenneth Holditch is a Research Professor Emeritus from the University of New Orleans, where he taught for 32 years. He is the founding editor of *The Tennessee Williams Journal* and has published numerous short stories, poems, periodical articles, and critical essays on William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Walker Percy, Richard Ford, Anne Rice, and many others. Holditch was a founder of the Tennessee Williams Festival in New Orleans, Tennessee Williams Festival in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, and the Words and Music Festival. In 1974 he created a French Quarter literary tour and still conducts the walks through the Vieux Carre. Long term plans include a biography of John Kennedy Toole as well as a novel about growing up in the Mississippi. His full-length play on Tennessee Williams has been given two staged readings at Lincoln Center in New York and is still a work in progress. In 2003 his recorded narration was used as a voice-over in an off-Broadway staging of *Derelicts and Dreamers*, produced and directed by Erma Duricko. In 1997 Holditch was keynote speaker at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival in Cleveland, OH. He has lectured extensively in the U.S. and Europe on Tennessee Williams and other Southern authors and has participated in symposia at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Tennessee Williams Symposium at the University Alabama and the University of Minnesota. He is an annual speaker at the Hartford Stage for their Tennessee Williams Marathon. In 2001, he was awarded the Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities Lifetime Achievements Award. In recent years, he has concentrated much of his attention on Tennessee Williams and his works. Holditch's writings on the playwright include a monograph about Williams in New Orleans, *The Last Frontier of Bohemia*. He co-edited with critic Mel Gussow the two *Library of America* volumes (2000) that include 33 plays of Tennessee Williams. With Richard Freeman Leavitt, he co-authored *Tennessee Williams and the South*, published in March 2002 by the University Press of Mississippi. Holditch's latest book, co-authored with Marda Burton, is *Galatoire's: Biography of a Bistro*. Works Consulted

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## From Bad Catholic to Unthinking Catholic: Percy's Zombie Apocalypse

By Caroline Rash

Walker Percy's 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins* follows Dr. Thomas More, namesake and descendant of Sir Thomas More, author of *Utopia* and Catholic martyr. His very name is an ironic jab at the protagonist's lukewarm faith. The novel follows Dr. More's search for meaning in the days leading up to an apocalypse in the small Louisiana town of Paradise.

Dr. More, a psychiatrist, has invented the *ontological lapsometer*, a sort of stethoscope of the spirit, which supposedly can diagnose and treat maladies of the soul, the very maladies at the root of the disintegration of Society.

When the device falls into the wrong hands, a sort of zombie apocalypse occurs, with people fucking and fighting in the streets as their souls collapse into animalistic instinct.

From George Romero's classic 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* to contemporary shows like AMC's *Walking Dead*, the zombie genre of fiction has been a much favored vehicle for social commentary, and Percy's novel is no different in that regard. Percy's particular criticism is that people's lifestyles, impulses, and status as moral agents is profoundly unbalanced. The world is polemical, and all politics, right or left, have lost their vital center of thoughtfulness. The *lapsometer* can "treat" a man as far as an external treatment can assuage illness, but over the course of the book, we find that man's only cure comes from within, after thoughtful delving into the depths of one's soul.

First, it is helpful to understand a bit of background about what led Percy to write this searing satire. *Love in the Ruins* was published in 1971. Percy, by then, had grown up in the South, gone to medical school in the North (at Columbia University) and moved back to Covington, Louisiana. This journey also stands, metaphorically, for his loss of Protestant faith, dedication to science, then conversion back to faith (Catholicism). It is easy to understand that he saw many people entrenched in meaningless lives, having not sought out new perspectives and vistas, and this myopic apathy is his major criticism, whether it was Southern, Northern, Rural, Urban, Black, White, Scientific or Religious.

This is no **Thomas Bernhard** monologue,

however. Percy's jabs are usually ironic or tongue-in-cheek and the book is hilariously funny in many passages. For example, a cursory reading of *Love in the Ruins* suggests, to someone unfamiliar with Percy, that he was celebrating conservative, simple faith and morality. After all, the last sentence reads, "To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folk belong."

However, a close reading assures us this is Percy's deft final criticism. Lest the reader assume that—after making fun of academia, the government, violent agitators, hippies, and priests—Percy would be content with settling his protagonist into a monogamous, industrious, unthinking lifestyle and not criticize him, think again.

*Love in the Ruins* follows the sympathetic, yet completely lost, Dr. Thomas More, as he tries to attain meaning through alcohol, women, science, and art. More is a self-described "Bad Catholic," meaning he believes in God but that belief in no way affects his actions.

He remarks early on that, "I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally, I do as I please. A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar."

Percy delivers his cultural criticism as Dr. More encounters people

of varying ideas and tries to not only cure other souls with his *lapsometer*, but also his own. It is the search for a temple, reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's questions through the character of Marathe in *Infinite Jest*. Marathe says, "Our attachments are our temple, no? What we give ourselves to, what we invest with faith...Are we not all of us fanatics?. Choose your attachments carefully. Choose your temple of fanaticism with great care."

It is very clear that More does not find any true fulfillment in his vices. He is cuckolded by his first wife, then takes on two or three lovers for most of the book, going so far as to (rather comically) assume he can take all three into a Howard Johnson hotel for the apocalypse and its aftermath. He lusts after one's ankles, or lips or cello playing, then he'll turn right around and offer a similar soliloquy about the other.

Additionally, he is actually allergic to his gin fizzes, but, as an alcoholic, continues to drink them and rejoice in the few minutes of drunken ecstasy, though, like his lust for each woman, the relief from his troubled mind



Walker Percy's 1971 zombie novel

## In the Spirit of Walker Percy



**Zadie Smith**, the Cambridge educated London author, has been quoted as saying:

*Novels are not about expressing yourself, they're about something beautiful, funny, clever and organic... Go and ring a bell in a yard if you want to express yourself.*

She herself has written two novels which meet her description of what they are about, **NW** and **White Teeth**. In the forthcoming, December 5, issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Ms. Smith summons from the other world the spirit of **Walker Percy** with her essay, *Man vs. Corpse*. Here's a teaser:

*Walking corpses—zombies—follow us everywhere, through novels, television, cinema. Back in the real world, ordinary citizens turn survivalist, ready to scale a mountain of corpses if it means enduring. Either way, death is what happens to everyone else. By contrast, the future in which I am dead is not a future at all. It has no reality. If it did—if I truly believed that being a corpse was not only a possible future but my only guaranteed future—I'd do all kinds of things differently. I'd get rid of my iPhone, for starters. Lead a different sort of life.*

It's a marvelous essay. Be sure to read it in its entirety at: [www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/dec/05/zadie-smith-man-vs-corpse/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/dec/05/zadie-smith-man-vs-corpse/)

is only temporary.

Of course, it is not a stretch for Percy to dismiss lusting after women and alcoholism. The later criticisms are more interesting—those of important social movements, “scientism”, humanism, Free Love, and finally religion itself. Percy's resounding answer through **Love in the Ruins** is that there is no idea sufficient to be made a temple.

As Percy channels these criticisms through the observations of More, we begin to think he might, just yet, attain some greater truth. At the end of the book, however, Percy bends his critical gaze back upon his protagonist.

In the last scenes, after the zombie apocalypse has been (perhaps temporarily) quelled, More decides

to be a good religious man—to finally live his life in accordance with Biblical teachings. The problem is that he is not, deep-down, invested in the morals that he decides to uphold. As he tells the priest in his last confession, though he resolves not to sin again, he does not truly repent for what he has done. A dialogue follows:

“Do you have contrition and a firm purpose of amendment?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know? You don't feel sorry for your sins?”

“I don't feel much of anything.”

The priest is confused and asks if More has lost his faith, which More denies. So the priest's questions again:

“You are aware of your sins, you confess them, but you are not sorry for them?”

“That is correct.”

Eventually the priest tells More that it doesn't really matter how he feels inside, but how he acts, and that there are more important things than really, truly investing in inner faith. Basically, the priest says that a shell of faith is good enough, and Dr. More goes on his way, “ashamed” of his sins instead of genuinely sorry for them and genuinely determined not to sin again.

Percy subtly parses this last stab at a faithful, moral existence. In the end, living a good life just because of your religious beliefs does not make you a moral, exemplary human. Percy is echoing Flannery O' Connor speaking through her character the Misfit in **A Good Man is Hard to Find**. The Misfit famously remarks, “She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

The end of **Love in the Ruins** is a great irony as Tom More thinks he has attained a moral, happy existence by choosing religion as his temple or temple-loaded-gun. But he is the same as he always has been and will fail at being a good man again, as Percy demonstrates in the last pages, when More already is drinking again — in other words, back to his old vice and no better off than he was at the beginning of the book.

Dr. More's unthinking religion, in the end, circles back to the very reason behind the zombie apocalypse: people's lives are out of balance and polemicized by thoughtless attachment to one idea or another. Percy is criticizing thoughtlessness—that includes thoughtless religion. Dr. More's religion, in the end, is an unevolving, unthinking one. He wants to settle down with platitudes and guidelines.

He is finally a zombie.

**Caroline Rash** is associate editor of *The Double Dealer*.

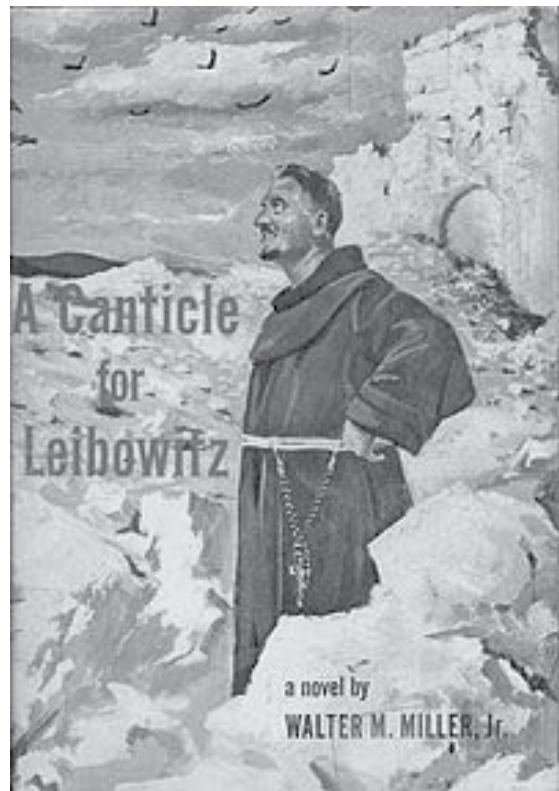


## Recommended Reading to Accompany Walker Percy

Books to read in tandem with Walker Percy's post-apocalyptic novel **Love in the Ruins** would doubtless have to include the 1960 apocalyptic novel about life after the Flame Deluge, **A Canticle for Leibowitz**.

Walker Percy once wrote in an essay on **A Canticle for Leibowitz** that "When one age dies, its symbols lose their referents and become incomprehensible." Percy found the novel—released during the Cold War when nuclear disaster was foremost in the minds of all—at once pregnant with meaning and idiosyncratic and he resisted recommending it as a good read. Yet, today, inundated as we are with ideologically charged and artistically mediocre end-of-time stories, it's time to pull **A Canticle for Leibowitz** off the shelf and recommend this novel that serves to put in question simplistic apocalyptic oppositions between science and religion, knowledge and faith, Jews and Christians, Muslims and Christians, Muslims and Jews and differences between all the other faiths of the world, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, for instance.

**A Canticle for Leibowitz** is a science fiction novel by American writer Walter M. Miller, Jr., first published in 1960 and set in a Catholic monastery in the desert of the southwestern United States after a devastating nuclear war. As the story goes, after long years of hiding from the aftermath of a nuclear war, humanity has re-emerged from shelter and is attempting to resume life. After the great destruction, amid the "confusion of tongues," hate and fear grow among the masses, especially toward "men of learning" whom the people now blame for the destruction. Thus begins a period of violence against scientists and against knowledge itself, whose "flame" continues for 12 centuries to "smolder in the monasteries." Science and scientists provide a target for the rage and pain of the survivors, who need someone to take responsibility for

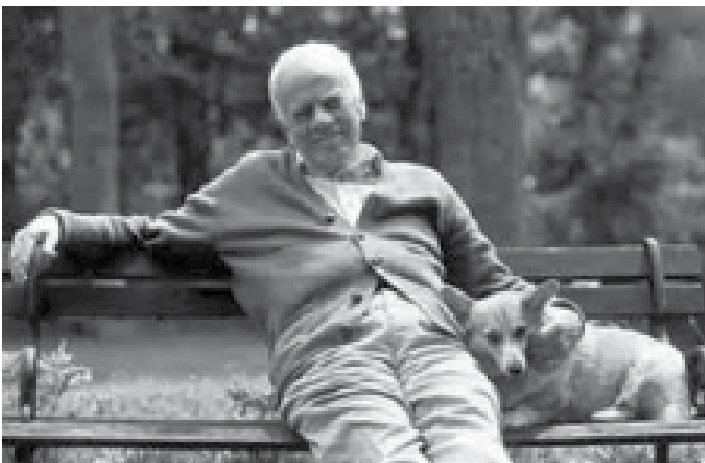


*A Canticle for Leibowitz* by **Walter Miller** has been compared favorably with the works of Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Walker Percy, and its themes of religion, recurrence, and church versus state have generated a significant body of scholarly research.

the tragedy. Society's attempt to purge the source of its destruction has led to persecution of scientists and the destruction of the knowledge that they carried. In the turmoil, the only sanctuary the scientists can find is the church and the church has sheltered scientists and their books and papers, understanding that this knowledge would be critical to restoring humanity to civilization. But with the passage of time, the scientists have died, monks have died, and the church has forgotten what little it knew about the books it preserves.

The story spans thousands of years as civilization rebuilds itself. The monks of the fictional Albertian Order of Leibowitz have taken up the mission of preserving the surviving remnants of man's scientific knowledge until the day the outside world is again ready for it, faithfully preserving all. The monastic Order of St. Leibowitz the Engineer attempts to keep alive relics, both religious and scientific, from the world before the destruction. Since knowledge is but fragmentary, the monks' careful cultivation of remnants of knowledge has a comic effect of which they are unaware. Their documents and places of reverence include the blessed blueprint, the sacred shopping list, and the holy shrine of Fallout Shelter.

But the monks remain serious about preservation, not just of sacred matters, but of knowledge itself, particularly scientific knowledge. a pervasive feature of our popular culture and of apocalyptic stories, of a



Covington, LA author **Walker Percy** with a friend

necessary opposition between science and religion is countered by the devoted activities of the monks in *Canticle*. Their task of preservation involves an insight into human nature:

“Man is a culture-bearer as well as a soul-bearer, but his cultures are not immortal and they can die.” Against that death of culture, what the book calls “total amnesia,” the monks toil. Not through anxious terror over the end of the world, but through subtle suggestion and comic indirection, the book makes us wonder to what extent we may suffer an analogous amnesia, a forgetfulness and fragmentation of knowledge, a decline of culture, that to someone possessing a more comprehensive vision might seem comic, if not utterly without hope.

What makes the novel memorable is its irony, its gentle humor. Miller treats his characters with dignity but allows the reader to appreciate their human foibles. The world Miller creates for *Canticle* bears the scars of destruction and is populated by people living in the aftermath of nuclear war and fallout. Their stories make the gray realm of destruction come vividly to life

Some 40 years after the novel was initially published, Miller’s writing, characters, and story feel current and topical, despite the fact that the cold war has passed into history. Miller’s experiences during World War II and his personal search that led him to examine his faith and ultimately convert to Catholicism drove questions that remain fundamental and valid today.

**A Canticle for Leibowitz** is based on three short stories Miller contributed to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It is the only novel published by the author during his lifetime. Considered one of the classics of science fiction, it has never been out of print and has seen over 25 reprints and editions. Appealing to mainstream and genre critics and readers alike, it won the 1961 Hugo Award for best science fiction novel.

Inspired by the author’s participation in the Allied bombing of the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino during World War II, which resulted in post-traumatic stress and deep feelings of guilt and depression for Miller, which led him to convert to Catholicism in search of redemption.

The novel is considered a masterpiece by literary critics. It has been compared favorably with the works of Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and Walker Percy, and its themes of religion, recurrence, and church versus state have generated a significant body of scholarly research. Miller’s follow-up work, **Saint Leibowitz and the Wild Horse Woman**, was published posthumously in 1997.

—*The Editors*

## An Excerpt from: **Ex Cathedra**

by John Biguenet

*Je me suis aperçu alors qu’il n’était pas si facile qu’on le croyait d’être pape. . . .*  
-Albert Camus

*I found then that it was not so easy as one might imagine to be Pope. . .*

Bob Bergeron had been looking for the Pantheon when, having somehow wandered off the Via del Gesù, which he had been assured by the *portiere* at his hotel would lead him without fail to the Piazza della Rotonda, he found himself instead navigating the slippery cobbles of the Via dei Cestari. Soon the street broadened into a small square, and the lawyer paused to consider whether he should try to retrace his steps back to where he had gone wrong.

Squinting there in the morning light, scanning the ancient stone buildings for a street sign, Bergeron noticed in a shopwindow on the square three headless mannequins draped in papal regalia. Beneath the name of the business, in smaller letters, “*SARTORIA PER ECCLESIASTIC*” explained the service offered within. “Tailor for the clergy,” he translated aloud.

He was amused. Where else but in Rome would one find such a shop? Approaching, he marveled at the quality of the white cassocks displayed in the window. The fabric, he guessed, was silk; and the subtle needlework rivaled the best he had seen in London when he had been fitted for his first bespoke suit the year before. *Worth every penny*, he insisted to himself, almost out of habit. So hefty an expenditure for a single suit still embarrassed him, and though it frequently drew compliments, he had never confessed to colleagues or even strangers that the beautiful pinstripe had been cut and sewn for him by hand.

Thinking of his colleagues, Bergeron remembered the costume party the firm threw at Mardi Gras every winter and realized he had an excuse to open the door beside the shopwindow. He needed another excuse, though, to explain to the clerk why a member of the laity should wish to purchase ecclesiastical garb, especially of the color reserved for the pope.

“I’m friends with a priest back home in New Orleans. I thought he might like to practice. You know, just in case.”

“A joke?” the tailor wondered.

Bergeron wasn’t sure whether that was acceptable. “Not so much a joke as a provocation.”

The Italian shrugged.

Bergeron couldn’t tell if he had been understood, but he forged on with his lie. “The priest is my height.” He lifted a hand as high as the top of his head. “This tall.”

The tailor nodded. "And about your weight, too, no?"

The American realized he was not the first tourist to have done business at the shop. "Yes, *si*."

"You understand it's not a cheap provocation, your little joke, eh?"

"The money doesn't matter. It's well deserved."

The clerk, who had knelt beside him to measure Bergeron from waist to heel, looked up skeptically.

"I mean my friend. . . the priest I know back home. He deserves it."

The clerk rose and slipped behind him. "It's true. Where would we be without them, the priests?" He grabbed the back of the American's pants in his fist, clasping the end of the tape against the belt with his thumb and measuring to the base of the neck.

When Bergeron saw, over his shoulder, the number the tailor had entered in the brown leather notebook, he started to object, then remembered it was in centimeters, not inches, the length of the papal robe for which he was being fitted.

When he was done with his measurements, the clerk seemed to bow as he slipped the tape measure back over his neck with both hands. The gesture reminded Bergeron of his days as an altar boy, assisting a priest preparing for Mass to don, among the panoply of liturgical vestments, a long silk stole. "Besides the cassock, I'll also need the little red cape—"

"*La mozzetta*," the tailor clarified for him.

"Yes, the *mozzetta*, and . . ." He put his hand on the back of his head.

"*Uno zucchetto*?"

"The beanie? You know, the little hat?"

"*Si, signore*, the skullcap. The . . . how do you say? . . . the beanie."

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By the time the package arrived from Italy, more than a month after he had returned to New Orleans, Bergeron had nearly forgotten his expensive little whim that morning in a Roman shop. But alone in his apartment overlooking the city's business district, he found himself impatient to try on his new clothes.

Gently peeling back the tissue in which each vestment was wrapped, Bergeron laid out the garments on his bed and admired the craftsmanship evident in the stitching of the seams and the buttonholes. "Superb," he exclaimed as he fingered the hem of the cassock. Then, fearing he might soil the white silk, he decided to shower

before dressing.

Padding back into the bedroom after bathing and shaving, Bergeron tugged on clean underwear, including a fresh T-shirt. Then he slipped his arms into the cassock. The length was perfect, and as he worked his way down the cloth-covered buttons, he marveled at the fit. He could barely tell he was wearing anything at all.

The small cape took some adjustment before it lay properly over the shoulders of the cassock, and he had to hold his head upright to keep the skullcap from tumbling off. (He'd pick up some hairpins in the morning to clip it in place, he decided.) But once he was fully dressed, he could not have been more pleased with the ensemble. *Magnificent*, he allowed, as he studied himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door, *absolutely magnificent*.

Still barefoot, he walked into the living room and poured himself a cognac from the mahogany cart that served as a bar. Sliding a disc of Renaissance madrigals into his sound system, he reclined in his favorite chair and savored the evening.

As he imagined the reaction to his costume at his firm's Mardi Gras party, he was distracted by his feet, jutting nakedly from the cassock. The problem of appropriate shoes hadn't occurred to him in Rome, and the brown loafers he wore around the apartment would spoil the effect of his outfit, he felt.

It took two days to find something compatible: red silk slippers embroidered with golden dragons from a Chinese import shop on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. On his way back to the office with his new slippers, he stopped at a haberdashery on Canal Street to pick up two pairs of red silk stockings.

When he got home that night and tried on the thin socks, he was surprised to find that, stretched over his feet, the silk was more pink than red, but he decided it hardly mattered, concealed as they were under the long cassock and encased in the embroidered slippers. To be certain the stockings would work, though, he again donned the vestments and, finding them more comfortable than his usual loungewear, left the regalia on until he went to bed.

The next night, too, he put on the cassock—technically called a *simar*, he had learned on the Internet that afternoon—as well as the *mozzetta* and the *zucchetto* along with his pink stockings and red silk Chinese slippers. It calmed him, he found, to dress this way at home.

After he had microwaved a ready-made dinner



**John Biguenet**, truly a renaissance man of literature—award-winning poet, fiction writers, translator, and playwright—is author of the new play in rhymed iambic pentameter, **Broomstick**, just closed an extended run at New Jersey Rep and will go on to at least three other productions around the country in 2014.



from the freezer, he carried it on a cork-lined tray to the dining room, where he chose the armchair at the end of the table. *Cathedra*, he remembered from a high-school Latin class, the kind of chair in which his teacher, Father Augustine, sat, as distinct from the armless *sedes* in which the student sat. He repeated the lesson from thirty years earlier: thus, the Pope is infallible when he speaks “*ex cathedra*,” from the chair with arms, the teacher’s chair.

The lawyer started to laugh at the notion that he might speak infallibly but then stopped himself. There were subjects, he acknowledged as he tried the meatloaf in a traditional tomato gravy, about which he could speak authoritatively. Forced heirship, for example. He had spoken at the state bar association’s annual meeting on that issue. And when it came to the fine points of usufruct, too, there was no one else in the local legal community who could touch him. *I’m not without authority*, he conceded to himself, dabbing a forkful of mashed potatoes into the compartment of green peas on the segmented plate.

It became a habit the next evening, changing out of his suit and into the *simar* and other accoutrements of his little joke, his little provocation. He understood how it might be misinterpreted as rather ridiculous, even pathetic. But he wasn’t some loser in a costume sitting around in an apartment pretending to be something he wasn’t. No, he just liked the feel of the cassock, the drape of its silk, the line of his shoulders beneath the *mozzetta*. He had never before worn anything so comfortable—it was nothing more than that.

And if he had been pushed, he could have gone on to explain that lounging after work in a handmade silk robe seemed to him simply—he searched for the word—*commensurate* with his accomplishments. Though he lived in a culture that scorned all but the subtlest displays of achievement by a man, why shouldn’t he be free in the privacy of his own home to dress as he saw fit? Judges, after all, pranced about in the robes of their rank in open court. Surely no one could object to an extremely successful lawyer wearing comfortable clothes around the house.

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It was just another joke, really—or that was how it started, at least—his first encyclical, begun a few nights later in the armchair at the dining-room table. An important ruling had gone his way that afternoon, and he celebrated with an expensive bottle of wine when he got home. Opening a second bottle, he decided he’d heard enough Mozart for one evening, and interrupting the piano concerto that had just begun to repeat, he switched to *Die Kunst der Fuge*.

He loved Mozart, of course, but compared to the stately inevitability of Bach, whose opening fugue now swelled on the recorded organ, he found the younger composer a bit too “ad hoc,” as he had once opined to

a fellow lawyer during the intermission at a symphony performance.

“Yes,” he concluded aloud, startling himself as he continued the remembered conversation in his imagination, Bach is just like the law—rigorous, absolute, but capable of moving a man to tears. He sipped the Châteauneuf-du-Pape and opened his leather notebook, the Mont Blanc in his hand poised over a blank page.

It had to be written in English, of course, because his high-school Latin was not up to the discussion of the case against capital punishment. But Louisiana was about to execute a retarded 16-year-old convicted of murder, and his sense of drunken outrage at the injustice to be committed in his name as a citizen of the state demanded he object in some form.

The first sentence wrote itself before he had even considered his argument:

*Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.*

It troubled him that he did not know the source. His chair scraped as he pushed back from the table and tottered toward the computer on his desk, the hem of his *simar* barely skimming the golden dragons of his red slippers. A search engine quickly returned a hit:

*Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

He block saved the verse and its citation, Romans 12:19, pasting the material into a new document that he opened in his word processor. Staring at the sentence glowing on the screen, he realized he had never actually read an encyclical. His computer easily located a translation of “*Deus Caritas Est*,” a recent example by Benedict XVI. He was pleased to discover that Benedict, too, had begun with a quotation from scripture. The form of the document seemed fairly straightforward: an explication of the opening quote followed by reflections on its implications and a concluding exhortation to observe the moral principles enunciated in the course of the discussion.

The lawyer smiled at its simplicity; he had written far more complicated legal briefs and memoranda than Benedict’s encyclical.

*Piece of cake*, he told himself.

When he woke the next morning, a word popped into his mind and stayed there: *reprehensible*. It took a moment to remember why.

Waiting for a kettle of water to boil for coffee, he sat down at his desk and awakened his computer from sleep. Still on the screen was the final sentence of a long paragraph: “To countenance the execution of an individual qualifying under current Louisiana statutes both as ‘mentally enfeebled’ and as a ‘juvenile’ is not merely an affront to the State’s constitution but, quite simply, morally reprehensible.”

He leaned back in his chair as he scrolled to the beginning of the essay. He was struck by the passion of his argument; it came as something of a surprise, the indignation his prose revealed.

Of course, he had to acknowledge his anger the night before might have been fueled, at least in part, by the contents of the two dark green bottles, nearly emptied of their wine, that now refracted the early sunlight as if a pair of miniature steeples of stained glass. Still, he felt he was not deceiving himself in thinking the eloquence of his argument had sprung from righteous disgust with the legal system he served as an officer of the court rather than from yet another display of the vanity that, he had to admit, often obfuscated his pleadings with garrulous circumlocutions.

He had not appealed to arcane case law in condemning the execution of the slow-witted boy, knitting a cunning argument of legal precedents that opposing counsel would find impossible to unravel. Instead, his encyclical had simply stated undisputed facts and called upon the reader to reflect on fundamental norms of justice. He had spoken from the heart, to the heart.

And the candor of the document left him both abashed and exhilarated. Having been interrupted by the whistling of the kettle on the stove, he let the coffee brew as he returned to the computer and typed a title: "Vengeance Is Mine." The author's name could wait, but an encyclical was a letter. To whom would he address the argument on behalf of the condemned? He heard the keyboard clicking before he even realized he was writing, "To My Fellow Louisianians."

He dated the document and had the computer check the spelling, then experimented with a number of typefaces before settling on Garamond. The ancient font, he was pleased to discover, had been created by Claude Garamond, a Parisian publisher who, in addition to designing type in the century following Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, had introduced to French punctuation the apostrophe, the accent, and the cedilla. Bergeron had always considered punctuation, like grammar, the moral underpinning of language. He sniffed a whiff of impropriety in violations of such conventions, and associates assigned to assist him often had their drafts of filings returned "bleeding with red ink," as he had heard one young lawyer complain to another. So Garamond seemed to him both aesthetically and morally appropriate as the font of his first encyclical.

There remained, however, the question of authorship. He considered a cloak of anonymity—"a *mozzetta* of anonymity," he joked to himself as he poured a cup of coffee and popped a frozen waffle into the toaster. But the absence of a signature suggested cowardice. On the other hand, he certainly could not jeopardize his reputation by using his own name on what was, after all, merely a drunken stunt. He would need a

pseudonym, he decided. Popes took the names of saints, so Bergeron chose Christopher, still a saint but removed from the calendar of feast days because no evidence survived that he had, in fact, ever existed. He signed the document "Christopher Pope" and printed a copy. . . .

*Ex Cathedra* was first published in Image #77 (Spring 2013)]. Copyright, 2013, John Biguenet, reprinted here with permission of the author.

**John Biguenet**, truly a renaissance man of literature—award-winning poet, fiction writers, translator, and playwright—is author of the new play in rhymed iambic pentameter, **Broomstick**, just closed an extended run at New Jersey Rep and will go on to at least three other productions around the country in 2014. An earlier play, **The Vulgar Soul**, which tells the story of a faithless stigmatic, was described by American Theatre magazine as "as a provocative inquiry into the nature of belief and self-deception." **The Vulgar Soul** won the 2004 Southern New Plays Festival and was a featured production in 2005 at Southern Rep Theatre; he and the play were profiled in American Theatre magazine. His Katrina trilogy of plays, **Rising Water, Shotgun, and Mold**, have won a number of awards and enjoyed 30 productions and staged readings around the U.S. His new play in rhymed iambic pentameter, **Broomstick**, just closed an extended run at New Jersey Rep and will go on to at least three other productions around the country in 2014. He is author of the critically acclaimed nove, **Oyster**, and short fiction collection, **The Torturer's Apprentice: Stories**. published by Ecco/HarperCollins in the U.S. and by Orion Books in the U.K. His fiction is published in Hebrew translation by Matar Publishing Company in Tel Aviv, in French translation by Éditions Albin Michel in Paris, and in Dutch translation by Uitgeverij Ailantus in Amsterdam. Among his other books are **Foreign Fictions** (Random House), two volumes on literary translation (The University of Chicago Press), and **Strange Harbors**, an anthology of international literature in translation (Center for the Art of Translation). Biguenet's radio play **Wundmale**, which premiered on Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Germany's largest radio network, was rebroadcast by Österreichischer Rundfunk, the Austrian national radio and television network. Two of his stories have been featured in **Selected Shorts** at Symphony Space on Broadway. His work has received an O. Henry Award and a Harper's Magazine Writing Award among other distinctions, and his stories and essays have been reprinted or cited in **The Best American Mystery Stories, Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards, The Best American Short Stories**, and **Best Music Writing**. Having served twice as president of the American Literary Translators Association and as writer-in-residence at various universities, he is currently the Robert Hunter Distinguished University Professor at Loyola University in New Orleans.

## New Orleans, Mon Amour



*The Ship, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*



**Editor's Note:** Walker Percy's famous essay, *New Orleans, Mon Amour*, published in *Harper's Magazine* in September of 1968 captured New Orleans with all of her bling and warts in a way that no one had done before or has since. Today, 45 years later, it remains one of the best possible windows into the soul of America's most interesting, often controversial, always inspiring city, rising up like Venus on the Half Shell out of her watery surrounds. Before her death last year, Mrs. Walker Percy, "Bunt" to her friends, granted the Faulkner Society permission to use the essay title for a permanent annual segment of our **Words & Music** program and **The Double Dealer** and to reprint the essay in memory of her husband. We salute Mr. Percy, his search for meaning, the always enlightening, always entertaining body of work he produced in the course of that search, and the helping hand and mentoring wisdom he offered to other writers.

## NEW ORLEANS, MON AMOUR

By Walker Percy

"One comes upon it, in the unlikeliest of places, by penetrating the depths of the Bible Belt, running the gauntlet of Klan territory, the pine barrens of South Mississippi, Bogalusa and the Florida parishes of Louisiana. Out and over a watery waste and there it is, a proper enough American city and yet within the next few hours the tourist is apt to see more nuns and naked women than he ever saw before, "If the American city does not go to hell in the next few years, it will not be the likes of Dallas or Grosse Pointe which will work its deliverance, or Berkeley or New Haven, or Santa Fe or La Jolla. But New Orleans might. Just as New Orleans hit upon jazz, the only unique American contribution to art, and hit upon it almost by accident and despite itself, it could also hit upon the way out of the hell which has overtaken the American city.

My tiny optimism derives not from sociological indices-which after all didn't help much in Detroit and New Haven. It has rather to do with a quality of air, which often smells bad, with a property of space, which is often cramped; and with a certain persisting non-malevolence, although New Orleans has the highest murder rate in the United States and kills more people with cars than Caracas.

The space in question is not the ordinary living space of individuals and families but rather the interstices thereof. In New York millions of souls carve out living space on a grid like so many circles on graph paper. These lairs are more or less habitable. But the space between is a horrid thing, a howling vacuum. If you fall ill on the streets of New York, people grumble about having to step over you or around you. In New Orleans there is still a chance, diminishing perhaps, that somebody will drag you into the neighborhood bar and pay the innkeeper for a shot of Early Times. Mobile, Alabama,

unlike New York, has no interstices.

It is older than New Orleans. It has wrought iron, better azaleas, an older Mardi Gras. It appears easygoing and has had no riots. Yet it suffers from the spiritual damps, Alabama anoxia.

Twenty-four hours in Mobile and you have the feeling a plastic bag is tied around your head and you're breathing your own air. Mobile's public space is continuous with the private space of its front parlors. So where New York is a vacuum, Mobile is a pressure cooker. Philadelphia is suffocating but in a different way. I speak from experience. Once I spent an hour in Philadelphia. I had got lost driving and instead of zipping by on the turnpikes, I found myself in the middle of town. I parked and got out and stood on a street corner near Independence Hall, holding my map and looking for a street sign and also sniffing the air to smell out what manner of place this was. Some young Negroes were moping around, no doubt sons of sons of the South. They looked at me sideways. I asked a fellow for directions but he hurried away. I hummed a tune and swung my arms to keep warm. Meanwhile all around us, ringing us 360 degrees around like a besieging army, were three or four million good white people sitting in their good homes reading *The Bulletin*. I got to thinking: I don't know a single soul in Philadelphia black or white. What is more, I never heard of anyone coming from Philadelphia except Benjamin Franklin and Connie Mack, or of anything ever happening in Philadelphia except the signing of the Declaration of Independence. What have all these people been doing here all these years? What are they doing now? They must be waiting. Waiting for what? For something to happen. Let me out of here! Somebody said that the only interesting thing about New Orleans was that it smelled different. There are whiffs of ground coffee and a congeries of smells which one imagines to be the "naval stores" that geography books were always speaking of. Yet the peculiar flavor of New Orleans is more than a smell. It has something to do with the South and with a cutting off from the South, with the River and with history, New Orleans is both intimately related to the South and yet in a real sense cut adrift not only from the South but from the rest of Louisiana, somewhat like Mont-Saint-Michel awash at high tide. One comes upon it, moreover, in the unlikeliest of places, by penetrating the depths of the Bible Belt, running the gauntlet of Klan territory, the pine barrens of south Mississippi, Bogalusa and the Florida parishes of Louisiana. Out and over a watery waste and there it is, a proper enough American city and yet within the next few hours the tourist is apt to see more nuns and naked women than he ever saw before. And when he opens the sports pages to follow the Packers, he comes across such enigmatic headlines as HOLY ANGELS SLAUGHTER SACRED HEART. It is as if Marseilles had been plucked up off the Midi, monkeyed with by Robert Moses and Hugh Hefner, and set down off John O'Groats in Scotland. The River confers a peculiar dispensation upon the space of New Orleans. Arriving

from Memphis or Cincinnati one feels the way Huck Finn did shoving off from Illinois, going from an encompassed place to an in-between zone, a sector of contending or lapsing jurisdictions. On New Orleans' ordinary streets one savors a sense both of easement and of unspecified possibilities, in fine a latitude of which notoriety and raffishness-particularly its well-known sexual license-are only the more patent abuses.

What's in the Gumbo Steeped in official quaintness and self-labeled "the most interesting city in America," New Orleans conceives of itself in the language of the old Fitzpatrick Travel talks as a city of contrasts: thriving metropolis, quaint French Quarter, gracious old Garden District. Actually the city is a most peculiar concoction of exotic and American ingredients, a gumbo of stray chunks of the South, of Latin and Negro oddments, German and Irish morsels, all swimming in a fairly standard American soup. What is interesting is that none of the ingredients has overpowered the gumbo yet each has flavored the others and been flavored. The Negro hit upon jazz not in Africa but on Perdido Street, a lost nowhere place, an interstice between the Creoles and the Americans where he could hear not only the airs of the French Opera House, but also the hoedowns of the Kaintucks, and the salon music uptown. Neither Creole nor Scotch-Irish quite prevailed in New Orleans and here perhaps was the luck of it.

If the French had kept the city it would be today a Martinique, a Latin confection. If the Americans had got there first we'd have Houston or Jackson sitting athwart the great American watershed. As it happened, there may have occurred just enough of a cultural standoff to give one room to turn around in, a public space which is delicately balanced between the Northern vacuum and the Southern pressure cooker.

What makes New Orleans interesting is not its celebrated quaint folk, who are all gone anyway- Johnny Crapaud, the Kaintucks, the Louis Armstrongs- but the unquaint folk who followed them.

The Creoles now are indistinguishable from the Americans except by name. There is very little difference between Congressman Hebert and Senator Claghorn of the old Fred Allen program.

Every time McNamara closed down a base, say, an Army-mule installation in Hebert's district, the act would go on: "This strikes, I say, this strikes a body blow to the morale of the Armed Forces!"

The grandsons and daughters of Louis Armstrong's generation have gone the usual Negro route, either down and out to the ghetto or up into the

bourgeoisie. The boy has likely dropped out of school and is in Vietnam; the girl maybe goes to college and talks like an actress on soap opera. Neither would touch a banjo or trumpet with a ten-foot pole.

Yet being unquaint in New Orleans is still different from being unquaint in Dallas. Indeed the most recent chunk added to the gumbo are the unquaint emigres from the heartland, who, ever since Sherwood Anderson left Ohio, have come down in droves. What happens to these pilgrims?

Do they get caught upon the wheel of the quaint, use up New Orleans, and move on to Cuernavaca?

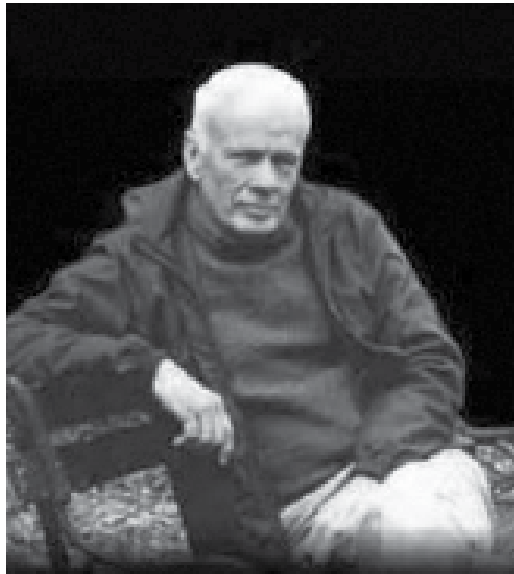
Do they inform the quaint or are they informed?

Those who stay often follow a recognizable dialectic, a reaction against the seedy and a reversion to the old civic virtues of Ohio which culminates in a valuable proprietorship of the quaint, a curator's zeal to preserve the best of the old and also to promote new "cultural facilities." It is often the ex-heartlanders who save jazz, save the old buildings, save the symphony. Sometimes an outlander, a member of the business-professional

establishment, who has succeeded in the Protestant ethic of hard work and corporate wheeling-and-dealing, even gets to be king of Mardi Gras these days, replacing the old Creoles for whom Fat Tuesday bore the traditional relation to Ash Wednesday.

There has occurred a kind of innocent repaganization of Mardi Gras in virtue of which the successful man not only reaps the earthly reward of money but also achieves his kingdom here and now. The life of the American businessman in New Orleans is ameliorated by the quasi-liturgical rhythm of Mardi Gras, two months of carnival 'and ten months of Lent.

Here, in the marriage of George Babbitt and Marianne, has always resided the best hope and worst risk of New Orleans. The hope, often fulfilled, is that the union will bring together the virtues of each, the best of the two life styles, industry and grace, political morality and racial toleration. Of course, as in the projected marriage of George Bernard Shaw and his lady admirer, the wrong genes can just as easily combine. Unfortunately and all too often the Latins learned Anglo- Saxon racial morality and the Americans learned Latin political morality. The fruit of such a mismatch is '~omething to behold: Baptist governors and state legislators who loot the state with Catholic gaiety and Protestant industry. Transplant the worst of Mississippi to the delta and what do you get? Plaquemines Parish, which is something like Neshoba County run by Trujillo. Reincarnate



Senator Eastland in the Latin tradition and you end up with Leander Perez, segregationist boss of the lowlands between New Orleans and the Gulf. Better than Harlem? ~t things get better. There were times when Louisiana was like a banana republic governed by a redneck junta. Now New Orleans has people like Congressman Hale Boggs, who is actually a statesman, that is to say, a successful able moderate responsible politician. And the Baptist north produces Governor John McKeithen, who may well turn out to be a populist genius.

Moreover, despite the bad past, the slavery, the Latin sexual exploitation, the cheerless American segregation, the New Orleans Negro managed to stake out a bit of tolerable living space. Unlike the Choctaws who melted away like bayou mist before the onslaught of the terrible white man, the Negro was not only tough but creative. He survived and it is not a piece of Southern foolery to say that there are many pleasant things about his life. Even now it wouldn't take much to make New Orleans quite habitable for him. Here is the tantalizing thing: that New Orleans is by providence or good luck fairly close to making it, to being a habitable place for everybody, and yet is doing little or nothing to close the gap-while in cities like Detroit the efforts are strenuous but the gap is so wide that it has not been closed.

Thus the relative serenity of New Orleans and the South for that matter-is subject to dangerous misinterpretation from both sides. The black militant says that the New Orleans Negro has not tried to burn the city down because he is afraid to. The Mayor and most whites would reply that the local Negro is better off and knows it, that there is still a deep long-standing affection and understanding between the races etc., etc.

Both are right and wrong. The New Orleans Negro is afraid but he still doesn't want to burn anything down-yet. Despite all, he has something his uprooted and demoralized brother in Watts does not have, no thanks to the whites, and which he himself is hard put to define. Said one Negro phoning into a recent radio talk program while the panelists were congratulating themselves on the excellent race relations in tolerant old New Orleans: "Man, who are you kidding? I've lived in New Orleans all my life and I know better and you know better. I know and you know that every Japanese and Greek sailor getting off a ship and walking down Canal Street is better off than I am and can do things and go places I can't go right here in my hometown. But where I'm going?

Harlem? Man, look out!"

New Orleans can perhaps take comfort in the fact that this man still wants to live here, still has the sense of being at home, still has not turned nasty. He is still talking and is in fact not illhumored.

Treat him like a Greek or Japanese today and you have the feeling New Orleans could make it. But tomorrow? That is something else.

The only trouble is that as long as the Negro does not lose his temper nobody is apt to do anything about him and when he does it is too late. It is a piece of bad

luck that the Negro, for whatever reason-and of course there are reasons-is like a piece of litmus paper which turns suddenly from blue to red. He takes it, looks as if he is going to keep taking it, then all of a sudden does not take it. There does not intervene in his case the political solidarity of the Irish and Italians. So with the Negro the blue litmus is always open to a misreading.

For any number of reasons New Orleans should be less habitable than Albany or Atlanta. Many of its streets look like the alleys of Warsaw. In one subdivision feces empty into open ditches. Its garbage collection is whimsical and sporadic. Its tax assessment system is absurd. It spends more money on professional football and less on its public library than any other major city. It has some of the cruelest slums in America and blood-sucking landlords right out of Dickens, and its lazy complacent city judges won't put them in jail. It plans the largest air-conditioned domed sports stadium in the world and has no urban renewal to speak of. Its Jefferson Parish is the newest sanctuary for Mafia hoods. Its Bourbon Street is as lewd and joyless a place as Dante's Second Circle of Hell, lewd with that special sad voyeur lewdness which marks the less felicitous encounters between Latin permissiveness and Anglo-Saxon sex morality.

Its business establishment and hotelmen restaurateurs are content that lewdness be peddled with one hand and Old World charm with the other-Bourbon Street for the conventioner, Royal Street for his wife-while everyone looks ahead with clear-eyed all-American optimism for new industry and the progress of the port. Yet there are even now signs that cynical commercialization will kill the goose. The Chamber of Commerce type reasons so: if all these tourists like the Vieux Carre, the patio-cum-slave-quarter bit, let's do it up brown with super slave quarters, huge but quaint hives of hundreds of cells laced with miles of wrought iron and lit by forests of gas lamps. An elevated expressway is planned along the riverbank in front of Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral, with a suitable decor, perhaps a wrought-iron facade and more gas lamps. Twenty years from now and the Vieux Carre may well be a Disneyland Francaise of highrise slave quarters full of Yankee tourists looking out at other Yankee tourists, the whole nestled in the neutral ground between expressways. The only catch is that the Yankee is not that dumb. When he wants synthetic charm he can buy it in Anaheim and he can find the real thing in Mexico.

If New Orleans has the good sense of St. Louis and Pittsburgh, which had much less to work with, it will at whatever cost save the Quarter and open it up to the River, thus creating the most charming European enclave, indeed the only one, in the country.

These are some of the troubles, and there are many others. But the luck of New Orleans is that its troubles usually have their: saving graces. New Orleans was the original slave market, a name to frighten Tidewater Negroes, the place where people



were sold like hogs, families dismembered, and males commercially exploited, the females sexually exploited. And yet it was New Orleans which hit upon jazz, a truly happy and truly American sound which bears little relation to the chamber music of Brubeck and Mulligan.

There is nearly always an and uet. Take the mass media. One might have supposed that New Orleans, with its history of colorful journalistic dissent, its high-toned Creole literary journals, its pistol-toting American editors, would be entitled to the liveliest journalism in the South. What has happened here instead is that the national trend toward newspaper monopoly has taken a particularly depressing form. The Times-Picayune is a fat, dull, mediocre newspaper which might as well be the house organ of its advertisers. Even the local Catholic archdiocesan weekly, hardly an exciting genre, offers a more provocative sampling of opinion on its editorial page. It runs Buckley next to Ralph McGill. The great debate in the Picayune is generally carried on between David Lawrence and Russell Kirk. It is not as bad as the Jackson Clarion-Ledger or the Dallas Morning News but it is not as good a newsgatherer as Hedding Carter's small-town daily up the River.

The best that can be said of the Picayune is that, being money oriented, it does have money virtues. It is against stealing. In Louisiana this is not a virtue to be sneezed at. And even though the Picayune supported Governor Jimmy Davis, composer of "You Are My Sunshine," and the most lugubrious disaster ever to overtake any state, it has served over the years as the sole deterrent to the merry thieves both in Baton Rouge and New Orleans who otherwise would have stolen everything. And yet. And yet there is WDSU-TV, owned by the Stern family, a sparkling oasis in the wasteland.

It actually performs the duties of a medium. Its news staff is one of the best in the country. It cries when foul is committed and holds its nose when something stinks.

One might have supposed too that the old Jesuit-owned CBS outlet, WWL, would shed some of John XXIII's sweetness and light among rancorous Louisiana Christians, to say nothing of the Ku Klux Klansmen to the north. But although WWL radio is a powerful clear-channel station which covers the entire Southeast, its most enduring contribution to the national morale has been its broadcast of H. L. Hunt's "Lifelines," twice a day, year after year. Millions of farmers get the word about the wicked United States government while they milk their cows in the morning and thousands of taxi drivers hear it on their way home at night. If the South once again secedes from the Union and throws in with Rhodesia and South Africa, the Jesuits are entitled to a share of the credit.

.4.nd yet there is Jesuit Father Louis Twomey, who has done more than anyone man hereabouts to translate Catholic social principles into meaningful action. His Institute of Human Relations has performed valuable services in labor-management conciliation, in its campaign for social justice for the Negro, and in the

education of the unskilled.

And there is Loyola University which under new leadership is doing some admirable things in science and the humanities. As one professor expressed it: "We may be broke and we may not make it, but if we go down, we're going down in style."

Loyola sits cheek and jowl with Tulane University, which is in a fair way of becoming the first first-class university in the Deep South, although it has money problems too and it will probably never be able to compete for scholars and professors with Princeton and Stanford. What Tulane and Loyola should do is capitalize on the unique Creole-American flavor of their city and merge to form Greater Tulane University on the Oxford model, of which Loyola would be the Catholic college. It would be like Beauregard's Zouaves joining the Army of Northern Virginia. Clerical and anticlerical elements would be embroiled in a fruitful melee without which either party tends to become slack and ingrown. Such an institution would be as unique as New Orleans itself, or as the Napoleonic Code of Louisiana and the civil "parish." It could well be more catholic than a Catholic school and less dogmatic than a secular school. New Orleans has the ideological flavor of a Latin enclave in a Southern Scotch-Irish mainland.

There is a certain inner rigidity softened at the edges by Southern social amiability. Catholics tend often to be more Catholic than the Pope. There are always jokes going around about how Pope John had to die in his sleep to get to heaven (**i**;e., awake, he'd be selling out to the Communists). Protestants are more conscious of being **not** Catholic, are indeed like Protestants of old. Unitarians are more anti-Trinitarian, anti-clericals more anti-clerical; Freudians more Freudian; anti-fluoridationalsts more passionate.

For all their orthodoxy, the churches-and synagogues- have not exactly distinguished themselves in the recent years of racial turmoil. William Styron said that the Negro was betrayed in the South by those two institutions best equipped to help him, the law and religion. In New Orleans the law has somewhat redeemed itself. The homegrown judges of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals have shouldered almost the entire burden of racial justice. The Catholics, like everybody else, have been content to yield moral leadership to the federal bench. Parochial schools integrate only when public schools are forced to. Protestants and Jews are by and large silent. The Episcopalians throughout the state have had their hands full with a different sort of problem, namely, staving off a **comp d'eglise** by their own Birchers.

**And yet.** The first Negro Catholic Bishop in the United States was recently installed in New Orleans and has been received warmly. It is something to see him go into a Birchy parish and confirm a mixed bag of little blacks and whites and afterwards stand outside with his shepherd's crook shaking hands with the parishioners and talking with them in the kinfolk idiom Southerners use. "Let me see now, Bishop Perry, where did you say you come from? New Iberia? Do you know so-and-so?"

# NEW ORLEANS, MON AMOOUR: *Walker Percy*

The new white Archbishop, moreover, is a man acutely aware of the needs of the poor and of the scandal of preaching the Gospel in air-conditioned churches to people who do not have inside toilets.

**And yet again.** The Protestant political hegemony in Louisiana has produced John McKeithen. He is in the Huey Long populist tradition but without the Long megalomania and he seems to be honest in the bargain. Recently McKeithen ran for Governor against a wild segregationist (a native of Indiana), came out flat for equal opportunity, and beat this man overwhelmingly. The peculiar virtue of New Orleans, like St. Theresa, may be that of the Little Way, a talent for everyday life rather than the heroic deed. If in its two hundred and fifty years of history it has produced no giants, no Lincolns, no Lees, no Faulkners, no Thoreaus, it has nurtured a great many people who live tolerably, like to talk and eat, laugh a good deal, manage generally to be civil and at the same time mind their own business.

Such virtues may have their use nowadays. Take food, the everyday cooking and eating of. It may be a more reliable index of a city's temper than mean family income. If New Orleans has no great restaurants, it has many good ones. From France it inherited that admirable institution, the passable neighborhood restaurant. I attach more than passing significance to the circumstance that a man who stops for a bite in Birmingham or Detroit or Queens, spends as little time eating as possible and comes out feeling poisoned, evil-tempered, and generally ill-disposed toward his fellowman; and that the same man can go around the corner in New Orleans, take his family and spend two hours with his bouillabaisse or crawfish bisque (which took two days to fix). It is probably no accident that it was in Atlanta, which has many civic virtues but very bad food, that a dyspeptic restaurateur took out after Negroes with an ax handle and was elected Governor by a million Georgians ulcerated by years of Rotary luncheons.

But it is Mardi Gras which most vividly illustrates the special promise of New Orleans and its special problems. Despite the accusations leveled against it-of commercialization, discrimination, homosexual routs-Mardi Gras is by and large an innocent and admirable occasion. Unlike other civic-commercial shows, Macy's parade, cotton carnivals, apple and orange festivals (and a noteworthy Midwestern dairy fete which crowns its queen Miss Artificial Insemination), Mardi Gras is in fact celebrated by nearly everybody in a good-sized city. As the day dawns, usually wet and cold, one can see whole families costumed and masked beginning the trek to Canal Street from the remotest suburbs, places which are otherwise indistinguishable from Levittown. The carnival balls which have been going on now every night for the past two months end tonight with the Comus and Rex balls. There is a widespread resentment of the parades and balls among tourists and folk recently removed from Michigan and Oklahoma who discover they can't get in. The balls and parades are private affairs put on by "krewes." A "krewe" is a private social group, sometimes

an eating club, which stages a ball and perhaps a parade. Some seventy balls, elaborate, expensive affairs, are held between Twelfth Night and Ash Wednesday. The older krewes are quite snooty but even they are not socially exclusive in the same sense, as, say, poor-but-proud Charleston society. In New Orleans money works too. Here, where Protestant business ethic meets Creole snobbishness, the issue is a kind of money pedigree. Like Bourbon whiskey, the money can't be too green but on the other hand it doesn't have to be two hundred years old.

The carnival ball itself is a mildly preposterous formal charade. It is a singular occasion for one good reason. Unlike the rest of American society, the balls, the parades, the krewes, the entire carnival season, even the decorating, are managed by men. Women have nothing to say about it.

Even the queens are chosen by the all-male krewes at sessions which can be as fierce as a GM proxy fight. New Orleanians may joke about politics and war, heaven and hell, but they don't joke about society. This male dominance is probably more admirable than otherwise in a national culture where most males seem content to be portrayed as drudge and boob, nitwitted Dagwood who leaves everything to Mama.

What is right and valuable about carnival in New Orleans is that it is a universal celebration of a public occasion by private, social, and neighborhood groups. It is thus an organic, viable folk festival, perhaps the only one in the United States.

What is wrong seems to have gone wrong inadvertently and almost by bad luck. It is this: while the unquaint white Protestant businessman is now very much a part of it, the emerging Negro, the sober unquaint middle-class Negro, is left out.

Mardi Gras is the least of the Negro's troubles but is nevertheless a neat instance of his finding himself curiously invisible, present yet unaccounted for. For there is hardly a place for him in the entire publicly sponsored "official" celebration of Mardi Gras. White Orleanians will point out that the Negroes have their own Mardi Gras over on Dryades Street. They do. There is, moreover, a Negro parade, headed by King Zulu, who traditionally gets drunk and falls off the float while the parade founders. These doings were all quite innocent and unselfconscious and pleased everyone, black and white, though for different reasons. It was only a few years ago, in fact, that Louis Armstrong consented to be King Zulu. But for better or worse, times have changed. It is harder and harder to find a Negro to play the happy-go-lucky clown who, in a symbolically appropriate role, loses his way and passes out cold in the street.

New Orleans' people-black and white-may yet manage to get on the right road. The city may still detour hell but it will take some doing. Le craps was introduced to the New World by a Creole. Now, the stakes are too high to let ride on the roll of the dice. If they do, Johnny Crapaud and his American cousin will surely crap out.

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## Letter from New Orleans

By Cassie Pruyn

A few days after the sale of Marigny's plantation to the city of New Orleans, men began carving up the fields, collapsing the slave shacks, pounding down sugar cisterns and tearing up trees, tightening the landscape with fresh-cut streets as if pulling taut a sailor's knot at the center of which, like a misplaced river stone, the big house balanced on its mound. Meanwhile the river yawned. Meanwhile, two hundred years later, lightning strikes a Marigny townhouse and bricks thud into the street; a pot of water boils, a wall of jasmine trembles, a palm tree droops low in the heat. In summer here, the afternoon buckles like a soaked quilt. Children run through streets lined with houses like railcars, stacked backward with transoms and hardwood, neat enough to shoot a bullet through.

You see, I didn't invite you to this city because I have no interest in debating the merits of regional magnolia strains, saucer vs. bull bay. I never asked you to abandon Commonwealth Avenue in April. A person is not a home, no matter what they say, and our chronology could never supersede what this town is made of, what I am made of, at least 60 per cent river water by now. What does it mean to be haunted by space? To be violated nightly by a dusky room? I can't recall who the girl was in the dream, but I remember from which corners history—sporting a white linen suit and a Cuban cigar—was watching as she unpacked her bags.

On Tchoupitoulas, tricolored shotguns line the levee. A woman dances on her porch to a lolling brass band, her dead son tripping along beside her; behind them, railroad tracks and truck roads, platforms of cranes and pulleys built into the river's sandy rib.

I could never rewrite us here, and neither could you. "History" will tell you the facts, but don't be surprised when you learn your favorite yoga studio on Louisa street once held a slave auction block. Don't be surprised when you hear the chains.

*Cassie Pruyn is a New Orleans poet, originally hailing from Portland, Maine. Her poem, Two Places, was second runner-up in the 2013 William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition, and one of her prose poems was a finalist for the 2013 Indiana Review 1/2K Prize. She received her undergraduate degree from Bard College in New York, and currently is working toward her MFA through the Bennington Writing Seminars in Bennington, VT. She is a member of Peauxdunque Writer's Alliance under the auspices of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner*



*Society. Her first book-length manuscript will include free-verse, formal, and prose poems all centering on the mysterious fusion of history and landscape.*

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### Recommended Reading: Faulkner House Favorites

Visitors to Faulkner House books know to trust **Joanne Sealy**, the bookstore manager who greets you with a smile and recommendation. Here is one of her recent favorites:

#### **Care of Wooden Floors** By Will Wiles

*This book turns the placid act of house-sitting into one man's existential nightmare. The narrator, a slacker copywriter, travels to a nameless Eastern European city to watch the apartment of an old college friend, Oskar, a composer who lives in "expensive, extravagant simplicity." Among Oskar's many, many rules for his houseguest — feed the cats, replace any coffee you drink, don't play the piano — is one imploring him to take extra care to preserve the French oak floors, a task at which he fails spectacularly.*

—New York Times Book Review



## Remembering Walker Percy A Family Man of Practical Talents

By Deborah Burst

Yearning for a literary challenge, I scanned my son's bookcase filled with classics from high school assignments. It was there I found **The Moviegoer** by Walker Percy. I began reading and his words struck a chord with me and I wanted to learn more.

It was 2007 and Mr. Percy had passed away, so I went to the local library and checked out a stack of books which delved deep into the life and work of Walker Percy and his philosophy and views on various aspects of life. Books stacked high, I began to immerse myself not only in the critical analyses but in the creative outpouring of this intriguing man, who not only enjoyed the simple things in life, but took pleasure in examining and dissecting the minute behaviors in what he called the "everydayness" of life.

Recently I wrote a profile on Mr. Percy in the *Advocate* newspaper, recapturing his life through those who were close to him, many who lived on the Northshore of Lake Pontchartrain. While interviewing others, I learned that Ann Moores, Percy's youngest daughter, had moved back to Covington. After a succession of emails, I scheduled a visit with Moores at the Percy home in Covington, where he live most of his adult life with his wife Bunt (Mary Bernice Townsend) and found inspiration for his unique brand of southern literature.

When Walker Percy—who had been born in Alabama and, after his parents died, raised in the Mississippi Delta by his cousin, William Alexander Percy—decided to locate to Louisiana, he chose Covington, rather than New Orleans, as Covington is, as he described it, "a non-place," without the distractions of a provocative destination like New Orleans, which could intrude on his mission to write and through writing find answers to his search for the meaning of life in the midst of what he saw as a degenerating society.

Sitting on the screened porch watching birds visit their feeders, Ann Moores told me this was one of her father's favorite rooms. Outside, a manicured lawn dips into the Bogue Falaya River flanked by a thick strand of ten-story pines and hardwoods. Moores remembers her father building the flagstone patio overlooking the river, it is there I take her picture, a fitting tribute for Moores and her father. The home and property remain imbued with the spirit of her father and mother and Moores continues to nurture the memories, building new landscapes, following her father's footsteps in his love for gardening. Often Walker and Bunt gardened together, all the while sharing stories about past generations with



*This photograph by Deborah Burst from her new book, **Hallowed Halls of Greater New Orleans: Historic Churches, Cathedrals, and Sanctuaries**, is of the church at St. Joseph's Abbey and Seminary just North of Covington, LA. St. Joseph's is a Catholic monastery, whose monks are members of the order of St. Benedict.*

their children.

"It's amazing what little things we do as parents are passed down to our children and future generations," Moores said. "It's very humbling."

We watched the late afternoon turn into twilight, bringing a flurry of wildlife and the sweet cadence of katydids, sipping on tea from china cups. Moores shares her childhood, not as an interview, but just a chat between two women who both dearly loved their fathers.

Her parents followed a strict schedule, Moores revealed. Percy wrote nonstop after breakfast, quitting at 1:00 o'clock, joining his wife Bunt, for a big midday lunch. "They would eat on TV trays and watch the television program **Days of Our Lives**, she said.

(Walker and his best friend—novelist and Civil War historian **Shelby Foote**, who were lifelong friends since growing up in the Mississippi Delta and going on together to the University of North Carolina—shared a fascination with this particular soap opera. Shelby watched it religiously, too, and then the two men would talk on the phone about what each episode meant. Shelby spoke at **Words & Music**, the Faulkner Society's annual literary gathering, in 1998 about his long friendship with Walker and explained then that soap operas represented a window on life for them, that it provided insight into American Society.)

# REMEMBERING WALKER PERCY: *Family Man*

"Afterward, he would take a nap for an hour, wake up at 3:00 o'clock and do yard work. We did it together when I got home from school."

Although Ann Moores is well aware of her father's literary genius, she is quick to point out he was also a very well-rounded, practical man, who knew how to do all kinds of things and do them well.

"He was knowledgeable about many things including the yard," she said. "I worked in the yard with him after school for years planting or pruning plants and helped him making pulleys, putting in drainage pipes using a level and surveying instruments."

We laughed about how he taught her to clean carburetors on boat motors, and how to fix an engine when it would stall on the water.

I told her, "You were the son your father never had."

She looked at me, head tilted, and smiled, "I never thought of it that way."

Percy gained a great deal of knowledge about plants and wildlife from a garden handy man named Lige, she said. "My father then imparted that knowledge to me. I am applying this knowledge to a landscaping project we are working on now and have found myself thinking of my father so much these last few weeks and our years together doing not just yard projects but also building sheds, working on boats and so forth."

She shared her memories of how he loved working in the garden, getting dirty then jumping in the river to rinse off. Later, "He would take a shower then read." taking notes and highlighting as he read," Moores said. "He was in his own world when he read his books."

Moores also recounted her father's love for golf. "He played golf well, and would often take me and my mother to the golf course or driving range and the three of us would play late in the afternoon," she said.

"I am so very blessed to have had such a very special and talented father."

As a young girl, Moores didn't know her father as a writer, but as a storyteller. She describes a special time they had every evening after dinner while her mother was cleaning the kitchen. Moores explained this was her father's way of teaching moral values.

"My father was a marvelous storyteller, and he would sit me in his lap and tell me stories," she said. "He had a character, a little girl named Sally and he would tell me stories about her along with another character who was a friend of Sally's named Susan who had undesirable traits."

Mr. Percy engaged himself in every aspect of life, even life's unexpected challenges. Moores was born deaf, it was the mid-50s with minimal teachings of mute communications.

"My father became very interested in language and linguistics and once told me that his book—**The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other**—evolved from learning about teaching a deaf child to speak," Moores said. (The book is a collection

of essays on semiotics essentially addressing the degeneration of the modern age and his attempts to find a middle ground between the two major ideologies of his age: Judeo-Christian ethics, which give the individual both freedom and responsibility; and the rationalism of science and behavioralism, which positions man as an organism in an environment and strips him of this freedom. It was first published in 1975 by Farrar, Giroux, Strauss. Mr. Percy developed a lifelong interest in the theory and study **semiotics** or signs and symbols, especially as elements of language or other systems of communication, and comprising semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics.)

"He also spent many hours tutoring me along with my mother in various subjects all through school since it was difficult for me to pick up everything in a classroom. He and my mother were both gifted teachers and in many ways working together as a couple and teaching me brought us all closer together."

And his obsession with getting the language right in his stories led to permanent fixtures, such as the soap operas after lunch, in their family life.

Moores told a delightful story about how Percy loved the Waffle House. Bypassing the fine dining restaurants, he would drag his family to the local diner, where he could hear the epitome of pure, unadulterated chatter from a cast of characters living on the edge.

"He knew the waitresses by name and liked to listen to their interaction with the truck drivers," Moores said. "And he would tell us to be quiet so he could eavesdrop, listening to women talk about trying to pay their bills."

Our conversation seemed so natural, any communication barrier from her deafness melted away in the common bond of women remembering well—loved fathers now gone away.

Before I left, Moores invited me to her office in the home where she grew up, the walls and sloped ceilings formed a Percy shrine covered in articles about her father, some yellowed, but all carefully preserved. His curious half grin looking down on Moores' desk, that stoic, satirical look he often shared with photographers, it seemed fitting as he was a private man who cared little for the limelight of fame and fortune.

As I drove away, I couldn't help but feel his presence and marvel about how the everydayness of life can result in the most precious of serendipitous moments. An intended quick photo shoot turned into a delightful conversation, a rare and privileged peek into the real life Walker Percy.

*Deborah Burst is an award winning freelance writer and photographer. A New Orleans native, she enjoys writing outdoors at her home in Mandeville. She specializes in travel, profiles and historical architecture with more than a 1,000 published articles and twice as many photographs with local, regional and national publications. In the spring of 2013, Old House Interiors, a national publication,*

# REMEMBERING WALKER PERCY: *Man of God*

featured her work as a cover photo and article. And this summer she began a weekly column, In Profile, with the New Orleans Advocate, the new daily newspaper of New Orleans. **Hallowed Halls of Greater New Orleans: Historic Churches, Cathedrals, and Sanctuaries**, is Ms. Burst's first book. She did both the writing and the photography and has traveled across Louisiana for speaking engagements, promoting the book. Famous author **Anne Rice**, also a New Orleans native, did the foreword and contributed to a portion of the chapter on her childhood church, St. Alphonsus. Anne Rice recently shared the book on her Facebook page with this message: Congratulations to Deborah Burst on the publication of this very interesting new book on New Orleans churches and cathedrals and sanctuaries. Highly recommend to all. Faulkner House Books has a limited number of copies of the book signed by Anne Rice, as well as Ms. Burst. You can reserve your copy by calling (504) 524-2940. They will be sold during Words & Music, 2013 In the on-site Book Mart. Ms. Burst will be presenting on her book on Thursday, December 5 in the annual slot of presentations titled New Orleans, Mon Amour in memory of Walker Percy and his famous essay on the city.

## Remembering Walker Percy A Man of God

In various biographies and pamphlets, the author Walker Percy's name will appear as Walker Percy, Obl., OSB, which means he was an Oblate of the Order of St. Benedict. An oblate in Christian monasticism (especially Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) is a person who is specifically dedicated to God or to God's service. An Oblate is an individual, either lay person or cleric, normally living in general society, who, while not professed as a monk or nun, has individually affiliated with a monastic community of his or her choice. The individual makes an Oblation, a formal, private promise (annually renewable or for life, depending on the monastery of affiliation) to follow the Rule of the Order in private life as closely as individual circumstances and prior commitments permit. Oblates do not constitute a separate religious order as such, but are considered an extended part of the monastic community, and as such also often have the letters OSB after their names on documents. They are comparable to the tertiaries associated with the various Orders of friars.

Raised as an agnostic by his cousin William Alexander Percy, who became his guardian after the suicide deaths of his parents, Walker Percy's Birmingham family connection to religion was the liberal Presbyterian Church. He devoted his literary life to the exploration of "the dislocation of man in the modern age."

In the aftermath of Tuberculosis and the long convalescence which followed, he began an examination



of existentialism and Catholicism. It was during this period that he came in contact with **The Summa Theologica** of St Thomas Aquinas, which in turn led him to the threshold of the Roman Catholic Church. He was received into Church for instruction and converted in 1950 and later became an Oblate of St. Joseph's Abbey, which is located just north of Covington, LA, where the Percys lived. According to his biographer, the Rev. Patrick Samway, S.J., once Percy had turned Catholic in 1950, he "never backed away from his faith," although he did admit to novelist friend and fellow convert Mary Lee Settle that he found the Catholic Church to be "a very untidy outfit."

Interviewed about his faith and his conversion, he once said to *Esquire Magazine*:

*...the only answer I can give is that I asked for it; in fact demanded it. I took it as an intolerable state of affairs to have found myself in this life and in this age, which is a disaster by any calculation, without demanding a gift commensurate with the offence. So I demanded it (faith).*

And his body of work displays a unique combination of existential questioning, Southern sensibility, a sense of humor about mankind's predicament, and deep Catholic faith.

In 1983 he addressed the graduating class of priests in training at St. Joseph's Seminary, ending with the following words, which sum up his feeling that Science is Knowledge and God is news and that people should learn to distinguish between Science and the "good news from across the seas."

*Never has there been such loneliness in the midst of crowds, never such hunger in the face of satiation. Never has there been a more fertile ground for the seed and the harvest the Lord spoke of. All that is needed is a bearer of the Good News who*



# REMEMBERING WALKNER PERCY: *Man of God*

*speaks it with such authenticity that it can penetrate the most exhausted hearing, revive the most jaded language. With you lies the future and the hope. You and the Church you serve may be only a remnant, but it will be a saving remnant.*

Walker Percy had a quick eye for the incongruities and absurdities of our so called Christian society and in one essay he theorized that if during some Sunday service, Jesus Christ was to walk up the aisle of your average American church, the most likely response would be that someone present would phone for the police to come get rid of the hippie.

Being outspoken gained the man more than a few enemies and in the 1960s Percy found himself branded “a nigger lover and a bleeding heart,” an accusation followed almost immediately by a bomb threat from the Ku Klux Klan, causing him to spend some time armed with a shotgun and huddled with his family in the attic “and feeling both pleased and ridiculous and beset with ambiguities” since knowing some of the Klan people made him aware that “they weren’t all that bad and were probably no worse than bleeding heart liberals.” Walker Percy was a good man who assumed that every other man has some good in him.

In his essay, *Why Are You a Catholic*, he said

*However decrepit the language and however one may wish to observe the amenities and avoid offending one’s fellow Americans, sometimes the question which is the title of this article, is asked more or less directly. When it is asked just so, straight out: “Why are you a Catholic?” I usually reply, “What else is there?”*

He also has been quoted as saying that when he began his search for meaning and, ultimately, for faith, he decided he did not want to fool around with derivative religions, too numerous today for each to be personally investigated, so “I went directly to The Source.”

In 1988 he was surprised to find himself the only American invited to participate in a symposium sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican. As what he would say if he were able to spend five minutes with the Pope, he replied that that he would say, first:

*Don’t worry about scientists. They pursue truth, from which the Church has nothing to fear. They become a matter of concern only when they begin mucking around with human life with their high technology..... Scientists tend to be smart about things and dumb about people.*

Then, addressing the issue of how few young people are taking vows, he would tell the Pope:

*Don’t worry about the present dearth of vocations among our young people. The Western World, both capitalist and communist, is so corrupt and boring that sooner or later young people will get sick of it and look for something better. All it takes is a couple of high livers, like Francis of Assisi, a real dude, and Clare, a rich teenage groupie, to turn it around, to actually put into practice the living truth of the Church’s teachings, of the Gospel.*

Two years later in February of 1990, he made his final Oblation and just a few short weeks later on May 10, 1990, Walker Percy died. He had been suffering from prostate cancer and was just a few days short of turning 74.

During this period, Faulkner Society co-founders Rosemary James and Joseph J. DeSalvo, lived in Mandeville, LA, not far from Covington. The DeSalvos were great gardeners. Joe DeSalvo was a rosarian of the first order and maintained a rose garden of some 300 varieties in their garden on the Lakefront in Mandeville. When Mr. Percy was dying, every few days,

Joe DeSalvo, a great admirer and collector of Mr. Percy’s work, would take a big bouquet of roses for him along with a basket of fresh Louisiana strawberries then in season. Petals from his last bouquet were strewn on Mr. Percy’s casket during the graveside ceremony at the monastery, where he is buried.

His wife Bunt (Mary Bernice Townsend) died in 2012 and is buried there next to him.

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## Quote To Live By:

***Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: It must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all.***

—William Faulkner, Nobel Prize winner



## Paul Morphy: Mad Chess Master of New Orleans

*It is the head that governs men. A kind heart is of no use in a chess game.*

—Nicolas Chamfort

### By Leopold Froehlich

Paul Morphy died in a bathtub on Royal Street on July 10, 1884. He had gone out for his daily walk at noon, and returned to a cold bath. Cause of death was listed as congestion of the brain, a quaint term for apoplexy or stroke.

Many would say Morphy was the greatest chess player ever. He was certainly the only chess master America produced in the 19th century, and he was heralded widely for his accomplishment. At one banquet in Boston, he was praised by Oliver Wendell Holmes while Longfellow and Agassiz and Lowell stood in attendance.

Born in New Orleans in 1837, the second son of four children, Morphy was taught to play chess at the age of ten by his father, a justice of the Supreme Court of Louisiana. Two years later, the child beat his uncle, who had been the reigning chess king of New Orleans. He accomplished this while blindfolded. In 1851 he played 100 games, losing only five. He could play from nine in the morning until midnight for many successive days. He was only 5'4", with small hands and feet. A biographer, F.M. Edge, described him as having "a face like a young girl in her teens."

In October 1857 Morphy made his first public appearance in the world of chess when he entered the lists of the first American chess congress in New York. He traveled to London and Paris the following year. "Toward the end of his stay in Paris," writes Ernest Jones in his article on Morphy, "he defeated blindfold the whole of the Versailles Press Club playing in consultation." Upon returning to New Orleans in 1859, he recklessly issued a challenge to play anyone in the world at odds of pawn and move. When he received no response, he declared his chess career—"which," Jones notes, "had lasted barely 18 months, comprising actually only six months of public play"—over.

When Morphy was 21, he gave an exhibition at the Café de la Regence in Paris. He played eight blindfold games at a time. The first opponent was defeated only after seven hours of play. The match lasted ten hours, during which time Morphy refused food and water. At seven the next morning he called his secretary and recited every move in all the games.

His play was aggressive and relentless. He knew he was destined to win. Morphy was a pioneer of so-called positional play—of gradually building up a fortified position and taking advantage of an opponent's weakness. He was confident enough to sacrifice pieces to gain



*Paul Morphy in his match with Johann Löwenthal*

position.

"While playing he was very impassive," writes Jones, "with his eyes fixed steadfastly on the board; opponents got to know that whenever he looked up, which he did without any exultation, it meant he could see the inevitable end." G.A. MacDonnell, who watched Morphy play in London, wrote: "I fancy he always discerned the right move at a glance, and only paused before making it partly out of respect for his antagonist and partly to certify himself of its correctness."

Madness is not uncommon in chess. Charles Mingus writes about being in Bellevue with Bobby Fischer. Many other examples are available: Alexander Alekhine urinating drunkenly on the floor, Akiba Rubenstein hellishly mad, unwashed and unshaven in Brussels. Carlos Torre-Repetto naked on a Fifth Avenue bus. Harry Pillsbury trying to jump from a fourth-story window at Presbyterian Hospital in Philadelphia. William Steinitz locked up for 40 days in Moscow, driven insane by the game of chess. Morphy was no different—he spent the last quarter century of his life in a cycle of insanity.

Morphy's memory was acute. He is said to be one of two people who could recite by memory the entire Civil Code of Louisiana. After hearing an opera, he could whistle the entire score from memory.

Admitted to the bar in April 1857, he took up the practice of law, with intermittent success. Perhaps his unwelcome fame as a chess player prevented people from recognizing his abilities as a lawyer. Maybe he was already crazy. During the Civil War he applied in Richmond for a diplomatic post, but he was denied. He returned to New Orleans, and fled when the city was captured by union forces. In October 1862, he left with his family in a Spanish warship (the *Blasco de Garay*) for Cuba, and then to Cadiz and Paris. After a year in Paris he returned to Havana until Appomattox. His mother encouraged him to return to Paris, where he stayed for 18 months. He was in Paris in 1867, when the International Chess Tournament was going on, but he never visited the event. After 1869 he played no chess whatsoever—though he admitted he kept a board and chess pieces to play over old games.

# LEOPOLD FROELICH: *The Mad Chess Master*

In his later years, in the years of his madness, Morphy was convinced his brother-in-law, J.C. Sybrant, administrator of his father's estate (and also counsel for the crown of Sweden), had defrauded him of his legacy. Why were Morphy or his brother not chosen to be administrator? For many years, Morphy prepared his legal action, but the court ultimately found no fault with Sybrant's actions.

"Two years before his death," writes Jones, "he was approached for his permission to include his life in a projected biographical work on famous Louisianans. He sent an indignant reply, in which he stated that his father, Judge Alonzo Morphy, of the High Court of Louisiana, had left him at his death the sum of \$146,162.54, while he himself had followed no profession and had nothing to do with biography. His talk was constantly of his father's fortune, and the mere mention of chess was usually sufficient to irritate him."

This is a familiar New Orleans type, it must be admitted. People avoided him on his daily walks, for fear of having to hear again about his inheritance.

Morphy thought his brother-in-law was trying to kill him. He challenged Sybrant to a duel. He lived in fear of poisoning, and would eat only food prepared by his mother or sister. "Mr. Morphy," writes his childhood friend Charles Amédée de Maurian, "thinks himself the object of the animosity of certain persons who, he claims, are trying to injure him and render life intolerable to him by a regular system of calumnies and petty persecutions."

Maurian wrote elsewhere: "He is possessed of a belief that the barbers are in a vast conspiracy, suborned by his enemies, to cut his throat. There are only one or two shops in New Orleans he will enter, and when a strange barber, or even an old one, operates on him, he watches him closely, on the alert always for a suspicious movement. Often he springs from his chair and rushes into the street, half shaved, lathered and with his towel about his neck, screaming murder. Everybody knows and likes him, however, and though he is a nuisance they pity him too much to refuse to shave him."

In June 1882, he rode with his mother and brother and Charles Maurian to the Louisiana Retreat, where it was hoped he would find refuge. But upon arrival he objected, and declared himself fit. The Catholic sisters in charge declined to assume responsibility for him. He rode back home with his family.

He agreed to meet Wilhelm Steinitz in New Orleans in 1883 only on the condition that chess could neither be discussed nor even alluded to. Their awkward meeting lasted only ten minutes. "He was given to stopping and staring at every pretty face in the street," writes Jones. He was passionately fond of flowers. He took a walk every day at noon, scrupulously attired. Sometimes he would change his clothes as many as a dozen times a day. He would promenade Canal Street and

visit the lobby of the St. Louis Hotel to read his newspapers. After mass at St. Louis Cathedral, he would return home, where he would remain until evening, when he attended the opera. He would see no one except his mother.

According to his niece, Morphy had a mania for pacing on his veranda, repeating: "Il plantera la banniere de Castille sur les murs de Madrid au cri de Ville gagnée, et le petit Roi s'en ira tout penaud." He will plant the banner of Castille on the walls of Madrid to the cry of the city won, and the little king will go away sheepishly.

Morphy's rejection brings to mind other renunciators: Rimbaud, Duchamp, Booker. Other *sannyasins* (Hindu for a wandering mendicant and ascetic). What drives these people? There is something honorable in their rejections, even when they are driven by nothing more than boredom or weariness, or even when the world loses a great talent. It is the prerogative of the rejector to deny the world. *Contra mundum*. Perhaps Morphy was one of those wrecked by success, or as Freud defined them, *die am Erfolge scheitern*. Ruined by victory.

Or perhaps, in the end, he simply did not care.

Charles Maurian indicated: "Paul Morphy was never so passionately fond, so inordinately devoted to chess as is generally believed." In 1875, Maurian wrote a letter to a New York newspaper and indicated that Morphy was "constantly bored to death by all sorts of people," who asked him "to be kind enough to solve this or that problem, etc., to say nothing of the mountains of stupid letters he was called upon to read."

Morphy's mother died in 1885, and his sister the year thereafter. The Sybrandt family occupied the house for a while, but 45 years after its purchase by Judge Alonzo Morphy, the house was occupied by strangers. The flamingo-colored building where Morphy died was for years the site of Brennan's Restaurant. Brennan's was known for its turtle soup, its bananas Foster, and its matin glasses of Mersault.

In the end Brennan's devolved into a rigorous family dispute worthy of a Tuscan melodrama, and the restaurant is now closed. Thus did gentility descend into barbarity.



Leopold Froehlich

**Leopold (Lee) Froehlich** is managing editor of *Playboy*. Over his 22-year career at *Playboy*, he has edited fiction and nonfiction by the likes of Katherine Dunn, Liesl Schillinger, Barry Hannah, Harry Crews, Roger Ebert, Robert Gordon, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Jonathan Raban, Gore Vidal, Robert Coover, Chuck Palahniuk, T.C. Boyle, George Pelecanos, Dave Hickey, Victor Pelevin, Scott Turow, and Robert Stone. Ishmael Reed, Barbet Schroeder, Rodney Crowell, Thom Jones, Aleksandar Hemon, Will Self, Christopher Hitchens and Paul Theroux. He is based in

Los Angeles. For more on Lee Froehlich, visit [http://www.wordsandmusic.org/Lee\\_Froehlich.html](http://www.wordsandmusic.org/Lee_Froehlich.html).



**Editor's Note:** This is an abbreviated excerpt from **Peter Wolf's** new book, *My New Orleans, Gone Away: A Memoir of Loss and Renewal*, published by Delphinium Books, 2013. To set the scene, Peter is living and working for his father in the cotton business in New Orleans after college. Two close friends living in New York, Calvin (Bud) Trillin and Gerry Jonas, come down to celebrate with Peter over a long weekend. The last evening they are there, Peter's girlfriend Camilla joins them for supper at **Mosca's**, the secluded West Bank roadhouse way out in the wilds of Jefferson Parish, a watering hole beloved by insiders—basically Mafia dons and those they don't hate—and created by a couple who once cooked for Al Capone, Lisa and Johnny Mosca. The **Oysters Mosca** are to die for.

## MOSCA'S

By Peter Wolf

In late November 1962, I proposed a mini reunion weekend with Bud and Gerry in New Orleans to celebrate Bud's and my birthdays. We were each born in early December, one day apart.

When I suggested the idea to Bud, who was then back in New York as a member of *Time* magazine's staff, he said, "Yes, yes; are there any good places to eat that aren't the usual tourist traps, or the big-deal restaurants I know about?"

Bud had always loved to eat authentic local food. I'd known that for years and from our travels together.

"I'm gonna take you to a restaurant so genuine and so good you'll never forget it," I assured him.

In those days, even though it had been serving remarkable food since just after World War II, Mosca's was unknown outside the city and all but unknown to most white-shoe New Orleans sophisticates who fancied themselves arbiters of taste.

"Yeah," he said, sounding dubious.

"Bud, trust me on this one."

I saved Mosca's for Saturday night, their last in town. I steered my Volkswagen Beetle through town and past the low wooden houses of Jefferson Parish, continuing onto U.S. Route 90 over the Huey P. Long Bridge, then headed southwest. I swung right on the west bank of the Mississippi in the direction of the towns of Paradis, Des Allemands, and Boutte. I drove past the Avondale Shipyards. We cruised the darkening highway until our headlights and those of passing cars provided the only illumination.

"Where the hell are you taking us, Pierre?" Bud asked.

"We're nearly there," I said. "Hang in."

The swamp was evident on both sides of the dark road, which grew dimmer as we passed fewer and fewer cars. Ten miles after the bridge, I turned left off the



*Peter Wolf, author of My New Orleans, Gone Away: A Memoir of Loss and Renewal*

road, negotiated a drop of about a foot, and descended into a shadowy parking lot made of crushed and layered oyster shells. The man-made ground cover rose just a few inches above the level of the swamp. We stopped in front of our destination, a low-slung, one-story roadhouse with cracked and peeling white paint and wavy clapboard walls: **Mosca's**. In the streaked, intermittent light of passing cars, you could just make out the murky swamp behind the roadhouse and weedy, mushy land on either side of it.

"Is this it?" Gerry asked, looking at Bud as if to say, "The guy's been down here too long—he's lost his compass."

Bud was more hopeful. As I parked amid the few other cars in front of the building, he eagerly asked, "Do they serve alligator, muskrat, and rattlesnake? What about nutria? Never had possum." He was on a roll.

Gerry was uncharacteristically quiet. He was a less adventurous eater and by now noticeably nervous.

"You'll know soon enough," I said to Bud as we stepped out of the car onto the iridescent oyster shells. Their sun-bleached insides reflected whatever light was available, making them appear dimly illuminated by some interior source.

Mosca's was set thirty yards back from the road and marked only by a single light fixture next to the front door, with one paltry bulb. A rusty tin sign swinging from a metal pole read, DRINK BUDWEISER.

"I like this," Bud whispered, as if to keep the news from Gerry.

"But what is it?"

"A Mafia hangout."

"A what?" Gerry said, looking more nervous than before.

"A Mafia hangout," I said again, this time

whispering, as we were close to the screened front door. "Don't make any comments inside about the way anyone looks. Believe me."

"Okay, okay," they both said, a muted chorus.

We opened the front door and shuffled single-file through the vestibule. Johnny Mosca was working behind the bar, looking, as usual, as sad as a bloodhound. He worked up a smile as he saw us enter the bar area and came around to greet us.

As we shook hands I said, "Johnny, you know Camilla, and these are friends from New York, down for a visit." I wanted him to know they weren't locals, snooping.

"Okay," he said, as if they'd gained his permission to be there. He picked up four stained menus from a side table and motioned for us to follow him.

"Peter," Johnny said, motioning, "go to that corner four-top so Sally-Jo can take care of your group."

The wainscoted walls were painted dark green. Small windows high up in the wall were covered by dark burlap curtains, as if to conceal the goings-on within. Three naked bulbs in each round chrome ceiling fixture threw an even light across the room. Atmosphere was not a concept that had crept into the Mosca family's marketing plan.

When Sally-Jo came over to us, she said, "Hi, what'll it be?" She was short and intense, with dark hair that looked naturally curly. Her impatient dark eyes said, "I'm a busy lady in a busy place." She carried a carafe of water for another table.

I said to my pals, "You want to have a go at the menu or shall I order for us?"

"Whatever. What's good, Peter?" Bud asked.

Sally-Jo stood there waiting.

I said, "Two Oysters Mosca, one Italian Shrimp, one Chicken Grande, two Crabmeat Salads, and one Bordelaise." (To Sally-Jo, that meant Spaghetti Bordelaise.)

She wrote down nothing. "Red or white?"

"Red," I said.

"What you drink with supper at Mosca's is wine. Just wine," I said. "Sally-Jo will bring us a bottle of whatever they happen to have. It's usually very good and very inexpensive. I have no idea what their source might be. Maybe it goes through special channels."

Gerry said, "You think it's stolen?"

I said, "Let's talk about the weather."

At Mosca's there was only one style of glass for wine—a thick, kitchen-supply-house tumbler, the sort most places used as a water glass. At the bar, these same glasses were used for highballs or martinis. At the table, they appeared as both water and wine glasses. Johnny didn't believe in a lot of diverse tableware.

Sally-Jo brought the first course. I didn't have to specify. The cold crab salad is always the first course—shredded back-fin crabmeat tossed with lettuce, chopped green peppers, celery, light oil, and vinegar. No choice of dressing is ever offered.

The secret to Mosca's signature cooking is oil and garlic roasted into absolutely fresh seafood and fowl,

laced with wine at just the right time. Johnny Mosca, who never goes into the kitchen, always says, "Wine is the secret. Wine is the secret in all of our cooking." Oysters Mosca is a tight assembly of large, freshly shucked Louisiana oysters roasted with oil, garlic cloves, and shallots, topped with a light breadcrumb coating cooked in and served on the same large round or oval dented nickel platters that have been used since the restaurant began. Italian shrimp is made with the same basics, only with more oil and no shallots. It consists of large Gulf shrimp roasted in their shells, with no topping and only the head removed. If you know what to do, you eat the shrimp, shell and all, chewing slowly to coax out the flavor and thoroughly shred the tangy husk. Chicken a la Grande is pan-fried bird cut into eighths laced with olive oil, garlic, oregano, and rosemary, and basted with a smoky-sweet, garlic-infused marinade. Big cloves of fresh roasted garlic are sprinkled all over the ancient metal platter between the oddly cut chunks of glistening chicken, still on the bone.

The purpose of the Bordelaise is to mop up the garlic and oil, as well as the remnants of the oysters, shrimp, and chicken left on your plate. The dish is simple: thin spaghetti lightly tossed with more oil and garlic.

At the end of our meal, there wasn't a scrap of food left on any of the tin platters cluttering the table—not even one oily garlic clove. The bill, with pencil notations for each item, came to thirty-eight dollars. Those who try to replicate Mosca's dishes at home end up in despair, proclaiming that it's the seasoned cookware that makes all the difference.

Bud said, "You guys weren't kidding. This is way beyond barbecue!"

When we left, we could see that Johnny had been afflicted by drinks he'd had with customers who were waiting to be seated. His sad eyes were even droopier and more watery. He now wobbled a bit. But he was still there at his post behind the bar near the door, both to greet people and to scrutinize who was coming in. For some people—certain judges, for instance—there didn't ever seem to be a vacant table. My good friend, whom I'll call Judge Cross to assure his continued security, despaired of ever going to Mosca's, he said, because he had "put away Marcello's brother." Johnny held his hand out to me. "Thanks for comin' by," he said graciously as the old screen door swung open to the oyster-shell plateau.

In the car, Bud said, "How far is Mosca's from the airport?"

"The airport's halfway to Mosca's from the city," I said. "Why?"

"Because this is so good I might come down just for supper," he said. "This is the best goddamn meal I've had . . . maybe ever. No bullshit, no jive."

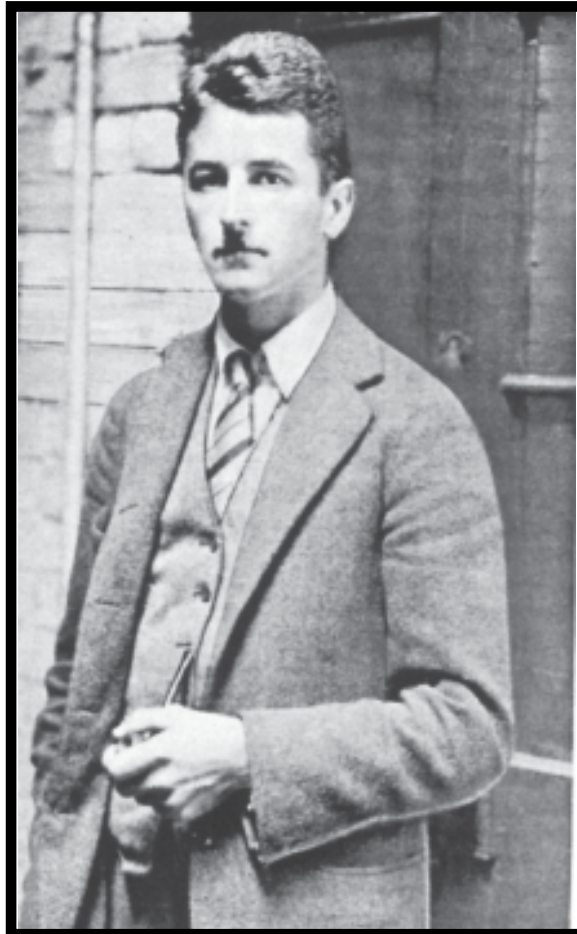
## Faulkner Fable

In this photo of **William Faulkner** taken in front of 624 Pirate's Alley in 1925, he looks socially acceptable in his outfit of tweed jacket, pants, and vest, and tie, the ever present pipe in hand. However, Faulkner is known to have been far more eccentric in his attire. During 1925, he met and fell in love with New Orleans society beauty **Helen Baird**. He chased her all over the Gulf Coast plying his suit but she was having none of it.

Later in life she recalled in a letter meeting Faulkner on the beach near Pascagoula, MS. "He was wearing a three-piece costume," she said, "A raincoat and a pair of shoes." In spite of spilling out his love for her in poetry and dedicating his novel **Mosquitos** to her, Ms. Baird, Faulkner's "Epicene Woman," never gave him the time of day.

The moral of the story?

Never wear a three-piece suit when courting a debutante.





## RECOMMENDED READING

### Preface New Orleans: A Food Biography

By Elizabeth Williams

I have been studying the history of the food of New Orleans in one way or another since I began to eat. In this way I am like every other person lucky enough to have grown up in this city. I have a bit of old Louisiana and new New Orleans in my personal family history. But on both sides there is an appreciation of food. Food—eating and sharing it—is associated with the happy times as well as with the sad ones. Food is love; it is worship; it is celebration; it is condolence; it is memory; it is identity. And when I say food, I include drink. Whether it is coffee or spirits or other special drinks, New Orleans takes care with anything that involves flavor.

I am particularly pleased with this opportunity now to write the story of the food of New Orleans, because after the flood caused by the failure of the federal levee system following Hurricane Katrina, the sense of place established and held together by eating in New Orleans has been undergoing a huge change of emphasis and focus. It is now both more grounded in tradition and looking forward to the future. Change itself is certainly not something to be avoided. It has been the city's ability to bend with change, ever adapting, that has allowed it to maintain such a rich and nourishing cuisine. I have no wish to stop change. But I do want to remember where we have been.

An appreciation of the past will allow us to march forward with an understanding of the continuum to the future. Because I choose to continue to live in New Orleans, I will probably change with the city. So with full disclosure I admit that my attempt to tell an accurate story may be to no avail. It is likely that my own opinions, formed as I grew up and tasted, formed as I traveled and tasted, and informed by some investigation of history have colored the way that I present the story of the food of New Orleans. So in that sense this is also my story.

Despite that I have tried to confine my voice to this section. I am not unlike so many New Orleanians.

We live in a city with a sense of place, a sense of history and character. It is not Anywhere, USA. That sense of place seems to bind all of us. Growing up in a sensuous city allows a person to appreciate the senses, without realizing that you are. When I was a child, I thought everyone cared about smells and sounds, sights and textures, and most of all taste. I think that every New Orleanian grows up with this swirling sensuousness all around him. Since so many of us denizens of the city remain in New Orleans for our entire lives, whether from inertia or lack of opportunity, many of us fail to appreciate how special it is here. Without having seen how others live or eat, we have no point of comparison. It takes the outsider to come here to appreciate the wonder of it and to make us see what we have taken for granted. Those of us who leave often return, drawn back to deep flavor and a need for a grounded place. I had my awakening in Augusta, Georgia, where I foolishly ordered Trout Almondine at a white tablecloth restaurant in 1975. I should have known that fresh trout might not be readily available there. I was served fish sticks—literally previously frozen formed rectangles of fish—with chopped almonds and dried parsley on top. After recovering from the shock of it, I realized that I was not in New Orleans anymore.

In addition to my good fortune regarding my place of origin, I was born into a half-Sicilian family. My grandmother, Elisabetta, and my grandfather, Francesco, were Sicilian. My mother was first generation American. She grew up speaking the Sicilian dialect, learning English when she went to school. She was a part of the large Sicilian community in New Orleans.

Because she was my mother and the family culture-bearer, I learned to eat, appreciating food and family in New Orleans, with a Sicilian twist. My father brought old Louisiana French and a bit of Alabama cracker to the family. That meant there was a country sensibility in his attitude, as well as an appreciation for simple things. Because my father wasn't Sicilian we spoke English at home, and I didn't spend my entire growing up years within the Sicilian community. We, my brother and I, moved in and out of it. Sometimes we attended family gatherings redolent of garlic, lots of shouting, huge hugs with those awful cheek pinches, and more Sicilian dialect. At other times we quietly visited fields and dusty roads, where we ate meat pies and corn bread. My Alabama grandfather made the best angel food cake ever. He beat the egg whites by hand. I still have his angel food cake pan. He also drank coffee that he dripped one cup at a time and poured into warmed



cup. He grew the very best peaches in his backyard. But mostly we lived in a middle class urban American neighborhood riding bikes, watching Saturday morning television, and going to school. I have eaten my share of TV dinners and fast food. I am not a purist.

As I have grown up, traveled, and matured, I have come to appreciate the city for nurturing the senses. Certainly my naive childhood presumption that my experience reflected the way all things are has been dispelled. I understand that consuming the world is not generally considered an appropriate way to live. What a pity. I don't want us to move into and out of the information age and discover that we have lost an appreciation of the subtle layerings of taste, having homogenized the world in our quest for security, speed and cost efficiency. I want everyone to be fortunate enough to be allowed to be open to the subtleties of the tastes, the texture, the aromas, and the flavors of food.

This book will not be a history that tries to identify definitively the origins of this dish or that, as though there could be only one influence on each dish. There has to have been social invention involved in the development of cuisine rather than individual inventors. The invention of the cuisine of New Orleans has been a collective one. And it continues to be so. And unlike the specific dishes invented intentionally at restaurants—such as Bananas Foster—developing a cuisine is an evolving and emerging process. It is a process that is always in flux. It is complicated by the fact that sometimes similar foods or methods may spontaneously develop in different locations. Social invention results in a product that belongs to everyone. That is true of the food of New Orleans.

Instead of seeking historical ties to ethnic origins of individual foods, this book will examine the philosophical and cultural forces that made a cuisine develop in New Orleans, even when similar and abundant raw ingredients and similar waves of ethnic groups came together in other locations without resulting in a cuisine. Even if the recognition of a local cuisine was intentional marketing, there is ample basis for declaring that the cuisine existed to be recognized. If there is myth involved, which there surely is, what are the basis of and the purpose of the myth?

I hope to convey to the reader the degree to which food permeates the culture and the thinking of the city. Food unites all of the people of New Orleans. Each New Orleanian respects the culinary opinion of every other New Orleanian, regardless of class, education,

or status. We may argue about the fine points of a dish, but it is with respect. We talk about lunch when we are eating breakfast. We know that people of all classes and positions in society all can and do cook. Food is that basic and ubiquitous.

In writing this book I have relied on the expertise and insights of numerous people who have written many books and articles. These are people whom I deeply

respect for their ability to discover and dig deeply into original documents in different languages and report and interpret those materials for us. I prefer to cook and eat my way to enlightenment. But I believe that I have legitimately used their research to explore the factors that have created this cuisine. In his memoir, **Hungry Town**, Tom Fitzmorris, a local food commentator, says with no irony that this is a “city where food is almost everything.” In a city where food means so much, where it is part of every element of life, a mere exploration of dishes and their recipes would not scratch the surface of meaning. It is with an attempt to capture and share that real meaning—the almost everything—that this book is written.



**Elizabeth Williams**, author of the new book **New Orleans: Biography of Cuisine**.

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**Elizabeth M. Williams** is author of the new book, **New Orleans: Biography of a Cuisine**, which is basically a history, not a cookbook. Liz, founder and President of the Southern Food and Beverage Museum in New Orleans, has always been fascinated by the ways in which food items have changed the course of world history. The lure of nutmeg and peppercorns, for instance, motivated the exploration of new areas of the world. Liz is a member of the adjunct faculty in the Food Studies Program at New York University. Much of her research and writing centers on the legal and policy issues related to food and foodways. Her book, **The A – Z Encyclopedia of Food Controversies and the Law** was published by Greenwood Publishing in 2011 and is available from AltaMira. Among those instrumental in the successful establishment of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Liz was for six years the President and CEO of the University of New Orleans Foundation. Prior to the UNO Foundation Williams was the Director of the Arts Administration Program at the University of New Orleans. A graduate of Louisiana State University and Louisiana State University Law Center she has served in the U.S. Army as a Judge Advocate General (JAG). She has practiced law in Washington, DC and Louisiana. She is a member of the Folklife Commission, State of Louisiana.

## Dispatch from the New Orleans Diaspora: Death, Loss and Food By. N. West Moss

As a child I had terrible insomnia. I would lie in bed with books all around me, reading late into the night, filled with despair that I'd never fall asleep. My father had insomnia too, and once in a while, I'd hear a tiny tapping on my bedroom door.

"Are you awake?" he'd whisper. "I saw the light on."

"Yes," I'd whisper back, putting my book under my pillow. "Yes, I'm awake."

He'd open the door a crack, revealing his own haggard sleeplessness. "Wanna come have a cheese sandwich with me?" And off we'd go in our pajamas, tip-toing through the dark house, past snoring siblings and down to the kitchen, where we'd make Swiss cheese and mayo sandwiches on sliced bread. Simple though the food was, it represented comfort, the end of a lonely night, a mooring against the darkness.

I came to New Orleans in May (2013) to complete research on a novel I'm writing that is set there in 1878. My mother and sister came with me, New Orleans being one of our favorite cities. Our ancestors are buried there too, and when we three Moss women visit New Orleans, we make a pilgrimage to the Brice Family tomb in Metairie Cemetery to "see" the family. I bring a little bottle of gin and we share a toast, each of the living taking a sip from the bottle, and pouring the rest on the granite steps for those within who might be thirsty.

This particular visit, we ended up at a restaurant we'd never visited before, one we always thought of as a place for tourists just off of Bourbon Street in the Quarter. We wanted to talk quietly and ducked into Arnaud's where there was live music playing, dim lights and a lovely menu. We weren't enormously hungry so we ordered gin martinis (needless to say), a plate of chilled, fresh Louisiana oysters on the half-shell and three Arnaud's salads with celeriac and pistachios. The trio was playing Fats Waller as we ate, drank and chatted. We were in accidental heaven.

Not wanting the evening to end, we asked for the dessert menu, and Mom read the following out loud to us: "Café Brûlot: Coffee, lemon and orange rinds, cloves, cinnamon sticks and Orange Curacao. Flamed with Brandy." She looked at my sister and me, and we said, "Yes," in unison, our waiter assuring us that we'd made the right choice.

As the Brûlot cart arrived, Mom said, "You know, my mother used to make Café Brûlot, after she moved to New York. Whenever friends from New Orleans came to visit, she'd make it for them up in the Washington Square apartment, to make them feel at home."



*The author's grandmother (and namesake) Rosina West when she is about 19 in 1913.*

The entire restaurant watched as the waiter cracked cinnamon sticks into the copper bowl, added whole cloves and brandy, put the bowl on top of the blue ring of fire and then, voila, lit the bowl of brandy itself. We gasped. He deftly cut the clove-studded peel of an orange and poured the flaming brandy over it, making a spiral staircase of flame, and causing the entire restaurant to burst into spontaneous applause. Sometimes being a tourist is just plain fun.

A few weeks ago, my father died, and I keep thinking of those cheese sandwiches we shared in the middle of the night, of sitting together in our pajamas discussing **Harriet the Spy** (a book Dad had bought me at a yard sale). It is moments like that which create true friendships. Who would have thought, 40 years ago, that it would be this image of my father and me that would come back to me so vividly after his death?

Dad's remains have been sent to Metairie Cemetery and we've received word that he's been placed in the family tomb with my grandmother (Rosina West, for who I am named), my great great grandfather, A.G. Brice, and the rest of the family. We are headed to New Orleans in December, my mother, my sister, my husband and I, and we'll make the pilgrimage again with our little flask of gin, this time, for the first time, to visit my father there, hard as that is for any of us to imagine.

Our food and drink rituals connect us as a family. Perhaps it's what connects all families. I like to think of my father being welcomed there with Swiss cheese sandwiches and Café Brûlot. I can't think of a lovelier way to spend a long, dark night.

*Reprinted from Okra, the magazine of the Southern Food and Beverage Institute with permission of the author.*

*N. West Moss is working on a novel set in New Orleans in 1878 as well as a collection of short stories that take place in Bryant Park in New York City. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Memoir Journal, The Blue Lake Review, The Westchester Review and elsewhere. She was*



selected by essay master Roy Blount, Jr. for the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society's gold medal for Best Essay, given annually in the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition in memory of novelist, essayist, and Civil War historian Shelby Foote. Her prize for Best Essay will be awarded at the Society's gala annual meeting, **Faulkner for All**, on December 7 during Words & Music, 2013, by Roy.

## New Orleans, Mon Amour

*The first thing you notice about New Orleans are the burying grounds - the cemeteries - and they're a cold proposition, one of the best things there are here. Going by, you try to be as quiet as possible, better to let them sleep. Greek, Roman sepulchers - palatial mausoleums made to order, phantomesque, signs and symbols of hidden decay - ghosts of women and men who have sinned and who've died and are now living in tombs. The past doesn't pass away so quickly here. You could be dead for a long time.*

—Bob Dylan, musician, poet, performing artist, pop culture icon



**Roy Blount Jr.**, whose latest book is **Alphabetter Juice**, has had 22 other books published, including **Alphabet Juice**, **If Only You Knew How Much I Smell You: True Portraits of Dogs** and **Be Sweet**, a memoir. His other recent books include two collections of essays, **Feet on the Street: Rambles Around New Orleans** and **Long Time Leaving: Dispatches from Up South** and an especially inspired biography of Confederate general, **Robert E. Lee**. In addition his incredible body of books, Roy has written hundreds of articles for national periodicals on subjects ranging from sports to war, travel, food culture, city profiles, you name it. Each offering from this Renaissance man of literature, no matter how well known is the subject, is hallmarked by a unique intellectual twist. This beloved southern humorist is an original and so is his work!

## An Epilogue: Spice of Life

By Roy Blount, Jr.

What holds multifarious old New Orleans together?

I think it must be the seasoning. I had a New Orleans cabdriver once who said, "I don't like the food other places. It doesn't have seasoning."

Everything in New Orleans, not just the food, is highly seasoned. The air is full of smells and sounds and palpabilities deriving directly from the place and stretching way back into the place's history. Underfoot the streets eel deeply seasoned, and alongside the streets, the buildings look seasoned—they have been lived in, and they have been lived in with feeling.

People in New Orleans are seasoned, as in spicy and as in veteran. In New Orleans complete strangers will talk to you as if they know you, will call you Cher or Darlin' and let you in on what they're thinking, because they know who they are, from way back, and they assume you know who you are, and you both sure as hell know where you are, so why be standoffish? Partying breeds familiarity, and so does crisis.

Here is one dictionary definition of "season":  
"To render competent through trial and experience."

And here are some words that Roget's International Thesaurus associates with "seasoning" and "seasoned":

*Salty, racy, lively, savory, pungent, poignant, piquant, hot, tangy, lively, keen, gamy, brackish, pickled, marinated, sprinkling, taint, suggestion, dash, touch, smack, nip, relish, zest, vestige, mellowing, ripening, aging, experience, inured, worldly-wise, modulated, habituation, adaptation, adjustment, familiarization, preservation, acclimation.*

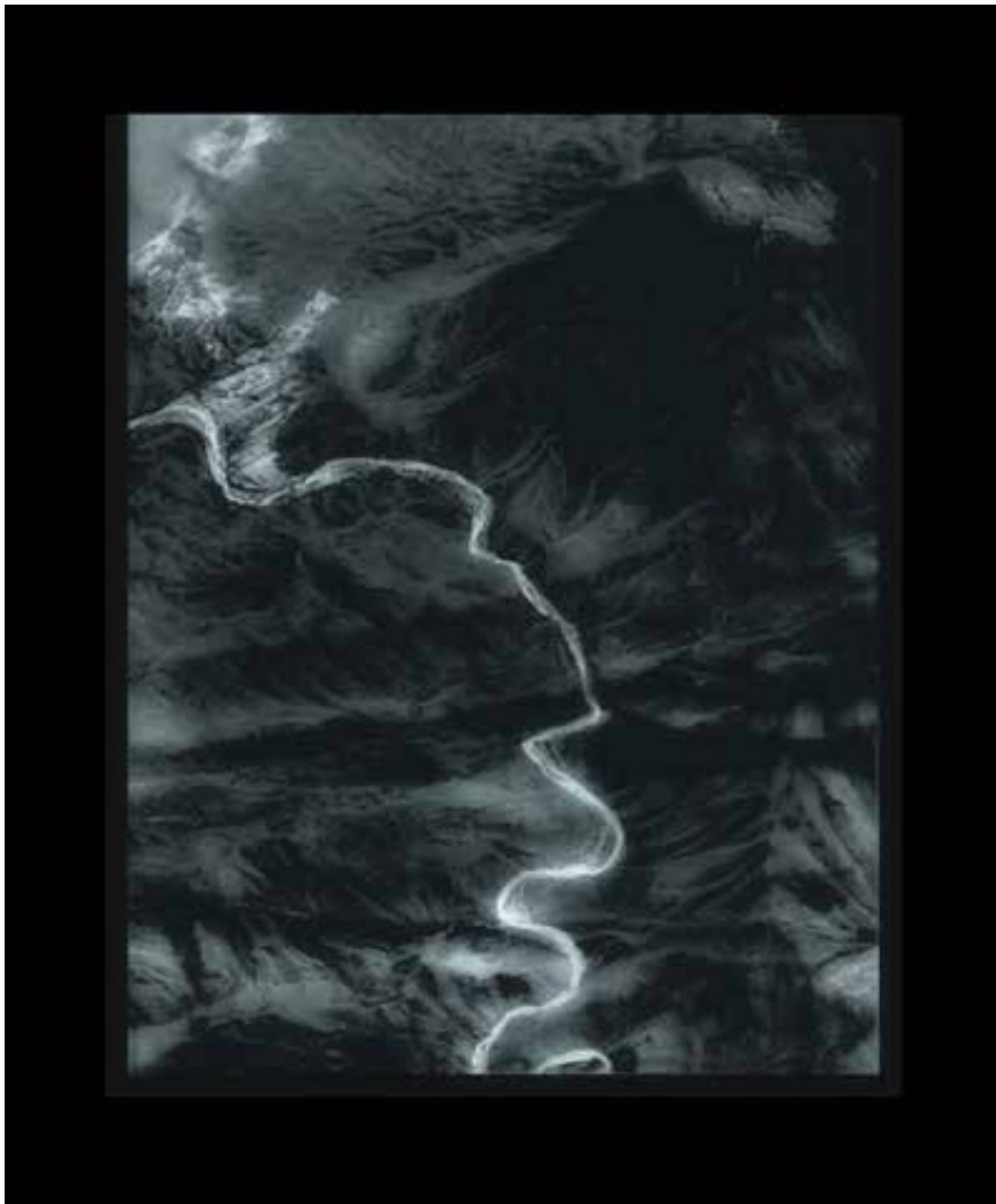
Not weather-beaten. That goes beyond seasoning. New Orleans has never been beaten by weather yet.

**Copyright, 2005, Roy Blount, Jr., this essay appeared originally in *My New Orleans: Ballads to the Big Easy by Her Sons, Daughters*, edited by Rosemary James. The essay is reprinted here with permission of the author.**



*New Orleans humorist  
Roy Blount, Jr.*

# Literature of the South



*The Severed Regions of Time, photograph by **Josephine Sacabo***

## Death, Loss, and Food in the South Gathering Together

By Robert Hicks  
With an Afterthought

I was eight when I wandered into my grandmother's living room and met up, for the first time, with my great uncle Willis Buford, over on the sofa. Though I had never actually seen him before, he needed no introduction.

I panicked. There before me was the bane of my family.

My brothers and cousins and I had been painfully aware of the presence of Uncle Willis at all family gatherings, as far back as any of us could remember. Yet, while the older ones often claimed to have seen him, I don't believe that any really had – before I encountered him there on my grandmother's sofa. My great aunt Willie never went anywhere without him, but was not one to parade him around like the freak he had become. When we dared ask our parents why Aunt Willie never let us see him, our parents told us, "She cares too much to have y'all gawking at him and asking uncomfortable questions" – as if such an answer could be enough.

And so he remained the unseen visitor at every gathering: a presence never addressed or spoken of, except in whispers, when Willis and Willie were out of earshot.

To my grandmother, Mattie Louise Talmadge Fort, both Aunt Willie and Uncle Willis were black marks against – and embarrassments to – our clan. Only blood – our family's and the blood of Jesus – made their presence in the least bit tolerable.

My grandmother considered many things to be black marks against our family: for instance, she didn't care for us to be in any way linked to the more famous Talmadge family of Georgia politics. They, too, were a black mark on our good name. If someone asked her if we were kin, she would smile the smile of Southern women and say, "Now do we really look like Georgians?"—as if somehow Georgians looked different from those who hailed from West Tennessee. In truth, she could have cared less that those Talmadges were from Georgia; it was that they were worst kind of politicians – those who scared poor ignorant white folks into voting for them by talking about the "Colored Threat."

Our own brand of racism, like everything else in our family, was far gentler and had grown softer with age. We were secure in our position in this world, and loved "our people" as *our* people. My grandmother loved the colored families that surrounded her and made her life click along smoothly in its place; she probably loved them more than she loved her white family. She prayed



*Robert Hicks and friend*

for them, fervently. She longed to be in their company in this life, and looked forward to being with them for eternity in the next.

Grandmother was far more confident that she would be spending eternity surrounded by those she loved than she was with the knowledge that her young sister, my Aunt Willie, and her husband, my Uncle Willis, would be with her.

Aunt Willie was weak. She was timid, helpless, and made poor choices in life. I knew all this by the time I was eight. Southern women *act* weak – they always have. They're supposed to act weak. But acting is never to be confused with being. It's all part of their role. While they acted, they sent their husbands and sons to war, ran the farms and stores, kept their families together, nursed their children and their people's children and their wounded when it all went bad. They were the ones who buried their dead, who fought off the invaders, who put life back together afterwards. They were the ones who kept the sacred memory of the heroic past. And they did it all without ever giving up the act.

Willie was different from the very start, if I was to believe my Aunt Mary-Charles (named after their father, my great-grandfather, Charles Philip Talmadge, "most recently of the Confederacy," whatever that meant seeing as the war had been over almost a hundred years).

Willie never fit in. When her sisters were courting a houseful of boys who showed up in the last years of the 19th century, Willie was in her room, not really doing very much of anything as she waited for everyone to clear out. In fairness, Willie was not considered a beauty, as the rest of the Talmadge girls were renowned to be: She was painfully plain. While her sisters helped their mother and their grandmothers, took classes, played tennis and rode, Willie never did. She was not a reader or a cook or a helper. She seemed doomed to become that sister that every family had: who never married, but stayed at home to care for her aging parents. But in Willie's case, her aging parents and her sisters and the help took care of her.

When her parents finally passed, her sister and brother-in-law – my grandmother and grandfather



– provided her an apartment within their rambling Colonial-Revival pile. My grandfather, though self-made and a product of the New South's industrial rebirth, was quick to adopt the ways of the Old South. My grandmother, a Talmadge of Talmadgeville, TN was key. She was 20-something years his junior and lovely, the product of generation after generation of good alliances and beautiful young wives. By all accounts, they were devoted to each other.

This was their lives: Gentle, gracious, uneventful; lives built around the Methodist-Episcopal Church – South, the Colonial Dames, the DAR, the UDC, bridge games, horses, dogs, garden clubs, the cotton crop, books, travel, antiquing, gossip, and my grandmother's grandchildren.

And into that world came Willis Buford. He would prove to be a 37 year disruption of their carefully scripted out way of life.

Willie met him in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. That is all any of us were ever told. Within days, though he was near twenty years younger and far handsomer than she, they were married in a civil ceremony in Stuttgart, Arkansas.

Even she had no idea about his past, his people, or his place. He cut anyone off who dared inquire – by saying he found such conversation shallow and meaningless. Meaningless? Who your people were was the bedrock of our civilization. Were we anything more than our past? My grandmother had leather-bound volumes, embossed in genuine gold, which told our story, taking the "Talmadge and Allied Families' back to 1066 and linked us to all the important events of history (even if we had to skip a generation or two, now and then, to get us there).

Once Willie and Willis had settled into one of my grandfather's many comfortable non-rented rental houses populated by my grandmother's family, Willis seemed to find work as shallow and meaningless as any discussion of his past. Though he was, according to his wife, always "on the threshold of something very big," Willis never seemed to make it through the door and into the temple of success.

All his schemes and travel, like everything else, were financed by his wife, who was, if truth be known, financed by her brother-in-law, my grandfather; and when he passed, by my grandmother.

That was all we knew. Willis seemed to have no hobbies, no friends and few interests, including his wife.

For 37 years, Willis Buford mooched off our family, stayed away for months at a time and made my great-aunt seem even more pathetic while she longed for his returns and lived her life in his vacuum. By all reports, even when he was around, he wasn't. He had found a meal ticket with few demands.

And then one day in 1948, three years before I was born, the phone rang. Uncle Willis had passed. A lady who worked as a salesclerk at a local department store had found him dead in a hotel room in Greenwood, MS.

His heart. I have few doubts that my grandmother rested far easier that evening knowing we were rid, once and for all, of ol' Willis. Just as my aunt began to veil herself in mourning, as far as my grandmother was concerned, a far darker veil had been lifted from our family and its good name. While I'm sure they took on their prescribed roles, as comforters to their grieving sister, as far as the rest of the Talmadge 'girls' were concerned, relief and justice had finally arrived for the righteous.

My grandmother set about making the arrangements for his interment in one of the 71 remaining spaces in the Talmadge-Fort plot in the center of Rest Haven Cemetery on the highest spot in Madison County, just outside the edge of Talmadgeville.

And then they read his will. Willis Buford did not want to wait out the long sleep before Judgment Day with our clan. He was to be cremated, and his ashes spread from a boat in the dead center of the Mississippi, between Tennessee and Arkansas. He was very clear that a bridge would not do. He wanted to be launched from a boat.

No one in our family had ever been cremated. Cremation was a dark ritual of the Pagans in some far off woods. The only time that you could possibly allow a Methodist to be cremated was if he had died in a terrible fire and you were simply finishing the job. When Willis died our people still held to the belief that an open coffin provided comfort for loved ones. For some unknown reason, the living found comfort in seeing that the dead were really dead. The same photographer that photographed our weddings would drive from Memphis out to Talmadgeville to photograph our dead: in case an "out-of-towner" had to miss the funeral, all the good food, and the chance to see a loved one dead, face to face, one last time. Folks would 'talk' if you didn't have a proper, open coffin or there wasn't any cold fried chicken afterwards.

If it had been any real member of our family or any other in-law, my grandmother would have ignored the cremation request. She would have reminded, gently, those who mourned that such a request was made by someone not in his or her right mind. "What if he had asked to be stuffed and mounted? Would we follow his wishes and drive on over to the taxidermist?" Her arguments would have been clear and overwhelming. We buried our dead.

But Uncle Willis was not a real member of our family, nor was he any other in-law. Willis was a worthless leech and a black mark and didn't deserve one of our 71 remaining spaces. My grandmother was just being gracious to her pitiful sister to have even offered. He would have to fend for himself on Judgment Day when the quick and the dead rose up at the sound of the last trumpet and all the rest of us were together.

So Willis Buford was cremated as he had wished, and life went on filled with church and bridge, travels and grandchildren.

Except for one small hiccup.

When they gave Aunt Willie the small green box

with reinforced metal corners that contained Willis, she never seemed able to get around to renting the boat and following the second half of his wishes.

No matter how much coercion – ever so gentle at first, then not so gentle at all – the family placed on her, Willie seemed to finally have what she never had in his life Willis, one hundred per cent of what was left of him.

Whether she always carried him around in her purse or if that only came in time, I don't know. But by the time my brothers and cousins and I came along, all of us knew that Uncle Willis stayed in Aunt Willie's handbag.

For several years after his death, he remained in the green box. Eventually the box, having been designed as a temporary home, began to leak at the seams, so Willie, still resisting her sisters' well-founded logic, transferred Willis to a glass quart-canning jar with an orange rubber ring-seal. And then he went back in her purse.

Though none of our generation ever really knew Willis Buford, all of us knew that purse and all the other purses that followed over the years. None of us ever entered a room and weren't immediately aware of the location of Uncle Willis.

As much as Uncle Willis was a very real part of my childhood and our family visits back to Talmadgeville and my grandmother's farm, there is something not right, even in our family, about a woman who carried her dead husband around with her in a Mason jar.

No one else I knew had any of their relatives in jars. Why our family? And while it seemed to fit with all the rest my family living in the atomic age of the 1950s but still making references to the Civil War's effects on us, it just didn't seem right.

And so that November day, just a few days before Thanksgiving 1959, I finally saw Uncle Willis, his jar leaning back on a pillow on my grandmother's sofa, taken out of his dark leather tomb by my great aunt for some reason I will never know. My brothers didn't believe me when I said I had finally seen him. Their adamant disbelief seemed to confirm my belief that I was, indeed, the first of us to see him.

We had all come home, as we had every year, a family joined together – not that we ever were too long away, no matter where we lived. All of my grandmother's sisters were still well and thriving, and as they had been all of their lives, were still preparing the dinner.

Thanksgiving was the one day in the year when Minnie, my grandmother's beloved cook and best friend was pushed aside and became simply a lackey in the kitchen where, normally, she proudly ruled.

Every year, the old place came back to life – it was a glimpse of how it must have been when my dad was growing up. As each of the sisters prepared her "dish," the doors to the back hall and to the dining room swung back and forth as old servants were sent on missions to get this and do that. There was a commotion that was rarely found in a house now populated with old folks.

Willie didn't really have a dish. She got in

folks' way. No one really needed her help, but part of everyone's job was to try to find small jobs she could do, here and there.

And then everything began to go wrong. As best as we could later piece together, Willie pulled Willis out of her purse and set him on the mantle. With everyone working and talking and ordering folks around, no one noticed that Willis had been placed right there in the midst of it all.

Great Aunt Tump, the godliest of all, was making her mother's mother's signature cornbread dressing – as



*Author Robert Hicks*

she had since her mother had given over the reins forty years before. This was no ordinary cornbread dressing from a package. This was holy, sacred dressing, far more important and more at the center of our meal than any turkey would ever claim. This was the dressing whose recipe all our mothers had asked for, in preparation for the day Tump left us.

Tump was looking for black pepper. There had never been the need for her to bother others. She could find it herself. Why interrupt a good story just to ask for the pepper?

She found, up on the mantle, a quart jar of black pepper.

Before she began to spoon and stir Uncle Willis into the dressing, she tasted him. Tump would go to her grave with her cherished faith that he was black pepper – that the crematorium must have given him a good Christian burial and then dumped a large can of black pepper into Willis's green box. After all, the crematorium people knew as well as anyone that they shouldn't be burning folks up. Aunt Tump would remain alone with this belief.

Aunt Willie must have noticed the opening of a too-familiar jar: she collapsed, swooning, onto the linoleum. Everything stopped. She was out cold, but seemed to still be with us.

My grandmother's equally elderly physician, Dr. Crook, came from his farm next door, arriving after Willie had been taken to her bed. As she came to, she mumbled things that made no sense: but then, again, when had she ever made much sense?

Somehow her sisters pieced it all together. Tump was mortified. Her actions had, all at the same time, hurt her fragile sister and ruined the dressing. My grandmother, meanwhile, was not going to throw away a very large pan of cornbread dressing just because of a small mistake. After all, she had lived through the Great Depression when folks would have killed for a very large pan of cornbread dressing – and such cornbread dressing as this!

On the other hand, no one seemed too concerned about Willis. After some quiet discussion, grandmother decided to get Willis out of the dressing and back in his jar. Of course, it was understood that, even when she'd finished, there was bound to be some dressing in the jar and Willis in the dressing. Nothing was perfect in this life, but we could try our best. That's all He had ever asked of us.

The kitchen oath was the key to making it through the day. My grandmother made each of her sisters, including a sniveling Aunt Tump and all the servants, swear they would never tell another soul what had happened. Willie had simply taken to her bed, as she more than anyone else would do. Success rested on their silence. What had happened was no one's business. It was over, done.

By the time we gathered in the dining room that afternoon, the big table a bit bigger and the four "children's" tables filled in each corner, everyone knew. I'd heard it from my cousin, Pat.

It was a rather quiet Thanksgiving. None of the grandchildren needed to be reminded that we were inside a house, or at dinner. There were no outbursts as we all kept our eyes glued on what seemed to be an unusually large serving of dressing on each of our plates. It looked, in fact, like most everything on our plates was dressing, the rest of the meal a mere garnish. Each of us had the same goal, and that was to make it through the meal and try not to eat anything that had touched the dressing.

My grandmother tried to normalize the unusually quiet meal with small talk. She demanded verbal interaction. Yet silence seemed to prevail, broken only by the periodic quiet sniveling of Aunt Tump.

As I said earlier, weakness was never considered a virtue in our family. When significant looks didn't work, grandmother spoke up and asked Tump why she was sniffing and dabbing at her eyes. She knew perfectly well why, of course; what she was really saying, in her own special way, was to stop.

Tump, by now so eaten up with grief and guilt, didn't take the hint. "You perfectly well know why!"

Grandmother again tried to take control. "No. I don't understand why."

This was Tump's queue to silence, but somehow she didn't get it. "I'm sniveling because Willis is in the dressing and Willie's in her bed! That's why I'm sniveling! It's all wrong and you know it!"

It was out. What we all already knew was now public knowledge. Willis was in the dressing. Willie really did have a reason this time to have taken to her bed. Despite Tump's weeping, our silence grew louder.

And then it happened. All of us are witness to what was said and happened next. Our grandmother cut that silence with a slight smile and melodious words. "No, I don't understand why you're sniveling. Here we are, an unbroken chain of family under one roof. The Lord has preserved our health and made us to prosper. We are united as sisters in this family, with my children and my children's children. Our land and our people thrive and are well. We are safe here from harm's way.

"It was bad enough that Willis Buford ever came into our lives. He humiliated our vulnerable sister with his slothfulness and infidelity. It was bad enough that he died as he did, compromising what was left of her dignity. It was bad enough that he demanded to be cremated as heathens do and thrown into the Mississippi – for what purpose I will never understand. Yet even then she could not depart from him and has humiliated each of us by carrying him around in a jar for near 15 years.

"I'm not sure that Willis Buford didn't finally do something constructive for this family that he only took from in life."

"Whatever could you mean?" Tump asked.

And then we saw her do it. For the first time that anyone could recall, my grandmother, Mattie Louise Talmadge Fort, with her impeccable table manners, took a bite of food *and spoke with her mouth full*. "If I'm not mistaken," she said as she shifted the food on her palate, "I believe that Willis has added a bit of body to the dressing."

And with that, all the taboos had disappeared, the veil had lifted. At first with reluctance, and then with some kind of empowerment years before any of us had ever heard the word, each of us, in our own time and in our own way, ate Uncle Willis.

Within the next two years my grandmother and the rest of the Talmadge 'girls' went on to their reward. All who gathered with them around the big table that day are now gone, too. There are far fewer spaces left in the Talmadge-Fort lot at Rest Haven these days.

Yet, for those of us who remain, Willis Buford forever lives on in our hearts every year, as we gather together, wherever we might be.

## **After Thoughts**

After I wrote this story, a true story, with only the



names changed to protect I'm not sure whom, I found myself in New York as part of a panel with three other Southern writers to talk about the reoccurring themes of *Death, Loss and Food in Southern Fiction*. I had no intention of relating this story as I was there because of **The Widow of the South**, my first novel. After all four of us had spoken, they opened it up to the audience for questions. Five or six questions later, a woman made her way up to a mike. She looked 'very New York' – a bit too thin, with a bit too much work done, all dressed in black – and asked as we were all Southerners, if any of us had ever written about a meal and, if so, would we share our story. The other three writers sat silently. Never one to let silence reign, I lifted my hand and said that I had recently written a short story about a Thanksgiving meal at my grandmothers. I then went on to mention that it had involved my family cooking and then eating my great uncle-by-marriage. Silence seemed to envelop the room, punctuated by a cough here or there until she slowly responded in a whisper, "Literally or figuratively?"

"Oh, literally!" I replied and then added, "And if my fellow panelists claim to be Southerners and say they have never eaten anyone, then they are lying. It's our little secret. All of us are cannibals!"

Having spent enough time in New York over the years to know that the general opinion is that Southerners are freaks, I knew there would be some believers in the audience, but I was counting on my fellow-Southerners to protest so I would have a chance to tell the story. Problem was all three of them remained stone silent, as if I had revealed some dark family secret about Southerners. The only laughter was that nervous laughter that happens when we're uncomfortable. Truth was, the entire room seemed convinced that my godly family and I were cannibals just because we had eaten my great uncle-by-marriage. For Pete's Sake, we're Methodists!

There were a few more questions, but no one was really any longer paying attention. There I was, the focus of side-glances from everyone.

The moderator thanked all who had come and invited us to a really swell reception and open bar. Maybe with a couple of drinks, folks would be ready to ask me to clarify what now sounded like some dark woods ritual. This may sound a bit like projection, but it was clear to me that everyone both needed and was ready for a drink. Funny thing, even after they had gotten their drinks, no one seemed to make their way over to me in the corner as I tried to make dinner out of the tomato aspic. Wisely, I had decided to forgo the carving stations. It was clear that I needed to avoid any public display of meat eating.

As I reflected on why I wished I had never brought up that Thanksgiving meal, yet, another very New York-looking woman – a little too thin, with a little too much work, all dressed in black – made her way over to my corner. Maybe I was desperate, but, with each step, her smile seemed to ooze warmth and acceptance, as if she was the only one in the room who had gotten my humor.

Her voice and words were comforting as she told me how much she had appreciated what I had said. I thanked her and began to talk about **The Widow of the South**, when she interrupted me to say she was speaking of my words about eating someone we loved. "It was so brave of you, so Pre-Christian, so powerful and pagan to take in the very flesh of a loved one, to now have their strength and goodness within you! I so much applaud you!" She gushed.

"Oh, I think I misled you," I replied.

"What? You really didn't eat him?"

"No," I answered, "We ate him, alright, but we didn't love him. He was a terrible man who, by all accounts, humiliated his wife and my entire family over many years."

Her look of confusion seemed to grow into rage. "What! You ate someone you didn't love!" as if that was the dirty secret of it all.

"You're disgusting!" spitting the words out of her mouth, as if I was a bad raw oyster.

It was right there and then I realized the difference between them and us:

For it would seem, in New York, you only eat the ones you love.

**Robert Hicks**, author of *The New York Times* bestsellers, ***The Widow of the South*** and ***Separate Country***, was born and raised in South Florida. He moved to Williamson County, Tennessee in 1974.

He made his mark as a music publisher and in artist management within both country and alternative-rock music, focusing on the role of the singer / songwriter. His first book, a collaboration with French-American photographer Michel Arnaud; ***Nashville: the Pilgrims of Guitar Town*** told the story in photographs and essays of those who have come to Nashville in pursuit of their dreams of making it in the music business.

He is founding chairman emeritus of ***Franklin's Charge: A Vision and Campaign for the Preservation of Historic Open Space*** in the fight to secure and preserve the Civil War battlefield and other historic open space in Williamson County

In December 2005, the Nashville Tennessean named him 'Tennessean of the Year' for the impact ***The Widow of the South*** has had on Tennessee, heritage tourism and preservation.

He travels, throughout the nation, speaking on a variety of topics ranging from *Why The Civil War Matters* to *The Importance of Fiction in Preserving History* to *Southern Material Culture* to *A Model for the Preservation of Historic Open Space for Every Community* and a host of other topics.

In 2008, Hicks co-edited, with Justin Stelter and John Bohlinger, ***A Guitar and A Pen: Short Stories and Story-Songs By Nashville Songwriters*** (Center Street Books/Hachette, North America) released in April 2008.

## Recommended Reading: New Fiction

### Harlow

By David Armand

*If Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy had a literary love child, its name would be David Armand. His novel **Harlow** combines O'Connor's Gothic violence and sense of humor with McCarthy's unforgiving landscapes and Old Testament themes. But while he pays homage to the icons, David Armand is his own writer, and **Harlow** stands alone as an incredible look into the oldest of stories: man's search for his father. But rarely are fathers this wayward, sons this compelled to search, and their shared histories this soaked in whiskey, blood, and Louisiana clay.*

—Wiley Cash, *New York Times* bestselling author of **A Land More Kind Than Home**

#### Editor's Introduction

David Armand first came to our attention when he placed several times in the **William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**. When we saw his first novel-in-progress and, then, the completed work, **The Pugilist's Wife**, we were reminded of Faulkner while knowing that this was not imitator but a writer intent on doing his own thing. The reviews of his new book *Harlow* so far have confirmed our belief that David is well on his way to a successful career as a novelist. *The New York Journal of Books* makes this comparison:

*Armand's writing is reminiscent of Hemingway: straightforward descriptions of manly action punctuated by laconic dialogue....**Harlow** is a tough little novel that plunges the reader into a fully realized way of life.*

A comparison echoed by the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, which said:

*Armand writes in a comfortingly familiar literary voice that blends Ernest Hemingway's laconic but rhythmically complicated explorations of the mysteries of masculinity with William Faulkner's more fabulist, Southern Gothic twang. It's a heady, seductively intoxicating combination.*

We agree that the multidimensional personal journeys of David Armand's characters are compelling in some instances with the strength of a cobra hypnotizing its intended victim. *Harlow*'s principal character is highly reminiscent of that family of southern trash, the Snopes. And David Armand walks with care the tightrope between popular and literary fiction with his universally appalling themes,



Author **David Armand**

accessible to all. As William Wright said in *Shenandoah*:

*...what makes **Harlow** undoubtedly literary—is the tonal maximalism, the luxuriating in evocative words and long sentences, the obvious love and care for language.*

The novel takes place over the course of three abysmally cold winter days in the late 1980s. **Harlow** tells the story of 18-year-old Leslie Somers, a boy who trudges his way through the dark Louisiana backwoods in search of his father, a man whom he has never met. As Leslie walks through the woods, making camp where he can, he thinks of the other men in his life: the ones who took him hunting and fishing, the ones who mistreated him. He can only hope that his father will be different from them, better somehow. But when Leslie finally finds **Harlow** and the man is not what the boy had expected. Ultimately, the two will end up on a crash course toward destruction, crime, and twisted relationships that will leave one of them dead and the other a hardly recognizable version of his former self.

The titular character of this story from the novel **Harlow** has had a lot of strange jobs in his lifetime. This is one of them.

### **The Prize**

Harlow Cagwin had worked at the fairgrounds in Franklinton and sometimes in the fall when the parish fair would come through he would assist in hawking a useless miscellany of oversized stuffed animals and plastic daggers that you could win if you hit one of the balloons

that were tacked to a piece of slate-colored corkboard behind him with one of the colored plastic darts that he held out fanwise before him like a hand of cards, calling out to the grotesque crowd of fairgoers who slouched past him only sometimes stopping to try their luck but otherwise disappearing into the dark and anonymous spate of people among the blinking and buzzing lights of the dusty hay strewn midway.

Once he met a man with no arms who wanted to try his luck and win a stuffed tiger for his old lady.

"But that there's a leopard," Harlow said to the old man, ignoring his handicap. "You still want it?"

"Yessir, you better believe it. Anything for her." He jerked his head at the haggard woman standing next to him.

"Well let's see what y'all got," Harlow said, still ignoring the logistics of this transaction: he assumed the woman would be throwing the darts.

"Three dollars gets you three darts. Five dollars gets you six."

The old man looked now to the woman standing at his side and nudged his chin in the direction of his shirt pocket. "See if you can get that five out for me, will you?" he said to her. "I'm fixin' to win you that there prize."

The woman reached her arm across the man's chest and plucked a five dollar bill from his shirt pocket and then handed it to Harlow. Harlow took the money and smiled at her.

"Thank you," he said.

"Uh huh." The woman looked around nervously as if she thought someone were watching her.

Under the dull mauve light leaking out from his booth, Harlow could see this woman's skin was leathery and cracked, tanned to a dusky horse saddle brown. It was stretched taut across her meager frame of bones and her two jaundiced eyes bulged forth from her white haired and wild skull, looking into the night as if seeking out an eternal answer in some dark recess only she could ascertain. She smiled at him with a mouth that had been half robbed of fat orange teeth.

"He's out of his mind thinks he can win somethin' at a fair," she said. "He should know these games is fixed. Everything here's fixed so you'll be the loser."

Harlow said to her: "come on lady, we have winners here every day. Just think positive," he said. Then he handed the woman the half dozen darts.

"These ain't for me," she said. "Lonnie wants to win me a stuffed animal, he can shoot for it hisself."

Harlow looked at her, then at the man standing before him. He didn't say anything.

But then the man Lonnie started to sit down, positioning himself on the dusty ground so that he was sitting in front of the booth now. He was using his left foot to remove the torn gray sneaker from his right foot.

"Can you get my sock for me?" he said to the woman now.

So the woman bent down and pulled the stained sock from the man's foot and then she placed one of the

darts in the dry craggy space between his toes.

"This is utterly ridiculous," she said standing back up now and looking toward the over inflated balloons jerking back and forth over the corkboard, the popped ones hanging there too like strips of hung beef against a smokehouse wall set to cure.

Harlow looked down at the gaunt man. There were several people standing around him now too and they were all watching him.

The man brought his leg back until his thigh was touching his chest and then he flung the leg forward, releasing the dart from between his toes as his knee locked into place and his leg hung now in midair straight as a two by four.

But he missed, the side of the dart hitting the wall then the dart itself bouncing off and landing in the dust at Harlow's mud caked boots.

"Damn," Lonnie said. He looked up to the woman now. "Give me another'n," he told her.

The woman bent over again and placed another dart in between the man's toes.

Again he shot. He missed a second time.

"Give up yet?" the woman said to him looking at her naked wrist where a watch would have been but wasn't.

He didn't answer but sat up now in the mild October dust and looked again at his targets. He squinted his eyes at the balloons and rolled his head around on his nubbed shoulders. The flannel shirt he was wearing had had the sleeves cut or torn from it and you could see through the sleeve holes the two small stumps where once there had been arms. Then you could hear his gray and grizzled cheeks rustling against the flannel like a scouring pad as he continued to roll his head around like some misshapen bowling ball.

He cracked his neck.

Then the man turned and spat a tan stream of tobacco juice at the ground yet this time before lying back he started to work himself into the ground some by moving his thighs from side to side a bit. Then he lay back in the dirt again, his long gray hair ensepulchered by dust and carnival debris.

"Now I'm ready," he said. "I was just warmin' up before."

The woman rolled her eyes and then she crouched down again and placed another dart in between Lonnie's toes. Once more he brought back his leg—held it there for a moment as if setting up a tableau—then flung forward releasing the dart in an almost majestic spiral as the implement hurled itself through the thick and smoky and fluorescent hued air and then striking perfectly into its seemingly preordained place in the world: the dart tore through a large yellow balloon and stuck itself firmly into the pocked corkboard behind it.

"Bullseye," said Lonnie. The sound of the popping balloon seemed to echo still in the dusty air.

The people in the crowd clapped and cheered and laughed some of them. The old woman handed the



remaining three darts back to Harlow. Quickly now as if she wanted to get away.

"So does that mean we get our money back on these we didn't use?" she said.

"No ma'am, but you still get three more tries. You can win more stuff. Or I mean your husband can."

Harlow gestured the darts back toward her but she pushed his hand away. "He don't want to," she said, turning away from Harlow now to see Lonnie standing himself up proudly but with what seemed a great and painful effort.

The old woman dusted off Lonnie's jeans for him and he tried to kiss her but she pulled away.

"Plus he ain't even my husband." The woman glared now at Harlow.

"Sorry," he told her.

"Can we just have the damn leopard?" she said.

"Yes ma'am," Harlow said.

Lonnie didn't say anything.

Then from beside his counter Harlow took a long yellow broom handle with a hook at the end where the bristles for the broom had once been and he reached up with it and snagged the leopard from its crowded place on the guy ropes above his head and then he unhooked it: the other animals that were hanging up there too falling rightfully into the leopard's vacated space like tree branches that had been tied down but now have been untied and are bending homeward, and he brought it down and the woman took it from the end of the stick and hooked her arm around its neck as she pulled Lonnie by the front of his shirt and beseeched him to come on and then they hastened forth into that sweating and stinking phalanx and into the mild dust in which it pulsed now where the endless buzzing and clatter of the midway enveloped them together like two peripatetic yet lost souls squandering away their existences in this world without ever even knowing it but in some dark and visceral place yet still incessantly searching for that tiny glimpse of light any place they could find it.

*The Prize* is an excerpt from **Harlow**, David Armand's second novel, published in 2013 by Texas Review Press. Copyright, 2013, David Armand.

**David Armand** was born and raised in Louisiana. He has worked as a drywall hanger, a draftsman, and as a press operator in a flag printing factory. He now teaches at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he also serves as associate editor for Louisiana Literature Press. In 2010, he won the George Garrett Fiction Prize for his first novel, **The Pugilist's Wife**, which was published by Texas Review Press. His second novel, **Harlow**, is also published by Texas Review Press. David lives with his wife and two children and is currently at work on his third novel.

## Quotes To Live By



*I decline to accept the end of man... I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among the creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.*

—William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

# The Tilted World: Review

By Geoff Munsterman

The Great Flood of 1927 was the greatest natural disaster this nation has ever faced, yet this truth goes mostly unspoken. A few years removed from the first World War, deep into a prohibition on liquor turning average citizens into criminals for the sole act of seeking a drink, and with The Great Depression and another World War on its heels, the '27 flood shaped America as we know it today yet happened during a time when various other calamities staked claim on the young country. That this disaster happened to the South, a region where aid came slow if it came at all—a distant past winking and nodding to more current events—also warrants mention.

In the belly of a great war echoing through the lives it indelibly scored, and with sandbagged levees about to fail, Tom Franklin and Beth Ann Fennelly set their co-written novel, **The Tilted World**. Set in the water-logged hamlet of Hobknob, MS, we meet bootlegger and wife Dixie Clay Holliver. Thrust into the shine business by her husband, Jesse, Dixie Clay's black lightning is moonshine's equivalent to Walter White's blue meth. Dixie Clay fills a baby-shaped hole in herself (her infant son, Jacob, dies shortly after his birth) by making whiskey, and as her banned brew tears through the region, it allows her sharp-dressed and quick-tongued husband to afford the finer things—a sleek Model T, the loyalty of crooked lawmen, and frequent trips to New Orleans.

We also meet Ted Ingersoll, one half of a two-man revenuer team dispatched by Herbert Hoover to tide-risen Hobknob after two fellow agents go missing. Despite the anonymity required to successfully bust barrels, Ingersoll and his partner, the yarn-spinning "Ham" Johnson (who provides a new tale each time he's asked what the story behind "Ham" is), develop a reputation for being effective and unbribable. It's this reputation that makes them uniquely qualified to discover what's become of the missing agents—were they bought off or knocked off? Ingersoll & Ham are no Izzie & Moe. Raised in an orphanage and in the blues bars of Chicago, Ingersoll hops from one busted still to the next, all the while fingering his once-prominent callouses earned on the neck of a fretboard as each assignment leaves him alive and well-paid, but disconnected to a life outside of the job.

But a murder delays Ham and Ing. They ride up to find three bodies heaped on the floor of a general store like wheat sacks. The scene is clear: two looters—one male, one female—and a clerk left gutshot during a fight over boots. "The flood had made regular folks desperate," the novel tells us, "and desperate folks downright reckless." Among the grisly scene wails its



lone survivor, an infant boy (nicknamed "Junior" by Ham after a 'diddle' change reveals the baby's gender) orphaned by the end results of his desperate parents' crime. Though Ham sees no issue with leaving the crying child, Ingersoll, an orphan long ago adopted by the United States government (and, by the same respects, his porcine partner), tends to the docile child's soiled 'diddies' and dirtied cheeks. Ingersoll requires no assertion from Ham that a revenuer's life is no life for a baby, so the dispatch from Hoover to Hobknob becomes a two-fold venture: investigate the missing revenuers and find his spittle-drenched ward a suitable family.

The scene in which Dixie Clay and Ingersoll first meet perpetuates a melody that carries the rest of the novel: this encounter is so unlikely, so improbable, and yet somehow swells with an overwhelming sense of predetermination. "I came here to bring you a baby. This here baby." Dixie Clay trains a rifle's crosshairs on Ingersoll as he pitches "Junior" for adoption. "A real American-style baby. Bona fide A-one cowboy, too. Likes the open road, Nehi soda. Loves the blues." Dixie Clay can't trust outsiders, can't risk her safety or the safety of her still. Dixie Clay can't trust anyone anymore, not even her husband or the men in his employ. Though her instincts had led her astray, had led her to love a man like Jesse Holliver—one of literature's great sleaze-bags—Dixie Clay remembers to trust her maternal instincts. Hold the boy. Be his mother. Love him as your own.

So much of the joy that comes from reading **The Tilted World** reveals itself in the love affair between Dixie Clay and her son, Willy ("Junior" renamed Willy by Dixie Clay, after her father). Willy's presence in her life. The pages with Dixie Clay and Willy sing with the same kind of poetry found in Beth Ann Fennelly's astounding collection of poetry, **Tender Hooks**. The sensuality of motherhood—the smell of a baby's head, washing clean each dirtied crevice with genuine gentleness

and curiosity, the cooing of a laughing child strumming chords of joy only mothers may know—introduces joy to a tilted world where even having the blues seems a romantic notion. That joys like this require tireless protection from contaminating forces looms throughout the rest of the book for both Dixie Clay and Ingersoll.

While the atmosphere of **The Tilted World** is fraught with as much danger, intensity, drama, and suspense as the title suggests, in truth, this massive tale set in the southland sandwiched between two wars and two disasters—the natural flood and the unnatural economic crash—is no bigger than an infant’s pinky toe.

It’s about a married woman feeling more like a cog in her husband’s criminal enterprise than his wife, about a man with nothing to hold onto in his life, about the bright miracle of a child and whether their shared love for him can bridge the gulf their opposing livelihoods place them in, a gulf wider than a swollen Mississippi River itching to breach. By novel’s end, what endures most is a sense of redemption and survival—a once-trusted gut redeeming itself and a heart’s seemingly mortal wounds managing to survive. And thrive.

With **The Tilted World**, we’re witnessing two—in my opinion—masters in their respective genres of fiction and poetry at work. While it’s Tom Franklin who’s known as the fiction writer, Beth Ann clearly knows her way around scene creation and character development. Any reader of this novel will be thankful Franklin convinced Fennelly to trade her line and stanza breaks in for paragraph and chapter breaks (though hopefully not forever, poetry would be worse off without her). And Franklin, well-established as an author capable of more than a few lines of poetry in his prose (just read **Poachers**. If you haven’t yet, quit wasting your life), clearly benefits from Beth Ann Fennelly’s ability to animate each sentence, each line, with images so alive you can almost feel the pages pulsate with a heart beat. There is a great music to this book. Cagey verbs charge forth from sentences while the tenderer ones slip into you soft and easy as an infant’s joyous cooing.

**The Tilted World** rewards its reader with gorgeous prose, vigorously brilliant storytelling, with literature that aims to tell of two characters whose fierce need for more than surface edification brings them to each other. This novel has on its surface a great setting, place-wise and time-wise; great and memorable characters, great writing that propels you through it too fast for just one reading (you’ll literally stop and moan at the beauty of some of this book’s lines, like “He was missing that part, the part where you sang like you had nothing better to do.”). But the surface splendor of this book fades too, leaving you moored to Dixie Clay, Ingersoll, and Willy—an unlikely family brewed 90-proof by the river in revolt, by the levee walls itching to collapse, by the world tilted inward on us. The poignant prose and captivating plot aside, their great achievement is what they do for us as readers. They adopt us, give us shelter, sing to us, raise us as their own.

**Geoff Munsterman’s** poems have been featured in Poets for Living Waters, The Southern Poetry Anthology, story | south, The New Laurel Review, and Margie—to name a few. His debut collection **Because the Stars Shine Through It** will come out Winter 2013 from Lavender Ink and he is hard at work on the follow-up, the book-length poem **Where Scars Wake**. His shingle hangs in New Orleans.

## The Tilted World (excerpt) Chapter Six

The whole first day, she was skittish with the baby. She didn’t even realize she was expecting someone to whisk him away—the baby’s dead mother, risen from her grave, or even the cowboy who brought him—until she decided to trim the baby’s long fingernails, bendy but so sharp they’d scratched his cheeks. She put her curved scissors to his inch-long finger and had to make herself squeeze. Holding her breath. One, two, three, four nails done, then his pinky twitched and she pinched it and a tiny smile of blood appeared and immediately she glanced at the door. But no one came to take him, leave her orphaned. The child was squalling so she picked him up and sucked his little finger and shushed him, holding him against her shoulder and patting him as she executed her loose-legged bouncy walk, the one which had worked on Jacob.

The bouncy walk came right back. The baby calmed. Later, when she needed to trim the rest of his nails, she put his fingers one by one in her mouth and nibbled them smooth.

And so she grew to know him through her mouth. Through her nose and ears and fingers. He dirtied his diddie and the mess got all up his back and she bathed him, worked her wet cloth into his wrinkles and crevices, lifted up his chin to suds out the grimy beads. He didn’t like the bath, she could tell the sensation was new, and he fastened desperate eyes on her so she sang to him about arms as she swirled the washrag over his arms, sang to him about toes as she flossed between his toes. He fell asleep afterwards and she had the strange experience of missing him, though he was right there. She hovered over the nest of blankets she’d made on her bed, and at one point he was so still she held a finger beneath his nose to make sure he was breathing. She wanted to study him from every angle. When have I had this feeling before? Oh yes—falling in love. . . She didn’t mind the rain which she wore like a cloak pulled tight around them both.

She named him Willy, for her father; Jacob had been named Julius Jacob Holliver, for Jesse’s father. She wished her father could meet Willy soon, though Jesse had never allowed her to go home to visit. She didn’t want to think about Jesse now, worried he wouldn’t like her having a baby. But she couldn’t give him back. Wouldn’t even know how to. It was too late.



Each hour brought her discoveries. The first was that he was happiest on the move. He'd woken squalling from his nap and kept squalling and she knew he was hungry. The strange-talking cowboy (where do you come from if you talk like that? Not Alabama or Mississippi, that's for sure) had given her some strained peas and oatmeal, and she offered them, but the baby didn't seem interested. She thought maybe he was thirsty. The cowboy had also said the baby liked Nehi soda, but that was crazy, and besides, she didn't have any. She made him a bottle of Pet milk with a bit of blackstrap molasses, but he wouldn't take it. He cried when she held him and cried when she pinned on a fresh diddie and cried when she put him down on a pallet. She picked him up and he paused to burp and kept crying. As the wind outside deepened from a whimper to a howl, he met it and raised it, opening his mouth impossibly wide (Dixie Clay thought of a snake she and Lucius had once surprised in the corn crib, disengaging its jaw to swallow a rat). The baby was good and angry by then, his eyes squinched, face a red fist, arms flailing, his tongue vibrating like the clapper of a bell. Dixie Clay decided to fetch him some cow's milk from the nearest neighbor, Old Man Marvin, so loyal of a customer that his teeth had about rotted. Marvin could be counted on not to gossip, and her instinct was to preserve the secret of Willy for a while. Certainly Jesse should learn about the baby from her.

But first she had to check the still, so she bundled Willy against the rain and ran with him pressed against her chest. She tried not to jostle him. He stopped crying, though the way was rough and rooty. When she got to the still, the mash was bubbling and she needed both hands free, to lift the heavy lid and stir the wooden paddle. She rested the baby on the thumper keg while deciding what to do. She didn't want to lay Willy on the floor because she'd seen a coach whip there a few weeks ago. Her feeling was that if snakes got in her house, well, she had no choice but to kill them, but when she was in the woods, she was in their home, and she let them be. But now she was uneasy about the coach whip, its black body tapering off into grey and then creamy white at the tail. She remembered stories from her girlhood about the coach whip chasing children by putting its tail in its mouth and rolling like a hoop. It would loop their feet, trip them, and then whip them bloody with its tail. She knew all this was hogwash then and knew it more so now, but still she hesitated. And that's when she realized Willy'd been lulled to sleep on the rumbling, hiccupping thumper keg.

Which is how William Clay Lucius Holliver became a moonshiner. A moonshiner, six months old on that very day of April 19 (she had declared this to be the case when she realized he couldn't have a birthday if she didn't choose one.

Dixie Clay did buy milk from Old Man Marvin and then on second thought rode back and bought the cow outright. The cow was named Millie and Dixie Clay put her in the stall next to Chester and he sniffed at the partition and pawed his hoof. Five years back, when

she'd begun to shine, she'd let all the farm animals go, first the cow then the sheep and chickens, no time to tend them, no need for what they could give. But Chester—this she'd never tell Jesse, he'd laugh at her, but was true nevertheless—had grown melancholy. She scratched his withers and then leaned her forehead on his shoulder. "We both have some company now, Chet," she whispered.

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**Beth Ann Fennelly** directs the MFA Program at Ole Miss where she was named the 2011 Outstanding Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year. She's won grants from the N.E.A., the MS Arts Commission, and United States Artists. Her work has three times been included in **The Best American Poetry**. Fennelly has published three full-length poetry books. Her first, **Open House**, won The 2001 *Kenyon Review* Prize, the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award, and was a Book Sense Top Ten Poetry Pick. It was reissued by W. W. Norton in 2009. Her second book, **Tender Hooks**, and her third, **Unmentionables**, were published by W. W. Norton in 2004 and 2008. She has also published a book of nonfiction, **Great with Child**, in 2006, with Norton. Fennelly writes essays on travel, culture, and design for *Country Living*, *Southern Living*, *AFAR*, *The Oxford American*, and others. **The Tilted World**, the novel she co-authored with her husband, Tom Franklin, was published by HarperCollins in October, and is an *Indie Next*, *Okra*, and *Library Reads* selection. They live in Oxford with their three children.

**Thomas G. Franklin** was born in the small southern town of Dickinson, AL, in 1963. In 1981 he moved with his family to Mobile, AL, and later attended the University of South Alabama in Mobile, where he earned his BA in English. Franklin earned his MFA in fiction at the University of Arkansas in 1998, then returned to the University of South Alabama to teach. Shortly after he became the Phillip Roth Resident in Creative Writing at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA and then he moved to Knox College, where he held the position of visiting Writer-in-Residence. In 2000, Franklin moved to Oxford, MS, as the John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence at Ole Miss. There, he has instructed both undergraduate and graduate students in a two semester fiction writing course. He and his wife Beth Ann Fennelly maintain a house in Oxford, where she is a member of the English Department. Franklin has been especially successful with his short fiction and essays, which have been published in numerous magazines including *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Brightleaf*, *The Nebraska Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Smoke Magazine*, to name a few. His fiction is in anthologies such as *New Stories from the South*; *The Year's Best*, 1999; *Best American Mystery Stories*, 1999 and 2000; and *Best Mystery Stories of the Century*. Franklin has published published five books: **Poachers**, **Smonk**, **Hell at the Breech**, **Crooked Letter**, **Crooked Letter**, and **The Tilted World**.

## **Rash Judgements: In the Tradition of O'Connor and Faulkner, Many of the Best Characters of Ron Rash Exude Evil, Are Fascinating, But Impossible to Love**

**By Rosemary James**

*Ron Rash's new short story collection, **Nothing Gold Can Stay**, is this Appalachian author's best book since his 2008 **Serena**. If **Serena** becomes famous as the basis for a coming Jennifer Lawrence-Bradley Cooper movie, never forget that it began as a fierce, breathtaking book, one of the greatest American novels in recent memory.*  
—Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

Agreed!

**Nothing Gold Can Stay** is a collection of 14 beautifully crafted pieces of short fiction by master storyteller Ron Rash. The book is incredibly versatile, covering periods ranging from the Civil War to contemporary life with mood swings from humor to brutality. The darkness of his work often is dramatically emphasized by sharply contrasting flashes of unexpected sensitivity and stark beauty. The title comes from lines in a poem by Robert Frost:

*Nature's first green is gold,*

*Her hardest hue to hold.*

*Her early leaf's a flower;*

*But only so an hour.*

*Then leaf subsides to leaf.*

*So Eden sank to grief,*

*So dawn goes down today.*

*Nothing gold can stay.*

The narrative voices and evocation of place put you in Appalachia as though by magic carpet. Read a line of his straightforward, yet lyrical, prose and you are there.

His characters frequently speak in a courtly style of English that harks back to the British Isles of an age long since past, the Elizabethan dialects of the Celts, especially the Welsh and Scottish settlers, who found comfort in mountainous terrain of the western Carolinas, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky—terrain so like that of Scotland and Wales. Ron Rash has the voice down pat, it the voice of his heritage. His family has lived in the mountains of North Carolina since the 1700s.

My paternal ancestors, all Welsh, settled in western North Carolina about the same time, and created good, self-sustaining lives for themselves eventually growing, some have said, "the best apples in North Carolina." The men were tall, lean, soft-spoken, confident men, who loved dogs, hunting, laughter. They had a weakness for pretty women and were gifted storytellers. Their stories were told out loud, rather than written down and collected for the ages. But their story themes were timeless, often fables rooted at least tangentially in the stories of **The Bible**.

They worked hard, of course; tending to fruit trees is a year round, sunup to sundown, business. That did not



**Ron Rash,**  
Photo by Mark Haskett

prevent them from enjoying the simple pleasures of life with gusto, however. Cider, the distilled kind, added fuel to their inventive recitations of tales, ancient and contemporary. Remembering their stories today, I feel at home in the books of Ron Rash. They take me back to the happy times of childhood, sitting close to my grandfather and listening carefully his humorous and often scary stories, sitting in handcrafted rocking chairs after dark on the back porch facing the orchard, with fireflies the only illumination. I loved visiting my grand parents in this, a section of the country I love, second only to my attachment to the coast of South Carolina, where my Scottish

maternal ancestors landed.

Like the storytellers of my family, Rash has a God-given talent for poking at the stones and uncovering evil and shining a light into the hard, dark crevices of it, bringing it out into the open for all of us to see for what it is, to understand the many faces of it and how evil hides in all of our lives, hoping to snare converts.

His people often are as hard to love as Faulkner's family of Snopes and his degenerate Popeye of **Sanctuary** or Flannery O'Connor's characters, such as the cranky old grandmother in **A Good Man is Hard to Find**, who is completely preoccupied with appearances and is snobbish about the so-called "common people," or the serial killer who murders her. I am reminded, too, of characters in Elizabeth Spencer's illumination of evil in her New Orleans-set novel, **The Snare**.

Rash has a steady hand with his flashlight, zeroing in on all kinds of sins, some mortal, some petty.

Like the men of my father's family, including my father, who knew that evil is best served with an occasional lace of humor, Rash can cut right to the heart of things with the kind of humor that can make you want to roll on the floor laughing and the noir grotesqueries, which make you laugh and then feel guilty about it.

There is little to laugh about, however, when it comes to the title character of his bestselling novel **Serena**, no reason to feel guilty, in fact, if you hate what she stands for, this Serena, a personification of pure evil.

Only a stroke of fairy-engineered Celtic luck could have landed for Rash the amazing **Jennifer Lawrence** as the lead in the new feature film adapted from his novel to be released this winter. When the contract for the film was signed, Jennifer Lawrence was not on the radar as a possibility for portraying a woman who is no heroine but, instead, a bigger than life demon, a modern Lilith, the legendary Queen piece in Lucifer's chess game against God and man, a Lady Macbeth of a backwoods kingdom.

Who could have known that along would come an astounding success in **The Hunger Games** and, then, an Academy Award winning role in **Silver Linings Playbook**, with her co-star Bradley Cooper, nominated for his role in the film, too. And who could have imagined that they would co-star again, this time in **Serena**.

If anyone deserves such a stroke of luck and, ultimately, fame, it's Ron Rash, whose work is superior, important literature, for which he has not previously been given the level of recognition it deserves. He sometimes is written off as a "regional writer," whose appeal is only regional.

His work is regional only in the fact that, like Faulkner and O'Connor, he sets his work in the environment he knows best, Appalachia, and models his characters on the real people of home. His stories, like theirs, embrace the universal issues of life and archetypes of the soul: Good, Evil, Faith and lack of

hit, Hope, Charity, Honor, Duty, Love, Hate. Rash has said in interviews, "I want to write about the universal through the particular."

Rash set his **Serena** saga in depression era Appalachia and weaves a tale of destructive greed and environmental ruin, the defoliation of vast swaths of forest in the building of a lumber empire, an empire built on the backs of the poor, as Serena virtually enslaves desperate families left out of work and out of hope, penniless in the wake economic collapse.

The plot owes its life, first, to the actual fight during the Depression for and against the wilderness paradise that is today the Smoky Mountains National Park and how brutal that fight became with timber interests pitted against environmentalists. In real life the park project that appeared doomed was salvaged by a \$5 million donation from Rockefeller.

Into the midst of this backdrop Rash drops Serena, a woman of unbridled ambition, who refuses to accept her humanity. Although married to a powerful timber baron from Boston, Serena is the real focal point of the story. In the timber camp she runs, she quickly assumes mythical proportions with the men of the camp: bewitchingly beautiful but manly in her command of people and horses and super human feats, such as training giant eagles to hunt snakes on her command.

The story is told, basically in a format taken from Shakespeare and Marlowe, in four parts and a coda. Serena speaks in a loose sort of iambic pentameter to distinguish her as above common people. There is a Greek chorus for a comic relief, including a preacher who sees Serena in pants as a sign of Satan's presence. (Lilith of legend, created by God as the first wife of Adam, abandoned Adam basically because she wanted to wear the pants in the family.)

Although it is hard to imagine right now just how Ms. Lawrence will interpret the role, as she often appears too young, sometimes awkward in her movements, with the gawkiness of a colt, ever entrancing in her natural tomboyish demeanor. During a recent appearance on David Letterman's show, she was fidgety, constantly twisting around in her chair, like a child forced to speak with grown-ups, who can't wait to be gone and doing something fun instead of hanging out with an old leech.

I am a believer, however, after seeing her in **Silver Linings Playbook** and after seeing the recent *Vogue* magazine cover story on her this fall. She has demonstrated that she can produce a wide range of emotions and can interpret complicated characters with ease. In her photo shoot for *Vogue*, for instance, this young gawky girl became an almost unrecognizable, sophisticated siren.

We have selected an excerpt from **Serena** for you. When you read it, you'll want to run right out and buy it to get your homework done in advance of the film.

It is the opening of the novel and, after reading it,





*Jennifer Lawrence, the talented young star of **The Hunger Games** and **Silver Linings Playbook**, will play the title character in *Serena**

you will understand that you have been in the hands of a master storyteller. The story succeeds on many levels: as narrative poetry, richness of character development, sense of place, a highly literate reworking of old legends for the contemporary reader, surprise twists and turns, and from the first paragraphs an immediately compelling an entertaining story of hot action and hotter sex and characters you either love or love to hate.

## **An excerpt from:**

## **Serena**

**By Ron Rash**

### **Chapter One**

When Pemberton returned to the North Carolina mountains after three months in Boston settling his father's estate, among those waiting on the train platform was a young woman pregnant with Pemberton's child. She was accompanied by her father, who carried beneath his shabby frock coat a bowie knife sharpened with great attentiveness earlier that morning so it would plunge as deep as possible into Pemberton's heart.

The conductor shouted "Waynesville" as the train shuddered to a halt. Pemberton looked out the window and saw his partners on the platform, both dressed in suits to meet his bride of two days, an unexpected bonus from his time in Boston. Buchanan, ever the dandy, had waxed his mustache and oiled his hair. His polished bluchers gleamed, the white cotton dress shirt fresh-pressed. Wilkie wore a gray fedora, as he often did to protect his bald pate from the sun. A Princeton Phi Beta Kappa key glinted on the older man's watch fob, a blue

silk handkerchief tucked in his breast pocket.

Pemberton opened the gold shell of his watch and found the train on time to the exact minute. He turned to his bride, who'd been napping. Serena's dreams had been especially troubling last night. Twice he'd been waked by her thrashing, her fierce latching onto him until she'd fallen back asleep. He kissed her lightly on the lips and she awoke.

"Not the best place for a honeymoon."

"It suits us well enough," Serena said, leaning into his shoulder. "We're here together, which is all that matters."

Pemberton inhaled the bright aroma of Tre Jur talcum and remembered how he'd not just smelled but tasted its vividness on her skin earlier that morning. A porter strolled up the aisle, whistling a song Pemberton didn't recognize. His gaze returned to the window.

Next to the ticket booth Harmon and his daughter waited, Harmon slouching against the chestnut board wall. It struck Pemberton that males in these mountains rarely stood upright. Instead, they leaned into some tree or wall whenever possible. If none was available they squatted, buttocks against the backs of their heels. Harmon held a pint jar in his hand, what remained of its contents barely covering the bottom. The daughter sat on the bench, her posture upright to better reveal her condition. Pemberton could not recall her first name. He wasn't surprised to see them or that the girl was with child. His child, Pemberton had learned the night before Pemberton and Serena left Boston. Abe Harmon is down here saying he has business to settle with you, business about his daughter, Buchanan had said when he called. It could be just drunken bluster, but I thought you ought to know.

"Our welcoming party includes some of the locals," Pemberton said to his bride.

"As we were led to expect," Serena said.

She placed her right hand on his wrist for a moment, and Pemberton felt the calluses on her upper palm, the plain gold wedding band she wore in lieu of a diamond. The ring was like his in every detail except width. Pemberton stood and retrieved two grips from the overhead compartment. He handed them to the porter, who stepped back and followed as Pemberton led his bride down the aisle and the steps to the platform. There was a gap of two feet between the steel and wood. Serena did not reach for his hand as she stepped onto the planks.

Buchanan caught Pemberton's eye first, gave him a warning nod toward Harmon and his daughter before acknowledging Serena with a stiff formal bow. Wilkie took off his fedora. At five-nine, Serena stood taller than either man, but Pemberton knew other aspects of Serena's appearance helped foster Buchanan and Wilkie's obvious surprise—pants and boots instead of a dress and cloche hat, sun-bronzed skin that belied Serena's social class, lips and cheeks untinted by rouge, hair blonde and thick but cut short in a bob, distinctly feminine yet also austere.

Serena went up to the older man and held out

her hand. Though he was, at seventy, over twice her age, Wilkie stared at Serena like a smitten schoolboy, the fedora pressed against his sternum as if to conceal a heart already captured.

"Wilkie, I assume."

"Yes, yes, I am," Wilkie stammered.

"Serena Pemberton," she said, her hand still extended.

Wilkie fumbled with his hat a moment before freeing his right hand and shaking Serena's.

"And Buchanan," Serena said, turning to the other partner. "Correct?"

"Yes."

Buchanan took her proffered hand and cupped it awkwardly in his.

Serena smiled. "Don't you know how to properly shake hands, Mr. Buchanan?"

Pemberton watched with amusement as Buchanan corrected his grip, quickly withdrew his hand. In the year that Boston Lumber Company had operated in these mountains, Buchanan's wife had come only once, arriving in a pink taffeta gown that was soiled before she'd crossed Waynesville's one street and entered her husband's house. She'd spent one night and left on the morning train. Now Buchanan and his wife met once a month for a weekend in Richmond, as far south as Mrs. Buchanan would travel. Wilkie's wife had never left Boston.

Pemberton's partners appeared incapable of further speech. Their eyes shifted to the leather chaps Serena wore, the beige oxford shirt and black jodhpurs. Serena's proper diction and erect carriage confirmed that she'd attended finishing school in New England, as had their wives. But Serena had been born in Colorado and lived there until sixteen, child of a timber man who'd taught his daughter to shake hands firmly and look men in the eye as well as ride and shoot. She'd come east only after her parents' deaths.

The porter laid the grips on the platform and walked back toward the baggage car that held Serena's Saratoga trunk and Pemberton's smaller steamer trunk.

"I assume Campbell got the Arabian to camp," Pemberton said.

"Yes," Buchanan said, "though it nearly killed young Vaughn. That horse isn't just big but quite spirited, 'cut proud' as they say."

"What news of the camp?" Pemberton asked.

"No serious problems," Buchanan said. "A worker found bobcat tracks on Laurel Creek and thought they were a mountain lion's. A couple of crews refused to go back up there until Galloway checked it out."

"Mountain lions," said Serena, "are they common

here?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Pemberton," Wilkie answered reassuringly. "The last one killed in this state was in 1920, I'm glad to say."

"Yet the locals persist in believing one remains," Buchanan said.

"There's quite a bit of lore about it, which the workers are all aware of, not only about its great size but its color, which evolves from tawny to jet-black. I'm quite content to have it remain folklore, but your husband desires otherwise. He's hoping the creature is real so he can hunt it."

"That was before his nuptials," Wilkie noted. "Now that Pemberton's a married man I'm sure he'll give up hunting panthers for less dangerous diversions."

"I hope he'll pursue his panther and would be disappointed if he were to do otherwise," Serena said, turning so she addressed Pemberton as much as his partners. "Pemberton's a man unafraid of challenges, which is why I married him."

Serena paused, a slight smile creasing her face.

"And why he married me?"

The porter set the second trunk on the platform. Pemberton gave the man quarter and dismissed him. Serena looked over at the father and daughter, who now sat on the bench together, watchful and silent as actors waiting their cues.

"I don't know you," Serena said.

The daughter continued to stare sullenly at Serena. It was the father who spoke, his voice slurred.

"My business ain't with you. It's with him standing there beside you."

"His business is mine," said Serena, "just as mine is his."

Harmon nodded at his daughter's belly, then turned back to Serena.

"Not this business. It was done before you got here."

"You're implying she's carrying my husband's child."

"I ain't implying nothing," Harmon said.

"You're a lucky man then," Serena said to Harmon. "You'll not find a better sire to breed her with. The size of her belly attests to that."

Serena turned her gaze and words to the daughter.

"But that's the only one you'll have of his. I'm here now. Any other children he has will be with me."

Harmon pushed himself fully upright, and Pemberton glimpsed the white-pearl handle of a bowie knife before the coat settled over it. He wondered how a man like Harmon could possess such a fine weapon,

*Read, read, read. Read everything -- trash, classics, good and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter who works as an apprentice and studies the master. Read! You'll absorb it. Then write. If it's good, you'll find out. If it's not, throw it out of the window.*

—William Faulkner

Perhaps booty in a poker game or an heirloom passed down from a more prosperous ancestor. The depot master's face appeared behind the glass partisan, lingered a moment, and vanished. A group of gangly mountaineers, all Boston Lumber employees, watched expressionless from an adjacent livestock barn.

Among them was the overseer named Campbell, whose many duties included serving as a liaison between the workers and owners. Campbell always wore gray chambray shirts and corduroy pants at camp, but this afternoon he wore overalls same as the other men. It's Sunday, Pemberton realized, and felt momentarily disoriented. He couldn't recall the last time he'd glanced at a calendar. In Boston with Serena, time had seemed caught within the sweeping circle of watch and clock hands—passing hours and minutes unable to break free to become passing days. But the days and months had passed, as the Harmon girl's swelling belly made clear. Harmon's large freckled hands grasped the bench edge, and he leaned slightly forward, His blue eyes glared at Pemberton.

"Let's go home, Daddy," Harmon's daughter said, and placed her hand on his.

He swatted the hand away as if a bothersome fly and stood up, wavered a moment.

"God damn the both of you," Harmon said, taking a step toward the Pembertons.

He opened the frock coat and freed the bowie knife from its sheath. The blade caught the late-afternoon sun, and for a brief moment it appeared Harmon held a glistening flame in his hand. Pemberton looked at Harmon's daughter, her hands covering her stomach as if to shield the unborn child from what was occurring.

"Take your father home," Pemberton told her.

"Daddy, please," the daughter said.

"Go get Sheriff McDowell," Buchanan yelled at the men watching from the livestock barn.

A crew foreman named Snipes did as commanded, walking rapidly not toward the courthouse but to the boarding house where the sheriff resided. The other men stayed where they were. Buchanan moved to step between the two men, but Harmon waved him away with the knife.

"We're settling this now," Harmon shouted.

"He's right," Serena said. "Get your knife and settle it now, Pemberton."

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**Ron Rash**, the distinguished American poet, short story writer, and novelist, was born on William Faulkner's birthday, September 25, in 1953 in Chester, SC. Rash, the final round judge of the Short Story category of the 2013 **William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**, is author of *Serena*, the 2009 PEN/Faulkner finalist and New York Times bestselling novel, which has been adapted for a feature film starring Academy Award winning actress **Jennifer Lawrence** to be released this winter. Rash has written four other prizewinning novels, **One Foot in Eden**,

## Advice From Ron Rash For Developing Writers

By Caroline Rash

Growing up with a father who wrote, taught college, and was a great dad taught me a lot about hard work, which is one of the oft-overlooked qualities of great writers. I can't imagine sometimes how Dad managed to wake up before dawn to get his writing in every day. His days were full of responsibilities that could have easily been an excuse not to write, but he always said, and still says, "The difference between writers and people who *want* to be writers is writers actually make themselves write every day." Most of his advice to his students and other writers is similarly straightforward, echoing William Faulkner's maxim that writers must first be readers. Here are his top five tips:

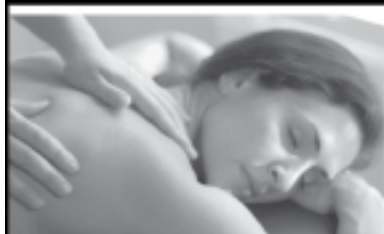
1. Read, Read, Read.
2. Concentrate on the writing, not the self-promotion.
3. Don't condescend to your characters or your audience.
4. Just the fact that you are poet or novelist already makes you weird enough, so you don't need to dress funny.
5. Read some more.

**Saints at the River**, **The World Made Straight**, and **The Cove**; three collections of poems; and four collections of stories, among them **Burning Bright**, which won the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, and **Chemistry and Other Stories**, which was a finalist for the 2007 PEN/Faulkner Award. Twice the recipient of the O. Henry Prize, he teaches at Western Carolina University where he holds the John Parris Chair in Appalachian Studies and teaches a graduate class in fiction.





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*Members of The Peauxdunque Writers' Alliance visits William Faulkner's grave. Left to right are J. Ed Marston, Terri Stoor, Tad Bartlett, Emile Choate, and Maurice Ruffin*

## New century/Old century, Three acts

By Tad Bartlett

### 1. my queer shoulder

russians. remember? always russians.  
certain exhilaration in constant threat.  
nuclear annihilation, every day the smirk  
and sarcasm about fingers  
on buttons, reds with stiff  
high-collared coats and harsh  
guttural grunting talk. bayonets  
and migs. spies.  
vodka.

now it's just god, jesus, whatever, mohammed,  
superpowered divinity playground death-match,  
theological debates with drones and IEDs.  
nothing so total and cold as a nuclear  
winter. summers of politics of fear.  
irrational masters playing at magic  
tricks – “keep your eye on your card.”

what's it take? this love, this life,  
your sick wife, while you wonder  
at news channel parlor games –

is this your card? or is it hiding  
behind that black man over there,  
the one with the dirty clothes, hungry  
stare, wants to kill you for your white,  
straight skin, or maybe it's hiding behind  
the other black man, the one in the large  
white house, the socialist spy, cool eyes,  
probably wants to kill you for your white,  
straight money (sipping his vodka martini,  
against the wall of the club,  
smirking).

fists in the air,  
waving like  
you just don't care.  
allen, this is what we've come to.

in an ambiguous world  
there are no more heroes,  
there is no heroic cause,  
but only a trap clause  
in some contract of  
marriage in the back of  
an alley in istanbul, a kid  
with one arm in the streets  
of kabul, paris's lights  
twinkling out.

it's so much easier to drink,  
to smoke, to meditate, to cuss,  
to feast, to sue, to dance, to beat,  
to run, to numb  
ourselves – hell, to hate is easier  
than to love. to fuck is easier than  
to touch a person.

won't you have a drink with me?  
won't you dance? would you like to ...?

new american century, this  
is what i hear us say:

it wasn't me. the dark man did it.  
it wasn't me. the fag did it.  
it wasn't me. the commie did it.  
it wasn't me. the frenchie did it.  
it wasn't me. it was chavez.  
it wasn't me. it was the sand nigger.  
it wasn't me. the banker did it.  
it wasn't me. buddha did it.  
it wasn't me. the devil did it.  
it wasn't me. sarah palin did it.  
it wasn't me. it was the tequila.  
it wasn't me. it was those crazies on

the reality tv, their clothes falling  
off, their claws out, dancing,  
diseases.

it wasn't me. it was the terrorists,  
the terrorists and their lies and their  
women in those long dresses  
can't even see their faces,  
see how evil them turrists is,  
don't believe in rights for little girls,  
them try force beliefs on  
non-believers,  
them get angry when things  
not go their way,  
them can't see past own money  
and oil,  
them crazy.  
it wasn't me.  
that's what i see.  
it wasn't me.

i can't dig myself out of this  
hole i'm in. there is comfort  
in the scrape of the shovel's  
ringing blade against the rock  
at my feet, an affirmation in  
the splinter's prick and the  
blister's burst on my hand.

## 2. tom waits by the road

thumb time  
waiting waiting  
road grime  
baiting baiting  
breath loud  
hating hating  
night cloud  
mating mating.

and a cigarette.  
that's right.  
a cigarette.

## 3. the things we don't talk about anymore

don't know why my obsession  
with russia still. russia's easier.

easier than grandmother bodies  
rotting in attics after a flood.  
easier than a neighborhood  
of mold. easier than mud caked  
and cracked on downtown streets.  
easier than a corpse in the grass.  
easier than an Air Force One  
flyover. easier than a shrimp  
boat at the bottom of a canal.  
easier than insurance coverage.

there was a time when this was us.

now we talk about making groceries.  
tea bags. birth certificates. the  
imaginary socialist under the bed  
sheets. Meat for the vegan.

hugs and kisses,  
exes and ohs.  
offense and defense.  
all a game.

allen, your old queer shoulder  
moved us down  
the road, where our new  
queer shoulders have gotten sold.

take it easy, old american century.  
centurions, rake it easy.  
fake it easy.  
slake it easy.  
ease your mind.  
appease your kind.

**Tad Bartlett** writes fiction, poetry, and essays. His photography and essays have appeared in a semi-monthly series on the website of the **Oxford American**, as well as in the **Mobile Press-Register** and the **Selma Times-Journal**. His short stories have been cited for Honorable Mention in the February 2013 Glimmer Train Short Story Award for New Writers, and placed as finalists in the 2012 and 2013 **William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**. His poetry was a finalist in the 2011 Faulkner-Wisdom competition; and an essay was a finalist in the 2010 Faulkner-Wisdom competition.

Tad has undergraduate degrees in theater and writing from Spring Hill College and a law degree from Tulane University, and is currently a student in the MFA program in fiction at the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans. Tad is a founding member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance, a chapter of the Words & Music Writers Alliance.



**The photo of Bartlett shown here is by L. Kasimu Harris.**



## Geronimo Johnson Shows His Hand as a Master at Evoking the Mystery and Sense of a Place

T. Geronimo Johnson's first novel, **Hold It 'Til It Hurts**, was released last year to widespread critical acclaim. His riveting debut last year centers on the search by a black veteran of the war in Afghanistan for his brother lost in the chaos of Hurricane Katrina. When Achilles and his brother Troy Conroy return from a tour of duty in Afghanistan, their white mother presents them with the keys to their pasts: envelopes containing details about their respective birth parents. After Troy disappears, Achilles—always his brother's keeper—embarks on a harrowing journey in search of his brother, an experience that will change him forever. Heartbreaking, intimate, and, at times, disturbing, **Hold It 'Til It Hurts** is a modern day odyssey through war, adventure, disaster, and love and explores how people who do not define themselves by race make sense of a world that does.

Kirkus gave the novel starred review and had this to say about it:

*A powerful literary debut . . . The depth, complexity and empathy within Johnson's narrative explores issues great and small—race, color and class, the wounds of war suffered by individuals and nations, the complications and obligations of brotherhood and familial love. Transcendent contemporary American literary fiction, a rich and passionate story rewarding enough to be read again.*

Stuart Dybek, author of **The Coast of Chicago**, call a book "a novel whose humane spirit is as large as its scope—and its scope is ambitious indeed, no less than an embrace of the USA of the first decade of the 21st century, complete with the upheavals of war, race, poverty, and natural disaster," and said:

*It is the kind of impressive debut that marks its author, T. Geronimo Johnson, as a writer with a career that bears watching.*

Jaimy Gordon, National Book Award winner for **Lord of Misrule**, joined the chorus of praise saying:

*Geronimo Johnson brings together pleasures rarely found in one book: **Hold It 'Til It Hurts** is a novel about war that goes in search of passionate love, a dreamy thriller, a sprawling mystery, a classical quest for a lost brother in which the shadowy quarry is clearly the seeker's own self, and a meditation on family and racial identity that*



**T. Geronimo Johnson**, a New Orleans native, was a finalist for the 2013 Pen/Faulkner Award with his debut novel, **Hold It 'Til It Hurts**, published by Coffee House Press.

*makes its forerunners in American fiction look innocent by comparison. Above all, in every one of its many layers, the novel explores the American idiom at its most pungent and varied: the particular dialogues of race, masculinity, soldiering, sex, the family and the street are subtly but powerfully twisted into the lyrical introspections of Achilles Conroy, who, fresh back from war, observant and ruminative by nature, searches the underworld of pre-Katrina New Orleans for the missing brother who served with him in Afghanistan.*

With all of this praise and more, too, it is not surprising the Nimo Johnson quickly found a major publisher for his second novel. In 2015, William Morrow will release his second novel, **Welcome to Braggsville**, a dark and socially provocative comedy set in the south about four liberal college kids who attempt to stage a lynching during a Civil War reenactment in a small Georgia town.

Following is a taste of what is to come in Johnson's new book, which firmly establishes him as an author who can evoke the sense and mystery of place.

## Welcome to Braggsville

By T. Geronimo Johnson  
An Excerpt

Only twice cut trees stay down. Birds don't sky before dusk. Where wolves walk upright, their curled tails question marks. Wiley wind slips silent through soft Georgia pine, upsetting without a sound. Low moon's cloudy; high moon hangs behind the ridge. Spring babes won't taste winter stew. Moss grows on the wrong side, and if tracked into the house, dogs stop eating, and soon die. Cats soon die, but not before eating their young. It's where `s hold court at branching streams divining with serpents. Feudal clans retain witches and consult wizened sages said to have seen Bragg himself consort with night itself to console his interminable grief. Beavers build damns with the bones of fallen men. Had Abel been laid here, Cain 'a ne'v been found out. According to his grandmother. To the Holler's edge she took Daron, to her last chance, to he who read life in the spine, the preacher swathed in rags, chained to anchor, length taunt, swaying on unseen waves like a swimming dog straining the lead.

...

Following the sermon, a procession to the river, the preacher in lead, trailed by flowing white robes, a pageant of bellflowers to be submerged one-by-one and anointed, as John did for Jesus, as someone certainly did for John. Gentle, so gentle they are, cradling Nana's head like two clumsy children entrusted with a precious egg. She stands, her eyes sparkle, and Daron is possessed by a rush, a true possession it feels—Alleluia!—as he hurries towards her, halting as she clears the water. The eyes aglow, yes, but her body is the same, and as she struggles to pilot it ashore, he wants to look away—but cannot—from the new sheer skin she wears, from the low orbs at midrib, staring at the wild tangle beneath. She still smells sickly, only now wet on top of it, and her hands frisk him, playing along his spine as if in search of the songs of youth. And after the baptism, a ritual he was not allowed to witness, but imagined all the more, knowing as he did the sounds of slaughter and recognizing, even at that pitch, Nana's voice.

Nana's remission everyone knew would be a black lunch, short-lived. Face grey as a catfish, she'd arranged a premature release. Hearing Nana coo and mutter (she could salt the air 'til it burned your eyes), her cracked lips intoning long forgotten chants, the nurse blanched to match her uniform, knowing a curse when she heard one, wheeled that patient right out the alley exit. When the ward caught fire a year later, that nurse was the only survivor. Glick was her name. Glick. She was from 'round the Holler. Toward the end his grandmother suffered olfactory illusions, the doctors had a word for

that, but it made her sound mentally deranged. Nana was always smelling things that weren't there. Clouds, she once claimed. As his professor would have said, It's just the mind playing tricks on us to rationalize what it can't explain. It's how religion started.

It was all a trick of the mind. Of course. Daron couldn't be remembering it right.

Couldn't be.

Couldn't be.

All that chatter rattling about the Holler was hearsay, not a lick true, but at that moment Daron climbed the Fair ridge and descended south into the shallow vale, he would have preferred any of it to what he was facing, setting off in the opposite direction of the glade he'd run as a child, and over the rise that separated Smiths from Houstons, town to the west clear as day, the scattered trailers to the east obscured as always by the obstinate glades that brooked not even wind, then bearing due north to descend into the Holler, to find that church.

Nope, none of the chatter was true, but he plumbed his memory nonetheless, sounding the words out until the rhythm rang right, and he knew for certain it was two steps back and one to the right before entering the Holler at night.

*Excerpt from **Welcome to Braggsville**, Copyright, 2013, T. Geronimo Johnson, published here with permission of the author.*

**T. Geronimo Johnson**, a native of New Orleans, was a finalist for the 2013 Pen/Faulkner Award with his debut novel, **Hold It 'Til It Hurts**, published by Coffee House Press. His fiction and poetry have appeared in **Best New American Voices**, the **Indiana Review**, the **LA Review**, and **Illuminations**.

Johnson received his MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and his M.A. in Language, Literacy, and Culture from the University of California, Berkeley. He has taught writing and held fellowships—including a Stegner Fellowship and an Iowa Arts Fellowship—at ASU, Iowa, Berkeley, Western Michigan University, and Stanford.

He also is a curriculum designer and director of the U.C. Berkeley Summer Creative Writing Program. In spring, 2014 he will be a visiting instructor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He is a Niroga certified yoga instructor and trained rally driver.

# Notes on Faith in the Work of Southern Writers

by W. Kenneth Holditch

The past that haunts Quentin Compson and other characters in the South, both fictional and real, includes the abiding presence of religion. **Alfred Kazin**, in his final book, *God and the American Writer*, notes that in contrast to church members in other areas of the United States, the white Protestants in the South “did not deal in pale abstract words heard only on Sunday,” and in the “black churches immediate issues of life and death were reflected in the words thundering from the pulpit,” from which evolved “a sense of human existence fraught with the most terrible consequences.” An integral part of that theological sense is an abiding conviction of personal guilt, not only for one’s own sins, but for sins of ancestors “even unto the third and fourth generation,” an inherited Biblical and Calvinistic precept remarkably paralleling the ancient Greek tragic belief in doomed families. The concept helped, I believe, to pave the way for the creation of tragic fiction in the South.

The Southern writer, in general, is unafraid of believing in that which cannot be explained and is Romantic in the sense of “negative capability,” which **John Keats** defined as the quality, necessary for the poet, of “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” **Flannery O’Connor** felt that a belief in mystery was essential for her existence as well as a plus for the creator of fiction, since, “The social sciences have cast a dreary blight on the public approach to fiction.” She scoffed at and satirized psychiatrists, sociologists, and all other “-ologists” who believed they could solve the mysteries of humanity, that women and men could effect, if not their salvation, at least a significant improvement in their lot. The writer who accepts the inexplicable would push fiction beyond “its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery,” since for such a writer, “the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted.” When the novelist **Mary McCarthy**, a lapsed Catholic, insisted that the Host was “only a symbol,” O’Connor responded that it was the most important element of her existence, adding, in a shaky voice, as she recalled, “Well, if it’s only a symbol, the hell with it.” For her, the mystery of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist was an element essential to make life meaningful.

O’Connor saw the South “Christ-haunted,” a blessing, she believed, providing for those within its circumference a “conception of the whole man”; and for the Southerner, she insists, “the general conception of

man is still, in the main, theological.” Even the Southerner who is not certain of the fact, she said, “is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God.” She adds the cautionary note that whatever can be said about “Southern belief” surely “can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety.” This type author will be concerned not with what we comprehend, but with that which is incomprehensible, “interested in possibility rather than in probability” and in “characters who are forced to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not.”

**Walker Percy**, a fellow believer, embraced much the same attitude, especially as regards the Gnostic heresy of he as well as his belief that Southerners are, more open to “possibilities” than urban Northerners. Nor surprisingly, when O’Connor spoke at Loyola University in New Orleans, she reportedly refused to meet any of her other audience except for Walker. **John Kennedy Toole**, a disciple of both O’Connor and Percy, certainly shared much the same “world view.” It is an interesting fact that Toole conceived of Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces* as a “medievalist” trapped in the twentieth century, while Jacques Barzun observes that for a reader to understand Flannery O’Connor, he must put himself in the frame of mind of a medieval Christian before **St. Thomas Aquinas** introduced intellect into theology. Long before O’Connor wrote her stories and novels, **Allen Tate** had written in a similar vein that in the South there existed “a convinced supernaturalism” which is “nearer to Aquinas than to Calvin, Wesley, or Knox.” Tate, himself, of course, ultimately converted to Roman Catholicism.

*Mystery. Spirits. Ghosts.* These are terms that seem alien to many modern non-Southern writers, but for those born and reared below the Mason-Dixon line, they often are a natural part of existence. When **Elizabeth Spencer** asserts, “I believe in ghosts,” she is voicing an attitude common among Southern authors—and here I speak not only of those symbolic ghosts that haunt Faulkner’s Quentin Compson, associated with guilt and the burden of the past, but whatever is “incomprehensible” to the human being. Though **Valerie Martin** was raised in New Orleans, she cannot exactly be classified a “Southern writer,” but she too can unabashedly write of a ghost and other inexplicable phenomena in her most recent novel, *Italian Fever*. (I speak here not of the writers who create that genre of fantasy fiction identified with the writings of **Stephen King**, or whom supernatural characters see—but devices or trappings designed to assure a salable work of fiction, but of those who truly believe.)

I said that the ghosts of whom I speak are not the symbolic ghosts that stalk Quentin Compson and his ilk, but they are, it cannot be denied, not only very real but also representative (if not symbolic) of something else, and that something else is the mystery of which O’Connor speaks. For O’Connor and many others; that “mystery” involves the eternal, the transcendent, in a word, God. This summer, the funeral service for Willie Morris was held in the Yazoo City, Mississippi, Methodist Church he



attended as a boy. It was in some respects a typical Southern Protestant service for the dead, with testimonials from such old friends as **William Styron**, **Mike Espy**, and **David Halberstam** and a poignant and amusing reminiscence from Willie's high school algebra teacher, a sermon and some of those hymns which are carved eternally into the consciousness of those of us who were reared in Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist churches in the Deep South: "Abide with Me" and "Amazing Grace."

I could not resist remarking to friends after the ceremony that all those East Coast and West Coast associates of Willie's who were in attendance--authors, editors, and film makers-- were getting an unaccustomed strong dose of Southern Calvinism, which might well do them good. (The only false note in the service, by the way, was that the local minister's two scriptures were, alas, read from the Revised Standard Version, while Willie Morris and most of the other Southern writers of his generation and before were reared on the sonorous Shakespearean language of the King James Bible, which helped shape their own distinctive styles. Elizabeth Spencer qualified her complaints about restrictions imposed upon her while she was growing up in the Presbyterian church by adding, "but the good side of it was, that I was brought up on the Bible"—and that Bible was, of course, the King James version.) Significantly, Rick Bragg pointed out in his New York Times article that Willie Morris's funeral had a very religious tone, "this being Mississippi, where people talk about God without feeling funny about it." Both Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, in commenting on that ubiquitous question as to why there are so many writers in the South, expressed the notion that belief in natural depravity, an inheritance of the Calvinist tradition, provides a better foundation for literature than a belief that man is perfectible. Both authors felt that the belief that the human race can be improved not only physically but also spiritually by mere human actions, by sociological and psychological studies or psychiatry, deflates the impetus for fiction, which becomes, as it was for **Emile Zola** and his followers, an "experimental" science aimed at amelioration of the human condition.

*Mystery. Spirits. Ghosts. God.* Well, many modern writers are simply not willing to be aligned with the belief in that which is beyond intellectual comprehension and consequently shun being categorized as "Southern," since the label comes with a certain baggage they find if not distasteful at least alien to their own views. This is not the case with Walker Percy, of course, but it certainly is with such a contemporary as **Richard Ford**; and it is one, but not the only' one, of the reasons why the label "Southern Writer" seems to be anathema to a group of those to whom it can certainly be applied in terms of geography if for no other reason.

A combination of the religious history of the South and the strong sense of tradition has produced in the

Southern character, at least in the character of those with a highly developed moral consciousness, an abiding sense of guilt: guilt that in some form or other was inherited from the ancestry of the old world but fed and exacerbated by the institution of slavery and its concomitant abuses and the mistreatment of the Indians of the region. Guilt, as we learn from the example of Hawthorne and Dostoevski among others, is not without its beneficial reward: indeed, Dostoevski argued that "Suffering is the origin of consciousness." Walker Percy, on one of those occasions when he was asked another one of those ubiquitous questions Southern writers always face--"Why has the South produced such an abundance of literature?"--replied, "Because we got beat." The answer is flippant, but it contains a considerable amount of truth, for, as **Alfred Kazin** wrote, the "extraordinary Southern literature of the twentieth century" was a result of the "sense of guilt not explicit but born out of a sense that life was more genuinely sorrowful and complex than the Old South or the New North could take in." Richard Ford, when asked the question about the abundance of writers from Mississippi, used to reply, "I'm not sure that there are," but his wife and muse Kristina recently told me that he has of late changed his answer. Now, he responds by saying that it is "Because Mississippians have so much to explain."

**W. Kenneth Holditch** is a Research Professor Emeritus from the University of New Orleans, where he taught for 32 years. He is the founding editor of **The Tennessee Williams Journal** and has published numerous short stories, poems, periodical articles, and critical essays on William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Walker Percy, Richard Ford, Anne Rice, and many others. Holditch was a founder of the Tennessee Williams Festival in New Orleans, Tennessee Williams Festival in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, and the **Words and Music Festival**. In 1974 he created a French Quarter literary tour and still conducts the walks through the Vieux Carre. Long term plans include a biography of John Kennedy Toole as well as a novel about growing up in the Mississippi. His full-length play on Tennessee Williams has been given two staged readings at Lincoln Center in New York and is still a work in progress. In 2003 his recorded narration was used as a voice-over in an off-Broadway staging of **Derelicts and Dreamers**, produced and directed by Erma Duricko. In 1997 Holditch was keynote speaker at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival in Cleveland, OH. He has lectured extensively in the U.S. and Europe on Tennessee Williams and other Southern authors and has participated in symposia at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Tennessee Williams Symposium at the University Alabama and the University of Minnesota. He is an annual speaker at the Hartford Stage for their Tennessee Williams Marathon. In 2001, he was awarded the Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities Lifetime Achievements Award.

## Christine Sneed: Smart Writing About Hollywood

**Christine Sneed**, a professor at Northwestern University, knows how to strike a balance between guilty pleasure and smart writing. Her latest novel, **Little Known Facts** (Bloomsbury Circus [UK], January 2013, Bloomsbury USA, February 2013), deals with a flawed but sympathetic aging movie star named Renn Ivins—think Harrison Ford or George Clooney. The novel follows Renn and those profoundly influenced by his fame—his ex-wives, his hot young girlfriend, and his grown children—as they make self-conscious, but not generally self-helpful, choices in love. It gracefully alternates perspectives, showing each character convincingly from different angles.

*Little Known Facts* is a follow up to Sneed's critically-acclaimed short story collection **Portraits of a Few of the People I've Made Cry**, winner of the Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction. *Little Known Facts* was named a Top Ten Debut Novel of 2013 by Booklist and Best New Book by a Local Author by Chicago Magazine.

Sneed received her MFA from Indiana University. She will participate as a faculty member at Words & Music, 2013. Check the program for appearances.

## New Fiction: Set in New Orleans Excerpt: Little Known Facts

*Meaningful Experience*  
By Christine Sneed

Sometimes I don't know what to say when I'm wrong. It doesn't happen often but when it does, I find myself no better equipped to handle it than the last time someone pointed out an error to me. The child was allergic to wheat, not milk. The prescription should have been a hundred milligrams, not eighty-five. I married the wrong man. I married the right man at the wrong time. I shouldn't have gotten married at all. One thing I do know, something I realized a year or so after the divorce, is that I should have gone back to my maiden name. I didn't do it at the time because I wanted the same name as my children. Perhaps I also wanted to inspire curiosity or jealousy, anything that might have required me to air my many virulent grievances, to offer my story as a cautionary tale.

For three years Renn, my ex-husband, kept trying to talk to me as if we were friends, to relieve his



Christine Sneed's second book, a novel titled *Little Known Facts*, was published by Bloomsbury USA in February 2013 and was recently named Chicago Magazine's Best New Book by a Local Author and one of Booklist's Top Ten Debut Novels of 2013

guilty conscience in order to prove to himself that I was doing fine, that Anna and Billy were fine too and one day we would all forgive him, but of course we wouldn't forget him. Renn and I are almost exactly the same age. His birthday is two weeks before mine; he was born in Evanston, Illinois, and I was born a few miles up the road in Lake Bluff. We met during our junior year at USC, and when a year and a half later I was accepted into UCLA's medical school and was about to finish that first caffeine-fueled semester with high marks, we decided to get married, which we did in downtown L.A. at the city hall, one of Renn's fraternity brothers and his girlfriend our witnesses. Renn was starting to get roles by then, ones that paid. He was twenty-two and very handsome and so naturally charming that if I had been a little smarter, I would have seen how impossible it would be to keep him from attracting the kind of friends, both male and female, with money and foreign cars and sailboats and in one case, a private plane, who would tell him not to limit himself, to experience all that he could of life because who knew? Tomorrow he might die. Or even later that same day. What did anyone really know of fate? *Carpe diem*, gather ye rosebuds, etc. etc.

I hated fate, I told him more than once, barely able to tolerate these new, fashionably blasé friends who couldn't stand me, the inconvenient wife, either – capable

medical student or no, I was heavy baggage. Fate was a con, a fool's game. There was only life, one day after the other. Then death, of course. Things happened, and no one could predict them. By then, I had seen hematomas in three-month old babies. I had seen two-year-olds dying of leukemia while their mothers almost managed to overdose on barbiturates in the parking lot outside the hospital. We had an earthquake or two, gas shortages, bad air, wildfires, whales beaching themselves and dying three hundred miles up the coast. We also eventually had two perfectly healthy children, miraculous creatures that I couldn't and sometimes still can't believe Renn and I created out of nothing but two fifteen-minute acts in a darkened bedroom, an act repeated millions of times over throughout the country on any given day. We were hardly original in anything we did but for a while it all felt so fraught and urgent and specific.

Today, December twelfth, would have been our thirtieth wedding anniversary. My daughter called this morning, sweetly apologetic but unable to resist saying that she had noticed this would-be milestone too. My son has not called, nor do I expect him to. He doesn't always remember my birthday, or his sister's, or his own, from what I can tell. Am I embarrassed or irritated with myself for continuing to observe, so to speak, the anniversary of my failed marriage? Not really. It is simply a fact of my life, like the myopia I have lived with since junior high, the knobby knees, the forgetful son.

"Dad's back in New Orleans," Anna informed me, even though I hadn't asked if she knew where he was. "He had to reshoot a couple of scenes for *Bourbon at Dusk*."

"I bet he's just thrilled about that. Have you seen him recently?"

"A few weeks ago," she said. "I thought I told you that he was in town for a couple of days before he went up to Seattle to visit the guy who's doing the soundtrack."

"Why didn't he hire a musician in New Orleans?"

"This guy is from Louisiana, I guess, but after Katrina, he moved to Seattle. I think he still has a place down there though." She paused. "When's the last time you talked to him?"

"I don't know. Over the summer, I suppose." I could hear strangers' voices in the background and wind hurling itself against Anna's phone. She was probably on break outside of the hospital where she and her classmates are doing clinicals.

"Have you talked to Billy this week?" she asked.

"I called him a couple of days ago but he hasn't called me back yet."

"He and Danielle broke up." She sounded embarrassed, as if she had something to do with it. Since childhood, she has had the unfortunate tendency of taking deeply to heart other people's mistakes or bad luck, but I suppose it is also this impulse that influenced her decision to become a doctor.

"Oh no. Why? Was it his decision or hers?"

"Hers. He's such a bonehead."

I was very disappointed to hear this. From the beginning, I liked Danielle; she has always seemed honest and kind and not the type of person who wanted Billy only because of his money or his connection to his father's celebrity. At 26, my son is still rudderless and he worries me much more than his sister does. Anna is one semester away from graduating with her MD, and I couldn't be more proud of her if she had won the Boston marathon or the Nobel Prize. Her decision to go into family medicine rather than specialize in pediatrics or obstetrics or something a little more glamorous than country doctorhood was a little surprising, but I'm flattered that she has chosen the same profession as mine. Thank God, in any case, that she didn't choose her father's. For a while, I thought for sure that she or Billy would.

"What happened?" I asked, ninety percent certain that it was my son's fault.

She hesitated. "I think he has a crush on the lead actress in Dad's movie. This girl named Elise Connor. You probably know who she is. Danielle found out and what a surprise, she was upset and broke up with him. He had just asked her to move in with him too."

I know who Elise Connor is. Of course I do. In more than one flimsy, flashy magazine that I shouldn't notice, let alone pick up, I have seen her name linked with my ex-husband's. "Mrs. Ivins III" one columnist has dared to call her. "I see stars in these stars' eyes whenever they look at each other," the so-called journalist crowed. "Are those wedding bells I hear in the distance?"

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**Christine Sneed's story collection *Portraits of a Few of the People I've Made Cry* won the 2009 AWP Grace Paley Prize in Short Fiction and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for first fiction. *Portraits* was also awarded Ploughshares' 2011 John C. Zacharis Prize for a first book and was the Chicago Writers Association's book of the year in the traditionally published fiction category. Her second book, a novel titled **Little Known Facts**, was published by Bloomsbury USA in February 2013 and was recently named Chicago Magazine's Best New Book by a Local Author and one of Booklist's Top Ten Debut Novels of 2013. Her short stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *New England Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and other journals. She was also chosen for the Chicago Public Library Foundation's 2013 Twenty-First Century Award, honoring significant recent achievement by a Chicago-area writer. She teaches for Northwestern University's graduate writing program and lives in Evanston.**



# Pan American Connections



*Exiled Shadows, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

## Poet Melinda Palacio offers two poems in tribute to Oscar Hijuelos

### Maria Cristina For Oscar Hijuelos By Melinda Palacio

Music flows through the streets of Havana.  
Sometimes the whisper is a trova beat,  
humming an old tune by Nico Saquito,  
*Maria Cristina me quiere gobernar.*

My grandmother told me to watch out for Cubans.  
She knew I would lose myself in Cuba's slippery waters,  
slow my days in Trinidad's yellow and turquoise  
buildings,  
sip anything with dark rum, coconut, or mint.

Maybe, she doesn't remember she called me  
Maria Cristina during my childhood days.

She refused to say the name her daughter gave me.  
Melinda, pronounced by someone who only speaks  
Spanish  
sounds like Maleta, the word for suitcase.  
Who cares about a four-year old's treasures?

Maleta, I answered when a woman at the doctor's office  
asked my name. !Pero Que!  
How can that be, a little girl named suitcase,  
her faced contorted in questioning disgust.

Shelve that name, Melinda,  
too harsh for a little girl.  
Call her Maria Cristina.

Maria Cristina me quiere gobernar.  
No, no, no, no Maria Cristina  
que No Que No Que No, ¿ay, porque?  
Maria Cristina me quiere gobernar.

## How Fire Is A Story, Waiting

My grandmother caught the flame in her thick hands.  
Curled fingers made nimble by kaleidoscope embers.  
Fire burns hot and cold if you know where to touch it, she  
said.

i watched the red glow spit and wiggle as it  
snaked down the thin timber, a striptease,  
born out of the festive sound of a half-filled matchbox.

through orange windows framed by obsidian eyes, i saw



the child she once was. A  
little girl who raised herself  
because her mother had a  
coughing disease. blood on  
her mother's handkerchief  
didn't stop her from  
dreaming.

Maria Victoria was going to  
be a singer with her deep,  
cinnamon stick voice.

she watched novelas in the  
kitchen while waiting for

dough to rise.  
her body, heavy with worry for two families and three  
lifetimes. she tucked Mariachi dreams under her girdle.  
lullabies escaped on mornings  
warmed by her song falling into gas burners turned on  
high.

the flame on a stove was never the same. it had a bad  
hangover, didn't remember the many matches lit when its  
starter broke down.

My grandmother rolled paper into a funnel,  
stole fire from the pilot to light the stubborn burner on  
the right. Crimson burned blue on the white paper, its  
folded edges  
curled black like a lace ruffle on a skirt.

the finicky flame can't comment on its magic.  
the thousands of tortillas and pancakes cooked over the  
years.  
how i burned myself roasting a hot dog campfire style.  
how a melted pencil smudged under my sister's eyelid  
makes her beautiful.

My grandmother noticed the time, almost noon.  
she needed to make three dozen tortillas to feed her  
family of thirteen. the show over,  
she blew the match into a swirl of gray squiggles,  
snuffed before it had a chance to burn hot on her finger.  
Funny, how fire is a story, waiting.

from *How Fire Is a Story, Waiting*

**Melinda Palacio** is the author of the novel, **Ocotillo Dreams** (ASU Bilingual Press 2011), for which she received the Mariposa Award for Best First Book at the 2012 International Latino Book Awards and a 2012 PEN Oakland-Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature. Her first full-length poetry collection, **How Fire Is a Story, Waiting**, (Tia Chucha Press 2012) was a finalist for the 2013 Binghamton University Milt Kessler Award, the 2013 Patterson Prize, and received First Prize in Poetry at the 2013 International Latino Book Awards at the Instituto Cervantes in Manhattan. [www.melindapalacio.com](http://www.melindapalacio.com).

## **Cuba My Beloved: Revolution, Exodus, Success in America: The Mambo Kings, Exiles Who Adapted**

**By Rosemary James**

Recently, various news organizations produced and aired or printed long background pieces for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 13, 1963, highlighting the tumultuous events of the 1960s. CNN, for instance, announced that it is producing a long documentary series on the 60s to air in the spring of 2014. They made the announcement with a two-hour special on the events surrounding the assassination, which aired a number of times in advance of the anniversary, a prelude to the series to come.

No remembrance of the Kennedy years would be complete, of course, without discussion of the thorn in the side of America's foreign relations the Caribbean nation of Cuba has been, especially during the 60s. And the Cuban-American community has once again had the flame of their emotions stoked, as they recall in vivid detail how they got here and why they have had no choice but to remain.

In 1959, after a long series of revolutionary movements and guerilla warfare, **Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz** took control of Cuba by force and began consolidating his power for a dictatorial reign lasting more than five decades.

When Castro first became a force to be reckoned with as a revolutionary leader, he preached a doctrine that sounded pretty good to many Cubans: liberty, social justice, educational opportunities for the masses. He emphasized his commitment to democracy and social reform, and he promised to hold free elections—all the while denying he was a communist. A powerful speaker and a charismatic leader, Castro began exercising an almost mystical hold over the Cuban masses.

Keen observers soon began to detect a change in content of his speeches, however. As previous revolutionaries had done in taking control of countries which eventually became part of the communist empire dictated by the Soviet Union, he began lecturing the Cubans on morality and public virtue. The free elections never came and, soon, Castro illegally confiscated wealth, he ruled had been “illegally” acquired by Batista's followers, anyone who had opposed the Castro takeover. He greatly reduced rents, and passed a law that confiscated inherited property—all moves hinting at Castro's growing enchantment with communism. During 1959 and 1960, Castro made radical changes in Cuba, including nationalizing industry, collectivizing agriculture, and seizing American-owned businesses and

farms. By the end of 1959 many military leaders were gone and had been replaced by communist radicals. Newspapers critical of these new leaders were quickly silenced. And many Cuban families with means to do so began quietly arranging to leave, with family members obtaining unobtrusive visas for travel to such places as Mexico and Canada.

This internal trend toward a communist agenda appeared in foreign policy too. Castro alienated the United States, accusing the American Government of taking actions to destroy his revolution. On January 3, 1961, then U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower (1890–1969) broke relations with Cuba. Afterwards, Cuba established relations with other communist countries, mainly the very powerful Soviet Union.

Cuba was the source of John F. Kennedy's greatest success of the Cold War.

In 1962, Cuba became the center of world's attention when the United States discovered the construction sites of Soviet nuclear missiles within Cuba. The struggle that ensued between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the Cuban Missile Crisis, brought the world to the very brink of nuclear war, the closest the world has yet come to a nuclear conflagration. All the world's eyes were on Kennedy and he showed his courage in standing down Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

A year earlier, however, Cuba was the source of Kennedy's greatest failure of foreign policy. The United States wanted Castro out of power, wary of his relationship with Khrushchev. Before his inauguration, President Kennedy was briefed on a plan by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) developed during the Eisenhower administration to train Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. The plan anticipated Cuban people and elements of the Cuban military would support the invasion. The ultimate goal was the overthrow of Castro and the establishment of a non-communist government friendly to the United States. The CIA set up training camps in Guatemala and other locations including New Orleans, and by November the operation had trained a small army for an assault landing and guerilla warfare. José Miró Cardona led the anti-Castro Cuban exiles in the United States. A one-time member of Castro's government, forced out, he was the head of the Cuban Revolutionary Council, an exile committee. Cardona was poised to take over the provisional presidency of Cuba if the invasion succeeded.

Shortly after his inauguration, President Kennedy authorized the invasion plan. But he was determined to disguise U.S. support. The landing point at the Bay of Pigs was part of the deception. The site was a remote swampy area on the southern coast of Cuba, where a night landing might bring a force ashore against little resistance and help to hide any U.S. involvement. Unfortunately, the landing site also left the invading force far from any refuge if things went wrong. And they went badly wrong.

In spite of efforts to keep the operation a secret, it became common knowledge among Cuban exiles in





**President Kennedy** inherited the CIA's plan to send Cuban exiles to liberate the Cuba. The CIA and the military were counting on the President to approve direct U.S. support once the invasion was under way. Kennedy, on the other hand, continually tried to limit US involvement. The end result was the annihilation of the invasion force. Shown above are a group of the captured U.S.-backed Cuban exiles, known as Brigade 2506, are lined up by Fidel Castro's soldiers at Bahía de Cochinos (**Bay of Pigs**), Cuba, following the unsuccessful invasion of the island in April 1961. Photo: Getty Images. Below, from the Kennedy Museum in Boston, the President with Cuban leaders in 1992 at the Orange Bowl, where he pledged to free the prisoners and free Cuba. He never had a chance to keep his promise. Less than a year later he was assassinated.

Miami and elsewhere. Through Cuban intelligence, Castro learned of the guerilla training camps and so the invasion lost the element of surprise.

On April 17, the Cuban-exile invasion force, known as Brigade 2506, landed at beaches along the Bay of Pigs and immediately came under heavy fire. Cuban planes strafed the invaders, sank two escort ships, and destroyed half of the exile's air support. Bad weather hampered the ground force, which had to work with soggy equipment and insufficient ammunition.

Part of the U. S. subterfuge had been to take U. S. World War II B-26 bombers for use in the invasion and paint them to look like Cuban air force planes. The bombers missed many of their targets and left most of Castro's air force intact.

The international media reported events as they unfolded. And, as news broke of the attack, photos of the repainted U.S. planes became public and revealed American support for the invasion. At that point, President Kennedy cancelled a promised second air strike and, long story short, the invasion failed miserably.

The Cuban exiles lost their chance to reclaim Cuba and Kennedy, whose failure to keep his promises to the Brigade, lost stature in the eyes of the world, especially among enemies of the United States.

His back down in this case encouraged others, notably the Soviets, to believe he also would back down in the future. Many historians and political analysts are convinced that his failure to fully support the invasion caused Khrushchev to become more aggressive in his nuclear arming of Cuba and suggest that there may never have been a nuclear crisis if the Bay of Pigs invasion had succeeded.

The failure resulted in the capture of most of the invaders, many of whom were publicly interrogated and



released; others of whom were imprisoned and not released until years later.

At this point, Cubans in America, losing hope of an early return home began in earnest becoming Cuban-Americans.

As the leader of the only communist country in the Western Hemisphere, Castro has been the focus of ongoing international controversy. Vehement protests against the Castro regime have continued undiminished within the Cuban-American community, created by the thousands upon thousands of Cubans who left the country in several waves after the fall of the government of military dictator Fulgencio Batista in 1959. The biggest exodus occurred with the Mariel Boat Lift of 1980 when, Castro, desiring to minimize opposition, allowed exiled Cubans to sail into Cuba and rescue their relatives and friends who wanted to leave. Castro took advantage of the situation to stuff the boats with political prisoners and others he considered undesirable and some 125,000 Cubans landed in Miami in that incident alone.

A whole new generation has been born and come of age since then, swelling the ranks of those of Cuban heritage living in the United States.

The Faulkner Society has regularly presented programming and featured articles in our literary journal, *The Double Dealer*, about Cuban-Americans and others of Hispanic heritage. In 2011, however, in recognition of the growing importance of the Hispanic heritage community in New Orleans and the rest of the country, we created a new, permanent part of our governance, **The Pan American Connections Committee** with a mission to bring to American audiences the work of important Latin American and Spanish writers.

This year we are featuring two Cuban-American writers, whose work was brought to our attention by **Raúl Fonte**, a founding member of the committee. They are bestselling author **Humberto Fontova** and **George Fowler**, an attorney whose uncle was a member of the Brigade and who is instrumental in the effort to free Cuba from the Castro dictatorship.

The three men are typical of the many Cubans who left their country in the wake of the takeover of their country by Fidel Castro. They hope that one day Cuba will once again will be free. Fontova and Fowler are featured in articles following.

First, however, we converse with Fonte, a principal in the New Orleans Hispanic Heritage Foundation, a cultural and educational organization founded in 1989, which “organizes and provides practical means of cultivating and promoting Hispanic culture—particularly, the Hispanic heritage of New Orleans and Louisiana. The organization supports the arts and cultural endeavors as they relate to Hispanic themes and culture and provides scholarships to deserving Hispanic students.”

Cuban-Americans take their heritage seriously, not only the Cuban side of it but the Cuban-American side of it. While they are generally supportive of cultural organizations in their communities, they are especially

supportive of the achievements of their own.

Quite a few years ago, for instance, Fonte, Fowler, and Fontova, our triumvirate for this issue of *The Double Dealer*, were among those instrumental in forming a social club that meets regularly for lunch in various well-known New Orleans watering holes. The club was named in honor of the late Oscar Hijuelos, first Cuban-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for his novel of the Cuban-American experience, **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**.

The name of their social club, **The Mambo Kings!**

Fonte, the son of Raúl Valdés-Fonte and Elsa González, came to New Orleans some 50 years ago as a young man, just 17 years old. Today, he is a successful patent attorney and professional engineer.

He is typical, not only in his hopes for a free Cuba, but in that he and his family lost a lot, when they fled, worked hard to re-establish themselves, both as a family which separated at first in order to get out of the country safely and as part of their new community in the United States.

The Cuban émigrés—unlike some other ethnic groups who have come to America under duress—have for the most part been successful in educating themselves and their children and climbing corporate and professional ladders to situate themselves securely. As a group, Cubans in America have more quickly established themselves in position of security than most immigrant groups, largely because they have not forgotten who they are and have extended helping hands generously as new Cubans have arrived in the States. They take care of their own.

Raúl and his wife Helen Flammer, have just finished re-establishing themselves under duress once again. When Katrina came roaring out of the Gulf of Mexico in 2005, the Fontes had just finished building a new home on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. Like countless others, they lost everything.

Raúl has never been one to concede failure, however, and after eight years he and Helen are today, living comfortably in the Garden District of New Orleans. The recent news events, of course, have turned his attention back to Cuba and leaving it.

## A Conversation with Raúl Fonte

**Q.** Why did your parents decide to leave Cuba? Did your parents fear for their lives?

**A.** They left for reasons of political and social intolerance and a desire to join my sister and me. We had escaped first. They feared for their lives when it became known (through the local neighborhood watchdog committee) that they wanted to leave the country.

**Q.** What was your family's life like in Cuba?

**A.** Middle class with conventional middle class hopes and aspirations.

**Q.** How did you leave Cuba?

**A.** I was able to obtain a visa to visit Canada and left for Montreal alone; when the plane landed in Miami, I stayed there instead of boarding the Montreal flight and my parents joined me there when they were able to leave.

**Q.** How and when did your family end up in New Orleans?

**A.** We had some relatives and friends here in the early 60s and I was able to enroll at Louisiana State University. My sister, who had gone to Rochester, NY, to finish high school, wanted to come to New Orleans and so did my parents who were in Miami.

**Q.** Describe what it was like for your family to be uprooted and resettled.

**A.** It was a humbling and disconcerting experience to be uprooted. As for resettling, we did not think back then that we would have to resettle; we intended to go back to Cuba; our goals and hopes were to return. A few years went by before we came to realize that we were here for good.

**Q.** Describe growing up in New Orleans as a Cuban immigrant.

**A.** As I said, we thought of ourselves as émigrés who were here temporarily and would soon return to a free Cuba. Personally, I liked New Orleans a lot more than I liked Baton Rouge although I spent a substantial amount of time at LSU in Baton Rouge during those first few years. In New Orleans we owned and operated a dry cleaners, then two, in the French Quarter, and my sister and I would drive this old Studebaker picking up and delivering laundry all over town, hence we got to know most of the local neighborhoods and people, not to mention the French Quarter and its many unique characters ("Ruthie the Duck Lady" comes to mind among others). New Orleans also always reminds me of my hometown, Cienfuegos, on the southern coast of Cuba which, incidentally, was founded by French immigrants from New Orleans when Louisiana was purchased by the U.S. from France.

**Q.** Was growing up here more difficult than it might have been in Miami?

**A.** I suppose that we will never know the answer to that. My guess is that I would have adapted to Miami just like I did to New Orleans. I have always thought that I am fairly good at adapting to circumstances and making the best out of bad situations. I did it as a young man in the 1960s when I left Cuba, and again as an older man when my wife and I completely lost our brand new home and everything that was in it in Pass Christian during Hurricane Katrina.



**Q.** How were you educated?

**A.** I attended elementary and high school at De la Salle in Havana and was ready to enter college when we decided to leave Cuba. I was able to enroll at LSU in Baton Rouge. Later, I took my law degree at Loyola University in New Orleans.

**Q.** What made you decide to become an engineer and lawyer?

**A.** I liked both. I had a solid science background from De la Salle high school in Havana and the Chemical Engineering faculty at LSU was (and still is) one of the best around. Keep in mind that my English was far from good during those first few years. With an engineering degree it was relatively easy for me to get several job offers, which I very much needed back then. Later on, I went to law school at night while working full time as an engineer. By then I had begun to be interested in patents and trademarks and could see the possibility of becoming a patent attorney and eventually, I did, practicing intellectual property law for more than 35 years.

**Q.** Describe the Mambo Kings.

**A.** We are New Orleans professional men who, first and foremost, like to eat and drink at Galatoire's and Antoine's. We engage in camaraderie and have fun in a good New Orleans atmosphere, where we speak Spanish and English, smoke a cigar every now and then and talk about Cuba more often than not. We are all Cubans except for two or three Anglos who we have named "honorary Cubans." We usually wear specially designed Mambo King ties to our lunches. As you know, we named ourselves in honor of Oscar Hijuelos and his wonderful achievements as a Pulitzer Prize writer. We were looking



forward to the fact that he was to have been a presenter at *Words & Music* again this year, along with his wife **Lori Marie Carlson**, who has a new novel, **A Stitch in Air**, just out. He was to have been a guest for lunch with the **Mambo Kings** during his visit. We were deeply saddened to learn of his death from a heart attack in October. We will never forget him and the way his talents and achievements cast the Cuban-American community in the spotlight so favorably.

**Q.** Do you have children?

**A.** Yes. I have one daughter, Raquel, who lives in Vancouver, Canada, with her husband Aaron Werth and their son, Max.

**Q.** Will you want to take them to Cuba?

**A.** Yes, absolutely? They need to understand their heritage and to see for themselves what happened.

**Q.** Have you been back to Cuba?

**A.** Yes, recently, 50 years after I left. As you are aware there has been some relaxation of the restriction on travel to Cuba.

**Q.** How did you find it?

**A.** A very different society, reminiscent of the totalitarian socialist regimes of East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Rumania of the 1960s and 1970s. The total social and economic failure of the first 40 years of imposed socialism has forced the dictators to resort to the previously- ostracized tourism industry in order to generate revenues. They seem to resent this and have imposed tight checks and controls over residents who come into contact with non-residents in an effort to avoid or minimize the "pernicious capitalist influences" that tourists may bring to bear.

**Q.** Will you go again?

**A.** I certainly hope so, to a free and non-socialist Cuba.

## Literary Wisdom:



*It's true that immigrant novels have to do with people going from one country to another, but there isn't a single novel that doesn't travel from one place to another, emotionally or locally.*

—**Oscar Hijuelos**, author, first Hispanic writer to win Pulitzer Prize for Fiction

## Cuba, My Beloved Writing from the Heart About Political Issues

Literature is instigated by inspiration from many avenues—the author's family history, a special place, memories of childhood, for instance, and also political issues. Regardless of the inspiration activating the mind of the author, literature is always a matter of heart and soul.

My father volunteered for the Navy immediately following Pearl Harbor. He was rejected for active service because of poor eyesight, but accepted for civilian duty and because of his experience and fluency in Spanish was sent immediately to Panama to operate elements of the commissary system in the Canal Zone for the fleet. Shortly after, when I was five, my mother and my baby brother, still an infant, left for Miami by train, then were taken by seaplane to Cuba and then on to Colon, Panama by ship. Our stay in Havana was short, only a couple of days, but my memories of that beautiful city have never left me, reinforced by a second visit when our family returned to the States.

In my mind, I can still see the waves crashing against the seawall of the Malecón, one of the great boulevards of the Western Hemisphere, and the gaiety produced by the simple pleasures of the paseo, families strolling together, sweethearts arm in arm, men fishing from the seawall. It makes me happy to remember those days. I cannot even begin to imagine the deep grief of Cubans forced to give it up.

One of my good friends in my days as a political journalist was Alberto Fowler, who was Director of Cultural Affairs for the City New Orleans.

I remember during social occasions catching a glimpse of the usually charming and witty Alberto deep in thought with what in soldiers has been described as the thousand-yard-stare, remembering.

Alberto was among those who fought at the Bay of Pigs and was imprisoned for years. It was this Bay of Pigs freedom fighter coping with what we now call post traumatic stress that I came to know. While he could most assuredly lay on the charm engagingly in his role as Cultural Ambassador, it was obvious that he was deeply injured in his heart and soul not only by his experiences as a prisoner in Cuba but by the deep disappointment of the failure of the mission, when promised U.S. military support failed to materialize, and the loss of hope for a quick end to the dictatorship.

A friend of mine from Colombia, Hortensia Calvo, Director of Tulane's Latin American Library, told me recently that the worst part of it for Cuban-Americans is that they can't go back, unlike other Latin Americans living here, who can go back to their countries if and when they so desire.

Cubans can only go back in their hearts and minds. And that keeps their passion for freeing Cuba alive.

It is this passion that has drawn me over and over again to books about Cuba and by Cuban authors. Two of my favorite authors are **Mayra Montera**, displaced from Cuba to Puerto Rico (See feature in the 2012 edition of *The Double Dealer*), and Cuban-American author **Cristina Garcia**.



*Roy Rogers in this photo is really George Fowler with his family on an outing in Cuba before Castro took power.*

The late Cuban-American Pulitzer Prize winner **Oscar Hijuelos** was an early judge in the Faulkner Society's international literary competition, the **William Faulkner-Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**.

He was a faculty presenter for **Words & Music** on several occasions and in the

process became not only someone I greatly admired but a friend. His stories came from the deeply felt emotions of a man attempting to reconstruct the lives of Cubans in Cuba in the pre-Castro Cuba he had never known as a means of figuring out his own identity. I loved all of his books. He won the Pulitzer Prize for **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**, of course. And two of our presenters for the **Pan American Connections** segment of **Words & Music, 2013**, will introduce members of a New Orleans luncheon club formed by Hijuelos admirers, **The Mambo Kings**, who will be introduced at a **Literature & Lunch** session by Raúl Fonte of the New Orleans Hispanic Heritage Foundation, a successful engineer and patent attorney, and, of course, a member of the Mambo Kings.

One of the **Mambo Kings** presented here is **George Fowler**, an internationally known and respected attorney, who is also among the world's leading activists on behalf of a free Cuba, contributing both free legal advice and financial resources to the cause. Recently, this activist has turned to writing to help bolster the cause and he is author of the new book, **My Cuba Libre: Bringing Fidel Castro to Justice**. The other is **Humberto Fontova**, whose career has progressed the opposite way. He started out as a writer, publishing stories and books about outdoor sports. Along the way he became an activist on behalf of the move to indict Fidel Castro for war crimes and free Cuba and the topics of his carefully researched books have gone



*George Fowler, like his fellow Mambo King, Humberto Fontova, is a dedicated outdoor sportsman, who especially loves fishing expeditions.*

from ducks to denouncement of Castro. His latest book is **The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro.**

Both books, although crammed with well-researched history and details of what

has happened in Cuba since the takeover of Castro, are easy reads because they carry you through their stories on tsunamis of emotion.

If you have any doubts about the burning passion of Cuban-Americans to free Cuba, or that these authors are writing from the heart and soul, you won't have after you read their books

—*Rosemary James*

## **Pan American Connections: George Fowler**

**George Fowler**, author of the new book **My Cuba Libre: Bringing Fidel Castro to Justice**, is today a successful litigator and founding partner of one of leading maritime, energy, and international law firms in the world.

He was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1950.

His memories of the carefree times before Castro and the contrasting memories of the frightening period when Castro was taking power and families like his were forced to flee, haunted him as a young man.

And he has become one of the world's leading activists on behalf of a free Cuba, lending his considerable legal talents and financial resources to the cause.

The Fowlers are descendants of the British Consul to Cuba who arrived in Cuba early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Fowler's grandfather, also named George Fowler, was a successful sugar planter in Cuba who married a New Orleans native, Lise Perrilliat.

(Historically, there were strong connections between New Orleans families and Cuban families. Jim Amoss, for instance, Editor of the *Times-Picayune*, is the grandson of W. J. Amoss, Sr., a prominent New Orleans businessman active in Cuba before Castro came to power, who returned to New Orleans then to become Director of the Port of New Orleans.)

It was natural for Fowler and his family to come to

New Orleans, after fleeing Cuba and, today, he and his wife, children, and grandchildren reside in New Orleans.

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro took dictatorial control of Cuba and has ruled with an iron fist for more than half a century. Mr. Fowler became a Cuban refugee in the United States at age nine. His father died shortly after arriving here and, because of the family's dire financial circumstances, he began to work at that age and by the time he became an attorney, he had worked in 36 different low-paying jobs. In 1975, he graduated from Tulane Law School, joined a 200-year-old law firm and 25 years ago opened what is now one of the leading maritime, energy, and international law firms in the world: Fowler-Rodriguez. The firm today is multi-national with offices in many cities.

Mr. Fowler is an active litigator, having come up against some of the top legal names in the country. He has practiced not only in the courts of the United States, but worked on cases worldwide.

Although Mr. Fowler has embraced American values and reaped opportunities possible only in America, he has never forgotten his homeland. Inspired by the bravery of his uncle, Alberto Fowler, who first fought with Castro's forces against Fulgencio Batista, Cuba's unpopular president before Castro, then afterwards against Castro in the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion, Mr. Fowler vowed to do whatever he could to oust the dictator and obtain freedom for Cuba. He denounced Castro in every form he could, starting at the age of 18, when he met his wife, Cristina, in college.

In 1989, he joined the Cuban American National Foundation, the largest and most powerful anti-Castro organization. He soon was appointed its General Counsel, a position he holds today. Using his legal background, he has tried to have Castro brought to justice for his crimes against humanity. He presented the case before the U.S. Congress seeking the indictment of Castro for the murders of the Brothers to the Rescue pilots, mercilessly shot down by Castro's MIGs within ten miles of the United States. He also sought to have Castro indicted in other countries, including Spain, where he filed a criminal complaint alleging 17,000 political assassinations, torture, imprisonment and rapes by the Castro government. Fowler has sought to have Fidel Castro arrested and brought to justice. He also has brought legal actions and claims against those who have defamed the Foundation in an effort to weaken its struggle against Castro's government. He assisted as counsel in the Elian Gonzalez case, during which he denounced Castro's crimes in the world media.

For more than 40 years, George Fowler has lived in New Orleans, where he and his firm are committed to a variety of worthy causes, including support for the Latin American community, the fight against corruption in state and local government, civil and human rights, and promoting international trade with Latin America.

The Preface to **My Cuba Libre**, presented here with permission of the author, will give you a clear idea of the depth of feeling among Cuban-Americans and possibly inspire you to take up the cause with them.



## My Cuba Libre Preface

By George Fowler

Fidel is still alive.

The Cuban sun on my face would wake me. I would open my eyes, hear the birds, and smell the sweet fragrance of the *mariposas*. I'd jump out of bed and dress up like Roy Rogers, who I thought was a Cuban. I also thought Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris of the New York Yankees were Cuban. They all spoke Spanish on Cuban TV. My Cuba was paradise. But one morning, sometime before dawn, I was awakened by the sound of gunshots. As my mother had taught me, I dropped to the floor. Our lives were about to change dramatically. It was January 1, 1959, and I was only nine years old.

Later in the day, I heard chanting and shouting—but there was no cheering coming from my home. “Fowler” might not seem like a Cuban name, but our roots in Cuba go back to the 19th Century; we are as Cuban as they come. My parents owned a modest, fairly modern house right on the edge of El Laguito, Havana, in the Country Club neighborhood. We lived in the shadow of my great-grandfather's home, Villa Viejo: a five-story mansion with gardeners and a staff of 17. That day, there was no cheering coming from Villa Viejo either.

Fidel Castro slowly worked his way toward Havana, making sure he had control of the city before he moved in ten days later. His control soon extended over the whole island. Since then, he has worked to maintain his power above all else. Castro betrayed Cuba: destroying a nation, dividing a people, and causing untold suffering. My family was just one of thousands that the dictator uprooted and plundered.

This book is about the horrors of Castro's Cuba and how his five-decade-old dictatorship savaged thousands of families, including my own.

Our lives in danger, we fled to the United States and settled in Fort Lauderdale, FL. All of my family's assets were wiped out; two years later, my father chose to end his life. My mother moved us to San Juan, Puerto Rico, where I worked hard as a construction laborer. I moved to New Orleans to attend college, and the United States became my adopted homeland once more. Like many Cuban exiles, I survived and eventually thrived in America. Intelligent, enterprising, and Capitalists at heart, Cubans are one of the most successful immigrant

groups in the United States. If you want to see what the Cubans can do in a free economy, visit Miami.

Cuban Americans like me are proud defenders of this, the greatest nation on earth. I thank God for this country and its generous people and delight that my children and grandchildren have the privilege to call themselves Americans.

While Cuban exiles came to prosper in America, those who stayed behind faced poverty, despair, and brutal authoritarian regime. Castro filled his prisons with anyone who dared to oppose or question him, and countless brave Cubans were unjustly tortured or killed. Government neglect and mismanagement led to widespread hunger and disease, and those who tried to escape were murdered or jailed. The U.S. made only one half-hearted attempt to dethrone Castro: the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. President Kennedy

abandoned the courageous Cuban volunteer fighters of Brigade 2506 and left them to face Castro's army alone. Since then, the international community has made no serious attempt to free Cuba, and the people continue to suffer.

After I graduated from LSU, I studied at Tulane Law School and entered the field of maritime law and worked under some of the best lawyers in the world. Eventually, I became successful enough to start my own firm. But as much as I grew to love America, I could never forget my homeland. I heard many horrible stories of the regime's cruelty, excess, and neglect. Like many other exiles, I dreamed of ways to remove Castro from power and bring freedom to my people. But rather than resort to violence, I struggled through legal means to bring him to

account for his crimes. I am a lawyer to the bone and trust in the rule of law.

In the early 1990s, I had the good fortune of meeting a truly remarkable man: Jorge Mas Canosa, the founder of the Cuban American National Foundation (“the Foundation”). The Foundation's mission is to bring democracy to Cuba through nonviolent means, while advocating for Cuban exiles in the U.S. and abroad. Mas Canosa asked if I could provide the foundation with legal advice, and soon I agreed to serve pro bono as General Counsel. Since then, I have made numerous legal efforts on the behalf of the Cuban people, many of which I will describe in this book. We battled to keep Elian Gonzalez in the United States; lobbied for Cuban interests in Washington, D.C.; and fought legal skirmishes with slanderers and publications like *The New York Times*.

Most importantly, we worked incessantly to bring Fidel Castro to trial for his crimes against humanity. I will



George Fowler, author of *My Cuba Libre*

“Whenever our efforts seemed to garner interest, Castro’s agents would send me little messages to let me know that they were paying attention. I’d get anonymous threatening phone calls or mysterious postcards in the mail. One postcard had a New Orleans stamp to let me know they were watching me in my own city. The postcard said, “*Jorgito, why don’t you come visit us in Cuba?*” It was signed, “Fidel.”

describe many of his crimes in this book. While Fidel has evaded indictment so far, we will not stop until he faces justice. We prepared a massive criminal complaint—in Spain it’s called a *Querrela*—for the *Audencia Nacional*, the notorious Spanish international court. We gathered testimony and affidavits from hundreds of Cubans whose family members were tortured or killed by Castro—terrible stories that needed to be told. We also battled to have Castro indicted in the United States after his fighter planes shot down two defenseless planes, killing all aboard, in the Brothers to the Rescue shoot-down. The lawsuits brought much-needed attention to our cause—and kept Castro on his toes. But that’s all it did. Castro has not been brought to justice. He must be indicted.

Whenever our efforts seemed to garner interest, Castro’s agents would send me little messages to let me know that they were paying attention. I’d get anonymous threatening phone calls or mysterious postcards in the mail. One postcard had a New Orleans stamp to let me know they were watching me in my own city. The postcard said, “*Jorgito, why don’t you come visit us in Cuba?*” It was signed, “Fidel.” I gave it to the FBI.

In 1999, I went before the U.S. congress to present a case for Castro’s criminal indictment for murder. Two weeks later, I learned that Castro had talked about me in a public speech and had ranted on for hours. I was glad to hear that he had mentioned me; it meant that our efforts had gotten to him. A defector from his security team once told me that Castro was deeply afraid of being indicted and extradited like Chile’s General Pinochet. Castro had given the defector instructions to prevent his arrest by any means, including preventative murder.

In that speech, Castro attacked the Cuban American National Foundation leadership, including Jorge Mas Canosa and his son, Jorge Mas Santos. Castro went on to condemn Roberto Martin Perez, a former Foundation Director who was imprisoned and tortured in Cuba for 27 years. Castro also defamed Francisco “Pepe” Jose Hernandez, co-founder and president of the foundation. Pepe is a staunch ally, and I’m proud of all the work we do together against the dictator. The Foundation has associated me with the true Cuban patriots and—

after 30 years of working together—good friends.

There are many others whose hard work, courage, and sacrifice must be acknowledged.

This book is dedicated to all those who were killed, imprisoned, tortured or displaced by Fidel Castro, many of whom I write about in this book.

In particular, I want to remember my uncle “Tio” Alberto Fowler who taught me to love that beautiful piece of land in the Caribbean where I was born. He so loved Cuba that he first fought with Castro expecting that he was going to oust the dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and replace him with a democratically elected government. When he realized that Castro had betrayed Cuba, he joined the valiant Bay of Pig invaders, who fought until they ran out of ammunition, was captured, imprisoned and tortured. *U.S. News and World Report* reported that Alberto and 37 of the invaders held off thousands of Castro’s men defending a strategically located rotunda through the night of April 18, 1961.

I also want to acknowledge my mother-in-law, Mercedes Jenkins, who with her husband imprisoned, was forced to send her four little girls away from their beautiful home in Varadero Beach to prevent them from being sent to communist Russia. With unflinching dignity, she endured countless humiliations in order to help her imprisoned husband.

I bend my knee to the courageous American Commander, William Morgan, who when facing Castros’ firing squad refused to bend a knee and when one knee was shot, refused to bend the other one and then they shot that knee. Then the rats slaughtered him. I salute Oswaldo Paya, Cuba’s foremost dissident murdered but a few months ago by Fidel Castro’s goons. He was a personal hero to many of us. We will not forget his courage or his murder.

I also want to acknowledge and thank those who continue to struggle against Castro in Cuba. They are an example of pure courage. In particular, I recognize the Ladies in White, who armed only with white flowers and their faith in God, protest Castro’s inhumanities and are regularly attacked and beaten. I salute Yoani Sanchez, the brave young blogger who has been repeatedly beaten by Castro’s thugs because she refuses to end her blogs that denounce Castro’s inhumanity. I have high hopes for the dissident, Guillermo “El Coco” Farinas, who leads the largest dissident group in Cuba and has endured 24 hunger strikes against Castro.

I have had the privilege of working with many men and women who over five decades of Castro’s dictatorship refuse to give up. In particular, I thank the Directors, Trustees and staff of the Foundation and its human rights organization, the Foundation for Human Rights, especially my personal friends, Clara Maria and Mario del Valle, Juan Gutierrez, Miguel Angel Martinez, Pepe Hernandez, Jorge Mas Santos, Irma Mas Canosa, Tony Costa, Carlos Quintela, Jeronimo Estevez, Laly Sampedro, Omar Lopez Montenegro, and Carlos Garcia.

Many other Cuban exile organizations struggle

for our same cause. I single out my friend Jose Basulto, President of the Brothers to the Rescue, and the Bay of Pigs invasion force, La Brigada 2506.

I know I don't have to thank my wife because our hearts are one on this subject. She is my Cuban steel magnolia, unbending and intolerant of abuses and generous of heart. My two children, George and Cristi have always shared my dream. Once when things were getting difficult, I felt that I didn't have the right to put them in danger and so I asked them if they wanted me to stop my work. They were offended by my question.

Over the years, the Cuban refugees here in New Orleans have helped Cuban rafters and refugees, as well as staged many demonstrations. My extended family here in New Orleans has always been there to provide help and support to our noble cause. I was asked to assist a 13-year-old girl named Laura, who much like Elian Gonzalez, barely made it alive to New Orleans on a sinking boat. She saw her father drown and, thereafter, dehydrated, went into a coma. The doctors and nurses at Ochsner Hospital in New Orleans, who provided wonderful free care, didn't have hope for her recovery. I brought over a little plastic image of La Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre, Cuba's Virgin Mary, and we prayed for her to get well; which miraculously she did. My first cousin, Maria Crumley, who calls herself the Cuban Flan Queen, took Laura into her home as one of her children and nursed her until Laura fully recuperated. One of thousands of stories of compassion and love.

This is my story, but it is also the story of Cubans' thirst for justice. It is a story of unfinished business. I write because Castro is still free. Thousands are murdered and tortured, the Cuban people suffer on a massive scale—and yet Castro walks the earth as a free man. This is more than one country's tragedy; it is an international disgrace. I write to raise awareness of our struggle, to convince the world to *take action*. Fidel Castro cannot be allowed to spend his final years in luxury and power. Whoever becomes his successor after his death will only continue his legacy of bloodshed, cruelty, and hate. We must act *now* to bring freedom to the people of Cuba.

Castro likes to imply that the Cuban exiles who work against him only want their "properties" back. That is not so with me; I am much greedier. I want *all* of Cuba back—free and without Castro.

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## Humberto Fontova: On the Trail of Correcting The History of Cuba; and Shocking Americans Out of Apathy!

By Seth Satterlee

Humberto Fontova, bestselling non-fiction writer and social commentator, is author of the new book, his fifth: **The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro**. Born in Havana, Cuba, he and his family of five attempted to leave in 1961, but only four of them were successful. Humberto Fontova Sr. (author's father) was grabbed by the *milicianos*. He yelled to Esther (Humberto's mother) and the three kids (Humberto, aged seven, Patricia, aged eight, and Enrique, aged five) to "Go ahead!....Whatever happens to me, I don't want you growing up here!" The next day, from a cousin's house in Miami, Esther called Cuba and found out that Humberto Sr. was in *La Cabana*, firing squad central, where 2,100 men and boys were murdered. Humberto Sr. stayed there for three months and then, by a fluke of pure luck, he was released and was able to leave Cuba and join his family in New Orleans, where Humberto grew up.

Since becoming an adult, Fontova has been on a mission to make certain that the world at large is fully aware of what happened during and in the years immediately after the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro, and what goes on in Cuba, which remains under the totalitarian Castro regime.

Today, Fontova laments the fact that we live in an age and society where the term "that's history" is a pejorative. "Most Americans barely know or care about the history of their *own* country," he says, laughing, "so, how can we expect them to care about the histories of foreign countries, especially those little inconsequential ones in the Caribbean or south of the border?"

(Never mind that one of them brought the world closest to nuclear Armageddon and figures in the crime of the Century--JFK's assassination.)

American apathy is one of many reasons he gives for Castro's absurdly long rule in Cuba. The second reason that the Castro regime has lasted so long, according to Fontova, is the mainstream media's love affair with their own romantic visions of the communist revolutionaries—the first hippies!—Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

Without doubt much of what Fontova says in his three books on Cuba—**Fidel: Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant, Exposing the Real Che Guevara and the Useful Idiots Who Idolize Him**, and most recently in 2013's **The Longest Romance**—is controversial, to say the least and possibly disputable. His claim that the vast



majority of Americans know little about Latin America and probably could care less is all too valid, however. I'd be hard pressed to find a friend who can name more than one politician anywhere in South America, when the names of David Cameron, Vladimir Putin, and François Gérard Georges Nicolas Hollande would roll off the tongues of the educated with ease. Why is this? Why don't we care about Latin America? It's Fontova's position that Hollywood and the mainstream media are to blame because of misguided allegiance to revolutionaries whose interests are anti-American.

Although it may be an exaggeration to say that Americans *never* care, usually our attention is captured only in times of crisis—the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Elian Gonzales. Unless America's ox is being gored, when it comes to our Southern neighbors, we are selfishly apathetic. In more recent years, drugs, drug wars, oil prices, and illegal immigration are the only examples of important issues relating to Latin America which cause some Americans to sit up and attention. Keeping this in mind, Fontova's books are even more potent.

How did Hollywood's loving fascination with Cuba and Fidel Castro come about? It's hard to argue with a man like Fontova on this subject. A well-educated Cuban-American with a degree in political science from the University of New Orleans and a master degree in Latin American Studies from Tulane University, Fontova comes equipped with a surplus of well-footnoted facts and is a conservative force to be reckoned with.

Reading Fontova is like listening to an historian who happens to also do stand-up comedy. He manages to add humor to a normally serious topic, making his books quick and easy reads. This is quite a task considering the expanse of information covered within the hundreds of pages he has created in his five books.

Fontova's books are not as narrow as their titles suggest. And he rarely fails to find through careful research a factual gem that will give a book shock value. Fontova actually began his book **Fidel** with Castro's anti-American roots, with the occurrences of November 17<sup>th</sup>,

1962, the day of an attempted terrorist coup against the United States coordinated by Castro himself.

*Agents of Fidel Castro had targeted Manhattan's biggest subway stations—including Grand Central station—for rush hour explosions. It was something the United States didn't know much about in 1962: terrorism.*

One of the scariest things about this disturbing fact—and Fontova has it footnoted—is that I've never heard of any Cuban terrorist plot in New York. In fact, typing November 17<sup>th</sup> Castro Terrorist Attack into Google brings up nothing. If Google can't find it, there's something wrong. So for the typical, lazy American, this information doesn't exist. See the excerpt from his current book following this story for another shocking example of information most American simply do not have.

Fontova is a true historian. His books are by a author of the Cuban Diaspora and written from the heart of a Cuban who wants see true freedom for Cuba and, as a result, have the overall feeling of propaganda. But everything is deeply researched and well planned. His books have been translated into Polish, Russian, Portuguese and Spanish. Last month when Poland's state radio station produced a special on the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Che Guevara's death, they cited Fontova's book for important facts unavailable in any of the dozens of Che Guevara biographies published worldwide over the years.

When **Fidel, Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant** was released in Madrid, Spain's former First Lady Ana Botella, wife of former prime Minister Jose Aznar, delighted

the crowd with the reading of Fontova's book.

Fontova does not pretend to be balanced. While he documents his claims about Castro and the Castro regime, you're not going to find him saying anything even the tiniest

bit positive about Castro and crowd. When he points out something from the other side of the argument, it's only to refute it with full-documentation. Cuba's vaunted healthcare and education systems are perfect examples.

While Fontova represents a valid point of view, quite frankly, his stances might be strengthened by even more examples of contrasting his ideas to those of the opposition. Such contrasts could, in fact, could have the effect of verifying the validity of Fontova's positions.

It would be easy to dismiss his books as partisan, to say the work is cant, but doing so would be overlooking the vital points that Fontova makes with indisputable



Author **Humberto Fontova** has written three books on Cuba—*Fidel: Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant*, *Exposing the Real Che Guevara* and *the Useful Idiots Who Idolize Him*, and most recently in 2013's *The Longest Romance*.

documentation.

One: Fidel Castro is a murderous tyrant who has isolated Cuba and kept the people of the country in distressing circumstances during his reign.

Two: Over the years, The Hollywood Left has refused to see Castro as anything but a dedicated leader.

Fontova emphasizes the first point with great simplicity. "People weren't trying to swim to America under Batista," he says. And if that isn't enough, listen to this statistic found on page 60 of the book **Fidel**, "When Cuba's overall suicide rate reached 24,000 in 1986, it was double Latin America's average and triple Cuba's pre-Castro rate. Cuban women are now the most suicidal in the world, making death by suicide the primary cause of death for Cubans aged 15 to 48."

The numbers, Fontova says, speak for themselves. "The majority of Cubans want to get out, in any possible way."

So why does so much of this go unnoticed by mainstream media?

Why has Communist Cuba been so romanticized? In no small part it's because of the sex appeal of Che Guevara. Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who was born in 1928 and died in 1967, commonly known as el Che or simply Che, was an Argentine Marxist revolutionary, physician, author, guerrilla leader, diplomat, and military theorist. A major figure of the Cuban Revolution, his stylized visage has become a ubiquitous countercultural symbol of rebellion and a global insignia within popular culture, not unlike the Chairman Mao decorative phenomenon, popular in the 60s and 70s, with pop artist Andy Warhol, himself a counterculture icon, contributing much to the popularization of communists.

"With big beards and bandanas, they looked like homegrown American Beatniks, like Hippies," Fontova says, "and this combined with Che's charisma and his high cheek-boned good looks contributed to his popularity."

Anyone would be hard put to argue that Che when alive and even now dead is an extremely marketable commodity. Between the thousands of "Che Shirts" and Robert Redford's **Motorcycle Diaries**, his fame boomed, putting him alongside Nietzsche as an icon of youthful rebellion. But Fontova is here to remind us that this "hero" is the same executioner who, in 1959, was quoted saying:

"To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary. These procedures are an archaic bourgeois detail. This is a revolution. And a revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate."

You can't argue with facts. In fact, in his numerous appearances on national television Fontova offered anyone criticized in **Fidel** and his subsequent books chances to debate his claims. No one takes him up on the offers. The few who do usually cite **The Godfather II** to refute his book's claim! "That was a movie, professor!" Fontova laughs out loud when recalling such encounters. "Not a documentary!" The problem Fontova faces is just this, who is really listening. If he is to succeed with his mission to set the history of his country straight, he must reach millions of people here and abroad. It's been hard to

compete with Hollywood but Fontova has made an impact.

They say it takes seven years after planting a perennial garden for that garden to take hold and become fully established. Well it's been seven years since **Fidel** was released, seven years of additional books and countless television and radio appearances with talk show hosts who are as controversial as he is and you can bet your bottom dollar that he has an audience hundreds of times bigger today than seven years ago when **Fidel** was first released. He's become the darling of America's loud mouthed talk show hosts, including the far right talk show hosts such as Bill O'Reilly and Shawn Hannity of Fox and crowd along with Glenn Beck. On the other side of the aisle, Bill Maher, no less, has made Fontova a regular on his show **Politically Incorrect**, inviting him four times.

Now, the numbers are starting to show on his side. For instance, the Latino population seven years ago, was still a small minority. Not so today! Most Latinos are Catholic and frequently believe in large families and so the numbers are going to continue to grow, giving Fontova a larger built-in audience, while he continues to reach to apathetic Anglos.

And why is that Cuban-Americans are so much more vocal in their attempts to stir the imaginations of voting Americans to do something about Cuba?

You must remember that unlike Latinos from other countries who have immigrated to America, Cubans who have come to this country can't go home again, not as long as the Castro regime remains in place. Even if they have been educated here, succeeded in business here, established strong roots here, even if they would remain here regardless, they want the freedom of choice.

With a zealous ambition to protect the history of his father's country, Fontova's books such as **Fidel** and his **Exposing the Real Che Guevara**, are passionate and compelling. It's an interesting time for Cuba and America now that an end to the Castro reign may be in sight. With the uncertainty of the future, we are lucky to have Fontova's books, all of which are accessible, entertaining, and full of interesting facts to provide us with a guide to developing circumstances by leading us through the past of this troubling neighbor so very close to our shores.



*Seth Satterlee grew up in New Orleans. He received an MFA in Fiction from Columbia University in 2012. Currently, he works for **Publisher's Weekly**. Seth was a writing and editing intern for **The Double Dealer**, while he was a student at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts.*

## Ernest Hemingway Admires Death in the Cuban Afternoon

By Humberto Fontova

**Editor's Note:** *The following story by Humberto Fontova is an example of the shock value approach to writing successful narrative non-fiction. It has the ring of truth when you recall that the late Matthew Bruccoli, who was the world's leading expert in Hemingway and his work, frequently referred to the writer as a "truly despicable human being."*

"Cuban mothers let me assure you that I will solve all Cuba's problems without spilling a drop of blood." Fidel Castro broadcast that promise into a phalanx of microphones upon entering Havana on January 7, 1959. As the jubilant crowd erupted with joy, Castro continued: "Cuban mothers let me assure you that because of me you will never have to cry."

"Castro's revolution," Ernest Hemingway wrote in 1960, "is very pure and beautiful. I'm encouraged by it. The Cuban people now have a decent chance for the first time." Papa's sometime friend John Dos Passos said Hemingway "had one of the shrewdest heads for unmasking political pretensions I've ever run into."

And indeed, Hemingway saw behind these pretensions of love, charity and humanism—and quite literally.

Some background: as commander of Havana's La Cabana prison and execution yard in the early months of the Revolution, Che Guevara often coached his firing squads in person then rushed up to shatter the skull of the convulsed man (or boy) by firing the coup de grace himself. When other duties tore him away from his beloved execution yard, Che consoled himself by viewing the slaughter. His second-story office in La Cabana had a section of wall torn out to better view his darling firing-squads at work, often in the company of distinguished friends. Havana resident Ernest Hemingway was one of these.

Accounts of "Papa's" Hemingway's presence at these massacres comes courtesy of Hemingway's own friend, the late George Plimpton (not exactly a right-wing Cuban exile), who worked as editor of the *Paris Review*, (not exactly a "McCarthyite scandal sheet.")

In 1958 George Plimpton interviewed Hemingway in Cuba for one of the *Paris Review's* most famous pieces. They became friends and the following year Hemingway again invited Plimpton down to his *Finca Vigia* just outside Havana. An editor at the *Paris Review* during the 1990's, while relating how this high-brow publication passed on serializing the manuscript that became Che Guevara's **Motorcycle Diaries**, reveals "Papa's" unwitting role in the rejection.

"I took the paper-clipped excerpt upstairs to the Boss (Plimpton)," writes James Scott Linville, "flopped

down in the chair to the side of his desk...and said I had something strange and good. As I started to tell him about it, his smile faded. I stopped my pitch and said, "Boss, what's the matter?"

"James, I'm sorry." Linville recalls Plimpton replying. A sad look came over him, and he said, "Years ago, after we'd done the interview, Papa invited me down again to Cuba. It was right after the revolution. "There's something you should see," Hemingway told Plimpton while preparing a shaker of drinks for the outing.

"They got in the car with a few others and drove some way out of town." Continues Linville (who is recalling Plimpton's account.) "They got out, set up chairs and took out the drinks, as if they were going to watch the sunset. Soon, a truck arrived. This, explained George, was what they'd been waiting for. It came, *as Hemingway knew* (italics mine), the same time each day. It stopped and some men with guns got out of it. In the back were a couple of dozen others who were tied up. Prisoners.

"The men with guns hustled the others out of the back of the truck, and lined them up. Then they shot them. They put the bodies back into the truck."

"I said to George something to the effect of "Oh my God."

Then I said, "I don't believe you." I'm not sure why I didn't.

"Did you ever write about this?" Linville asked his boss Plimpton

"No."

"Why not?"

"He looked uncomfortable and shrugged."

"In the 20 years I knew George, it was the only time he refused to look at a piece of writing," continues Linville. "It was unusual for George to talk about politics.... But still I didn't quite believe him. Quite simply, *I'd never heard a word about such executions,*" concludes Linville.<sup>3</sup>

And then there's the money quote.

Over the years the *Paris Review* has featured the works of literary luminaries William Faulkner, Jack Kerouac, V. S. Naipaul, Tom Wolfe, Vladimir Nabakov, Philip Roth, among many others. In the words of one critic, the magazine is "one of the single most persistent acts of cultural conservation in the history of the world." So up until the mid 1990's the ultra-educated editor of a magazine catering to the ultra-educated had no idea that Castro's regime had executed people. And he learned about a few of them only by a fluke.

"A writer without a sense of justice and of injustice would be better off editing the yearbook of a school for exceptional children than writing novels," wrote Hemingway in that very *Paris Review* interview with George Plimpton. "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shockproof, shit detector. This is the writer's radar, and all great writers have had it."



So was Hemingway duped by Castroism? Did his shit-detector malfunction? Or was it on high-alert? Few people, after all, had such access to Castroism's crime scenes. And the KGB, while certainly appreciating the work of dupes and useful idiots, was not known to (openly) sign them on.

The Cuba Archive estimates that by the end of that year two thousand Cubans had been murdered in the manner Ernest Hemingway loved to watch from his pic-nic chair while sipping *mojitos*. Significantly, both Hemingway and Plimpton passed on writing about any of these deaths in the afternoon....and mornings and midnights. Augusto Pinochet's regime, needless to add, would never have gotten off so easily.

I guess "left-wing death squads," just doesn't have the same ring to it as the other Latin-American type, so often and reflexively condemned by literary types. That the Cuba archive project already documented (by name) almost triple the number of murdered and "disappeared" by Castro and Che Guevara's death squads as the estimate of the disappeared by Pinochet's just doesn't register among the "enlightened." George Plimpton's deputy editor provided the perfect example above. It's worth quoting him again: "I didn't quite believe him. Quite simply, I'd never heard a word about such executions."

Sixteen thousand of these executions took place according to the internationally acclaimed Black Book of Communism, 90 miles from U.S. shores while Cuba swarmed with foreign reporters and Hollywood producers.

But in Linville's defense, and assuming he relied on the mainstream media for news and history—indeed, where would he have heard of them?

According to KGB defector Alexander Vassiliev "the 42-year-old Hemingway was recruited by the KGB under the cover name "Argo" in 1941, and cooperated with Soviet agents whom he met in Havana and London." This comes from a book published in 2009 by Yale University Press (not exactly a branch of the John Birch Society.)

This story is an excerpt from **The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro**, published here with permission of the author. Copyright 2013, Humberto Fontova

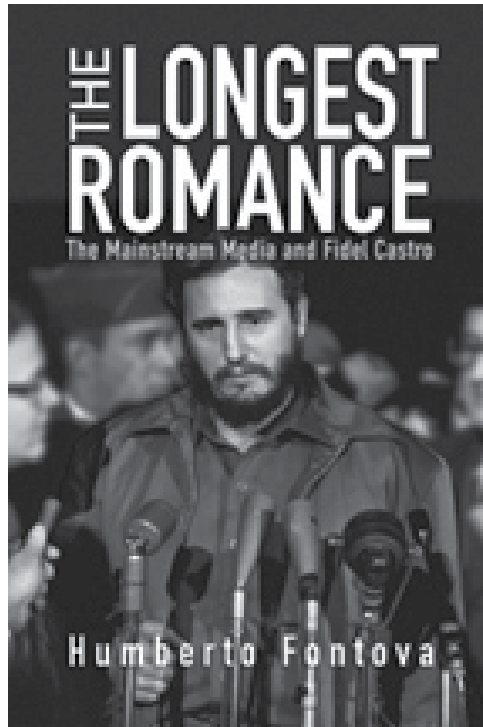
**Humberto Fontova**, bestselling non-fiction writer and social commentator, is author of the new book, his fifth:

*The Longest Romance: The Mainstream Media and Fidel Castro. Born in Havana, Cuba, his family fled Cuba in the wake of Castro's takeover. The Fontova family settled in New Orleans, where Humberto grew up. He was graduated from*

*the University of New Orleans with a degree in Political Science. He received his Masters Degree from Tulane University in Latin American Studies. An avid sportsman, who enjoys hunting, fishing, and scuba diving, he has been writing for the hunting and fishing magazine: Louisiana Sportsman for 30 years and also has written for Sierra, Scuba Times and Bowhunter. In 2001 he published his first book, The Helldivers' Rodeo, an extreme scuba diving and spear fishing adventure. In 2003 he released his second book, The Hellpig Hunt, a hunting adventure in the wild wetlands at the mouth of the Mississippi River. His foray into the political genre began with Fidel: Hollywood's Favorite Tyrant, a political and emotional exposé about Fidel Castro and Cuba, the only totalitarian dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere. This*

*book has been published in English and Spanish. Fidel was followed by Exposing the Real Che Guevara and the Useful Idiots who Idolize Him, now available in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Czech. Humberto appeared on numerous national television shows, including Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher, The O'Reilly Factor with Bill O'Reilly, Hannity and Colmes, Fox and Friends, Glenn Beck, The Dennis Miller Show and various shows for Telemundo. He travels the lecture circuit speaking on Cuba at various events and universities.*

*He is a regular contributor to many news websites such as [www.humaneventsonline.com](http://www.humaneventsonline.com), [townhall.com](http://townhall.com), [www.americanthinker.com](http://www.americanthinker.com), [www.newsmax.com](http://www.newsmax.com), and [frontpagemag.com](http://frontpagemag.com). He is married to Shirley Fontova and has three children, Monica, Michael and Robert. They live in Covington, LA, a Northshore community of Greater New Orleans.*



## Editor's Note:

**Horacio Castellanos Moya** is a writer and a journalist from El Salvador. For two decades he worked as the editor of news agencies, magazines and newspapers in Mexico, Guatemala and his own country. He has published 11 novels, five short story collections and two books of essays. His novels have been translated into 12 languages. It was only recently, however, that some of his exceptional work has been accessible to Americans without Spanish. The first of his novels to be translated was *Senselessness* and now three others—*The She-Devil in the mirror*, *Dance with Snakes* and *Tyrant memory*—are available in English. Born in Honduras, he was raised in El Salvador, where he witnessed the destruction of the country in the wake of a revolution gone sour. He also lived in Guatemala and learned of the horrors of the Cold War era massacres there. He fled Latin America, when subtle threats against his life became more overt. During his career as a journalist and author, he has lived in Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Germany, and Japan, as well as the United States. He was granted residencies in a program supported by the Frankfurt International Book Fair (2004-2006) and at City of Asylum/Pittsburgh (2006-2008). In 2009, he was a guest researcher at the University of Tokyo. In 2006 he went to Pittsburgh as an exiled writer-in-residence for City of Asylum. Through City of Asylum, he did a series of readings at regional universities. The New York-based independent New Directions Publishing arranged several readings for *Senselessness* in Manhattan, Princeton, and at San Francisco's legendary City Lights bookstore. Other support has come, indirectly, from the National Endowment for the Arts, whose \$20,000 fellowship for translator Katherine Silver was instrumental in getting *Senselessness* published in English. Since 2011, still in exile, he has been teaching in the MFA in Spanish Creative Writing program at the University of Iowa. We are very grateful to all of those who have made it possible for a broad-based American audience to become acquainted with the work of this remarkable writer and we are pleased that he will appear as the Faulkner Society's special guest of honor at *Words & Music*, 2013.

## Horacio Castellanos Moya: Master of Black Humor in the Face of Horror

By Mary Helen Lagasse

*I'm not all there in the head, I repeated to myself, stunned by the extent of mental perturbation this Cakchiquel Indian, who had witnessed his family's murder, experienced, by the fact that this Indian was aware of the breakdown of his psychic apparatus as a result of having witnessed,*



**Horacio Castellanos Moya** is a writer and a journalist from El Salvador.

*though wounded and impotent, soldiers of his country's army scornfully chop to pieces with machetes and in cold blood each one of his four small children, then turn on his wife, the poor woman already in shock because she too had been forced to witness as the soldiers turned her small children into palpitating pieces of human flesh. Nobody can be all there in the head after having survived such an ordeal . . .*

The unnamed narrator in this oft-quoted opening of *Senselessness*, the first of Horacio Castellanos Moya's novels to have been translated to English, is an exiled editorialist from an unnamed country who has taken a copy editing job in what appears to be Guatemala. His employer is the Catholic Church, and his job is sensitive: 1,100 pages that document the mass murder of that country's indigenous Indians by the military.

Contemporary Guatemalan politics were forged in a CIA-led 1954 coup against Col. Jacobo Arbenz, whose land reforms threatened powerful agricultural interests. Repressive military regimes ruled for nearly the next half-century, with Guatemalan officers receiving training from the U.S. military in their battle against leftists.

From 1960 to 1996, an estimated 200,000 civilians died—the equivalent of every 20th person in the country. Most were indigenous people of Mayan descent, and most perished, often horrifically, at the hands of the Guatemalan military. In December of 1996 the signing of the Peace Accords, brokered by the UN, ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war, the longest and bloodiest of Latin America's Cold War era civil wars.

Taken as a whole, the Peace Accords were to have

declared an “adios” to this painful history. But as Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias said of Guatemala in 1994:

*We'll be secure when we hear that knock at the door at 6:00 a.m. and we know it's only the milkman.*

Understandably, rage is a recurrent theme in Castellanos-Mora's writing.

*... if you have some kind of sensibility towards injustice you know what rage is. For me, it's not that difficult to feel rage. And sometimes I've been wondering if all my writing is related to rage, in the sense that rage is a kind of impulse that produces my writing. . . Without rage, I don't know if I would have written the books that I wrote. What for? I don't write to entertain. If people get entertainment, that's nice, but it's not my objective. I just want to take out something that is inside me and is bothering me. I think that rage is one of the mechanisms that allows me to do that....It is a factor in my books. Characters are escaping.*

*In my novel, **Tyrant Memory** there are two characters who are escaping because if they are captured they are going to be killed for taking part in a coup against the dictator. Most of my books have this kind of character who is escaping. Of course, that's related to my own life.*

When Castellanos Moya fled his country the first time he went to Canada, where he briefly studied history at York University in Toronto. The second time he went to Mexico City, where he worked as a journalist for ten years and began to become known as a fiction writer.

His writing style is characterized by his

fluid sentences and acerbic wit, features that have at times caused him trouble. He and his work have been extensively reviewed in the US and abroad—both positively and negatively. The tone and style of **Senselessness** are, as one reviewer commented:

*...comically profane self-absorption and accusatory bile expressed in rambling sentences of 200 words or more reflects its essential dynamic: that of the narrator's struggle to distance himself from a manuscript he insists he's editing only for the money. The unnamed narrator attempts to achieve this separation with frequent breaks for beer in local cantinas. He fumes over slights like not getting paid on time, fantasizing his revenge from the horrific descriptions he is proofreading. He plunges into attempted seductions of young women, with comical results. He is repulsed by one woman's smelly feet!*

Russell Banks wrote that **Senselessness** is “A brilliantly crafted fable, as if Kafka had gone to Latin America for his source materials. “In many ways a black comedy, **Senselessness** is still a political book. Its angry confessional could be the work of an American writer in the vein of Philip Roth . . .” wrote- Benjamin Lytal, of *The New York Sun*. It was the late Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño, a friend of Castellanos Moya, however, who made one of the more salient points about the author, calling him:

*The only writer of my generation who knows how to narrate the horror, the secret Vietnam that Latin America was for a long time.*



But **Senselessness** is literature, not history—political or otherwise.

In **Senselessness**, while the narrator might seem paranoid, a would-be assassin just might be lurking out there ready to get him. A jealous boyfriend is, after all, a military man in a country where political murder persists. In an echo of real-life events, the novel ends with an e-mail from a friend in Guatemala: The bishop who delivered the damning report has been murdered.



“They smashed his head in with a brick,” the friend writes. “Everybody’s fucked. Be glad you left.”

## In the Author’s Own Words:

**Q.** You’ve been quoted as saying the place you wouldn’t go to is El Salvador, that the police there, and throughout Guatemala, “are killers and kidnappers.” Your mother still lives there. What fear do you have for her safety?

**HCM:** I go to El Salvador once or twice a year. My mother and many of my friends live there. Certainly, most assuredly, I have fear for their safety. (And no doubt for his own safety, when he is there.)

**Q.** Of your two surnames, or *apellidos* (Castellanos Moya), reviewers—Americans for the most part—often refer to you as Horacio Moya. Are you okay with this?

**HCM:** I guess this is normal in some cultures, like in America, where your mother’s last name is erased and you only use your father’s last name. In Spanish speaking countries many people (and writers) use both: García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cabrera Infante. In my case, Castellanos is my father’s and Moya is my mother’s. If people call me Moya it is because it is shorter, or because they think Castellanos is my middle name. I do not have a middle name.

**Q.** You have been compared to William Faulkner. Why do you think this is so?

**HCM:** That is news to me. Certainly, it is an exaggeration. Faulkner was a genius; I am not. Perhaps some readers see that members of a single family are characters in many of my novels, as in Faulkner’s works. But many writers have done that. The Latin American author closer to Faulkner is the great Uruguayan writer Juan Carlos Onetti who even invented a town, Santa María, as Faulkner did with Yoknapatawpha.

**Q.** There are diverse first-person narrative voices in your novels. What do you consider to be the key to creating a convincing first-person narrative voice?

**HCM:** The key is to be able to silence your own voice, to quiet your own ego and to try to see the world from the character’s point of view. That is half of the task. Then you need to rely on your “inner” ear, so as to hear the voice of the character. Without that hearing there is no way for me to do it. I have to hear his or her voice inside me and that voice has to grow and expand, without interference of my own voice.

**Q.** There are characters and families who appear in several of your novels. You’ve said: “more strongly than the ambition to portray an entire society, what

(you) express in your work “are a writer’s fixations, compulsions, obsessions...” such being more ‘Salingeresque than “Balzacian.” How might this description be applied to the unnamed narrator in *Senselessness* and to the theme of this minimalist work?

**HCM:** *Senselessness* is an exceptional, unique novel in my work. The narrator is unnamed and is not related to any of the characters that show up in most of my novels. *Donde No Estén Ustedes (Where You Were Not)*, the novel I wrote before *Senselessness*, was the first of a group of five of the Aragón family. The next of the group, which came after *Senselessness*, was *Desmoronamiento (Collapse)*, was the second of that group. Neither of these has been translated into English, although the third one, *Tyrant Memory*, has been. That is why I say that *Senselessness* is like an island, that the description of ‘Salingeresque’ has nothing to do with this novel.

**Q.** The line spoken by one of those interviewed by the narrator in your book is:

*The houses they were sad because no people were inside them...*

This is poignant and powerful and is evocative of how indigenous people are able to express themselves lyrically despite having lived through and survived the most horrific experiences. What is more important in a literary work? Style or substance? Or, are they equally significant

**HCM:** Style and substance are equally significant. They are intertwined. The density of the substance corresponds to the specifics of the style. The craft of the writer is to create equilibrium between them in order that substance does not overwhelm style, and that style does not run off by itself, leaving substance behind.

**Q.** If you were to define the “how, whys, and wherefores” of your work you would say:

**HCM:** If I were to define my work I would be completely lost. How, why, wherefores? It depends on the book and on the particular conditions of my life at the time. I could say a necessity of expression, rage, a deep wound, sensibility towards injustice, lack of meaning of life, the utter helplessness of man in the universe. All of these are commonplace. A writer should not define himself.

## Staff Pick: Amber Porch Light by Gina Ferrara

by Caroline Rash

**Melinda Palacio**, who offered poems earlier in *The Double Dealer* in tribute to Oscar Hijuelos, is often mistaken for another excellent New Orleans poet, **Gina Ferrara**. Palacio wrote in a recent blog post:



Poet **Gina Ferrara**, author of the new collection **Amber Porch Light**

“Gina and I are the same height and have dark hair and dark eyes. In a pinch, you could say we are both Latina, since she is Latin by way of her Italian heritage and I am Latina by way of my Mexican ancestry. Slippery semantics aside, our poetry has much in common and we were both influenced by our maternal grandmothers, the storytellers in our families.”

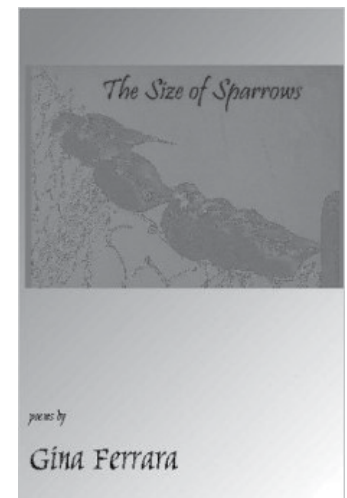
Ferrara, a friendly face at local readings and the host of The Poetry Buffet reading series at Latter Library (the first Saturday of each month) just released her third book of poetry, **Amber Porch Light** (WordTech Communications, 2013). She has already had book releases at Octavia Books, The Maple Leaf, and The Gold Mine Saloon.

**Julie Kane**, former Louisiana Poet Laureate, raves about the book:

“Everything in these poems is aglow: not only the amber porch light, but comets, ‘tarnished moonlight,’ ‘milky morning light,’ meteor showers, Orion’s belt, ‘mint blue runway lights,’ fluorescent hospital lights, kerosene lanterns, citronella candles, white star jasmine, polished brass, and lighthouse beams. Each poem is a small and luminous feast of sensory detail. What really shines through the collection, though, is the poet’s love of people and place—that place being her native New Orleans.”

**Amber Porch Light** is full of quiet, rich moments, such as children’s breakfast with their uncle. However, the quietude does not always equal peace—the collection is set against a backdrop of the Vietnam War and her parents’ divorce.

In a particularly haunting poem from the collection, “My Private Uncle”, Ferrara writes:

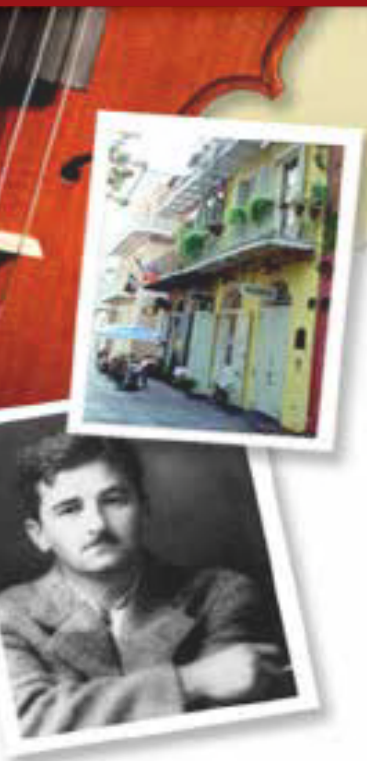


“With a poised fork, my private uncle said his maple syrup reminded him of water, gathering, soaking rows in a rice paddy. Of all things. My sister and I laughed, thinking we had heard a silly joke.”

There is an unrelenting, intense connection between the poet, her direct environment and her family history woven throughout each poem. As those moments stuck with Ferrara to become poems, so the poems will stick with readers—and enrich our perception of the everyday.

**Gina Ferrara’s** other books include **The Size of Sparrows** (Finishing Line Press, 2006) and **Ethereal Avalanche** (Trembling Pillow Press, 2009).

# Classics Revisited



*Time, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*



## Self-Moving Mind: William Butler Yeats and His Magic

By Geoff Munsterman

The greatest academics, professors, and scholars known to the 20th and 21st centuries have advocated reading, rereading, and re-rereading again the poetry of William Butler Yeats. We're right to listen. One of the great gifts given to us by critics and scholars is that they force us to return to an author—sometimes overlooked, sometimes appreciated too much for too little reason—and give their words new meaning, new life. Yeats remains relevant, in part due to the critics who re-examine his works.

Yeats is a scholar's poet because the philosophical and sociological scope of what his poetry sought to express deepens with learned analysis. Much like the scientist, scholars employ theory and research to prove sound the posited observations made about a particular work of literature. Works like *The Second Coming* and *Leda and The Swan* only gain power through deep textual analysis and when that analysis finds focus in literary theory, there's an even fuller understanding.

Personally, I am no great academic. While I've hungrily read the criticisms of Archibald MacLeish and John Crowe Ransom, it's never been my place to try and better them or refute their bifurcated assertions on the work of Yeats. Rather, I present to you some snippets of my favorite works by the great Irish bard and through this presentation, I hope to help explain why Yeats as a poet and thinker endures.

Yeats is a poet's poet for his mastery as a craftsman. His works were deliberate. His choices were brave. He never shied away from the larger themes; his poetry never searched for smallness. He tackled the defining moments of his time with an unflinching cavaliness, he wrote about the human heart in anguish, the human heart in exuberance, the human heart worn by the dreadful sorrows and hardships of times present and times past. Poets are not often thought of as brave. Society for the most parts casts them as outcasts; throwbacks to an era that required an attention span few audiences possess. Even among those who view poetry as a noble art, there is a belief that the beauty and truth Keats pined for comes easily to the poet, that observant wordsmiths need merely observe and smith words to produce a truly good poem.

But poetry is not a reactive art; the events and observations do not find their home within the lines of a poem without reflection. As Galway Kinnell said in *Middle Path*, his poem honoring his friend and fellow poet James Wright, "speech / which expresses trouble takes / going through hell." Traversing hell is no cakewalk. Neither is making that process into a product that communicates to



its readers or listeners a seamlessness that reveals none of the hardship required to get there. Poems are products; Yeats relished in the labors, the process.

To him, writing poetry was a magical act on par with the botanical works of Paracelsus or the theosophical pursuits of Madame Blavatsky. Yeats addresses this poetry work in his 1901 essay, "Ideas of Good and Evil Magic." He writes:

*Men who are imaginative writers to-day may well have preferred to influence the imagination of others more directly in past times. Instead of learning their craft with paper and a pen they may have sat for hours imagining themselves to be stocks and stones and beasts of the wood, till the images were so vivid that the passers-by became but a part of the imagination of the dreamer, and wept or laughed or ran away as he would have them.*

For Yeats, imagination is as real as you or I when invoked. Imagination is magic; and magic is real. While Yeats wholly accepted the "the evocation of spirits," he qualifies that ability with the bluntly honest, "though I do not know what they are." Much like the peace in need of crafting, his evoked poetry was on its own not anything Yeats would consider poetry. While Yeats famously participated in "automatic writing" his own published writing was anything but automatic. He respected the tradition too much.

Poetry, for Yeats, was no throwaway pursuit—it was a calling. His calling. Yeats wove different spiritual considerations into his poetry; the Irish mythology that haunted his home as vivaciously as Christ haunts

Flannery O'Connor's south, the mysticism and magical spirituality of Kabbalah, pagan rituals and cults. All of these considerations arise in his work, buttressing it. Yeats wasn't just a practicing poet, he was devoutly a poet. Understanding the tradition of Irish poets he was born into, worshipping the work required to make great poetry. His poem *Adam's Curse* reveals a young, brash speaker railing against the flippant and sometimes disregarded belief held by many people that poetry holds no value or takes no laboring.

*A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.  
Better go down upon your marrow-bones  
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;  
For to articulate sweet sounds together  
Is to work harder than all these, and yet  
Be thought an idler by the noisy set  
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen  
The martyrs call the world.*

Any poet worth a merit badge has encountered 'critics' who wish to demean the craft of poetry. For Yeats, this was an insult to his religion. This "stitching and unstitching" that Yeats assigns to the craft of poetry is the work that comes after inspiration, after the evoked spirits have had their say. It is the devotional that comes after the inspirational that makes Yeats' poetry superior to others merely grasping at the Muse. Magic isn't the defining mark of his poetry; it is the inciting incident maybe, but never the whole event.

That poetry activates magic, summons spirits from other astral planes, is no given. Yeats makes, in the slightest manner, his case for the symbolic-evocative image that can arise when the magical has agency. In the case of *Adam's Curse* the young poet knows magic tricks of a seamless poem takes great pains; the "going through hell" Kinnell speaks of as well as simple line construction, drastic and micro-edits.

John Ciardi wrote that "The craft of poetry is not easy. It is better than easy. It is joyously difficult." This echoes the sentiment of Yeats' lines from *The Second Coming*, where, in a world gone to pot, our poem's speaker remarks: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity." With the *ars poetica Adam's Curse*, we discover a Yeats that begins as a railing youth overtaken by the magic evoked symbol of love:

*We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
We saw the last embers of daylight die,  
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
About the stars and broke in days and years.*

*I had a thought for no one's but your ears:*

*That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.*

The moon here becomes more than mere celestial body. "The name of love" conjures it, and in the conjuring the poem moves from schoolboy rant about why poetry isn't a heralded occupation into something larger, something wholly expressive about the nature of youth in the presence of timeless beauty. This moon, which Yeats wearies "as if it had been a shell" until you feel all of its grooves and indentations, becomes occasion for honesty that's qualified, of course, by the fact that in the moment of the poem no honesty broke out, penned in and unleashed only in this poem. That the speaker wishes to love the "beautiful mild woman for whose sake / There's many a one shall find out all heartache / On finding that her voice is sweet and low" in an "old high way" comments to the young poet's need to honor tradition, yet transform it through himself into an entirely new and unrealized form. Love, for our young poet, is as much laboring as poetry.

In *Adam's Curse* Yeats inhabits the subjects of poetry, beauty, love; by no means minor subjects for a poem. Written four months after The Easter Rising (*Éirí Amach na Cásca*), *Easter 1916* begins:

*I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,  
And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motley is worn:  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.*

We sit, grown quiet at the terrible beauty. Yeats' countrymen and countrywomen fight for independence from the British Empire, an independence Yeats later reveals himself to advocate. Here in the beginning, however, Yeats' speaker provides an elegy to "polite meaningless words" the uprising negates. "All changed, changed utterly," is the world where politeness and meaninglessness has agency; friends and fellow countrymen (some of whom Yeats knew in childhood) have become enemies of the State, challengers of the status quo. Here, nineteenth-century manners, and aristocratic culture once held together by unspoken politeness falls apart through the utter change. That Yeats

has witnessed in the months following Easter the capture, sentencing, and even execution of rebellion members is not lost. Irish citizens fighting for independence faced certain death for their cause, and found it. The casual conversing no longer registers, is overthrown, “changed utterly,” by the radical politics that altered Ireland during Yeats’s lifetime, that announced the coming changes shaping the Irish landscape throughout Yeats’ life and beyond his passing. The sacrifice (independence) can no longer be ignored:

*Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven’s part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.*

Yeats allows the questions to stand: “Was it needless death after all?” Was the failed revolt pointless, leading only to death? Yeats, through the act of writing the poem, keeps their dream alive. Their names, their acts, become the magic symbols Yeats invokes “As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come.” The attitude in *Easter, 1916* is complicated. Yeats’s poems are neither nostalgic nor are they reactionary. Yeats looks at the total tragedy—the revolutionaries defeat, the revolt crushed, the commonplace disturbed, the England that “may keep faith” like keeping an inmate in its cell. The poem concludes:

*We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse—  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.*

The greatest loss for Yeats in the moment of this poem is imagination. That, too, has been corrupted in the nationalist revolt; true when considering this final question: did love for their country get them killed? Imagination, as real and tangible a thing as there is (as tangible as stone), cannot fathom or calculate the meaning of this loss. “...our life in cities,” continued Yeats in his 1901 essay, “deafens or kills the passive meditative

life, and our education that enlarges the separated, self-moving mind, have made our souls less sensitive.” City life includes both “polite meaningless words” and the “terrible beauty” of nationalism spilling blood.

That Yeats could shape his imagination to the task of responding to Easter Rising without being knee-jerk or didactic, could mourn and at the same time signal a coming change represents a complex bravery that all poets should mimic. Delve into an issue—don’t avoid it or snap to judging it, let the issue change your poetry as much as it changes you. Sometimes the change, like magic, comes down to good and evil. Either way, Yeats answered his call. In our own times of murky complexity, we turn to the Yeateses of history (and look always for a Yeats or two in our own time) to say our feelings to us in a way that transforms the vivacious abstractions of loss, yearning, anger, hope into symbols that unleash in their invocation an emotional world. As long as the world continues, we’ll continue to need Yeats, and poetry, to perform for us a magic that’s more than mere trick.

## The Phases of the Moon

by William Butler Yeats

*An old man cocked his car upon a bridge;  
He and his friend, their faces to the South,  
Had trod the uneven road. Their hoots were soiled,  
Their Connemara cloth worn out of shape;  
They had kept a steady pace as though their beds,  
Despite a dwindling and late-risen moon,  
Were distant still. An old man cocked his ear.*

*Aherne. What made that Sound?*

*Robartes. A rat or water-hen  
Splashed, or an otter slid into the stream.  
We are on the bridge; that shadow is the tower,  
And the light proves that he is reading still.  
He has found, after the manner of his kind,  
Mere images; chosen this place to live in  
Because, it may be, of the candle-light  
From the far tower where Milton’s Platonist  
Sat late, or Shelley’s visionary prince:  
The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,  
An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;  
And now he seeks in book or manuscript  
What he shall never find.*

*Ahernc. Why should not you  
Who know it all ring at his door, and speak  
Just truth enough to show that his whole life  
Will scarcely find for him a broken crust  
Of all those truths that are your daily bread;  
And when you have spoken take the roads again?*

*Robartes. He wrote of me in that extravagant style  
He had learnt from pater, and to round his tale*



Said I was dead; and dead I choose to be.

*Aherne.* Sing me the changes of the moon once more;  
True song, though speech: "mine author sung it me."

*Robartes.* Twenty-and-eight the phases of the moon,  
The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,  
Twenty-and-eight, and yet but six-and-twenty  
The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:  
For there's no human life at the full or the dark.  
From the first crescent to the half, the dream  
But summons to adventure and the man  
Is always happy like a bird or a beast;  
But while the moon is rounding towards the full  
He follows whatever whim's most difficult  
Among whims not impossible, and though scarred.  
As with the cat-o'-nine-tails of the mind,  
His body moulded from within his body  
Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then  
Athene takes Achilles by the hair,  
Hector is in the dust, Nietzsche is born,  
Because the hero's crescent is the twelfth.  
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must,  
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.  
The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war  
In its own being, and when that war's begun  
There is no muscle in the arm; and after,  
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,  
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,  
To die into the labyrinth of itself!

*Aherne.* Sing out the song; sing to the end, and sing  
The strange reward of all that discipline.

*Robartes.* All thought becomes an image and the soul  
Becomes a body: that body and that soul  
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle,  
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:  
Body and soul cast out and cast away  
Beyond the visible world.

*Aherne.* All dreams of the soul  
End in a beautiful man's or woman's body.

*Robartes,* Have you not always known it?

*Aherne.* The song will have it  
That those that we have loved got their long fingers  
From death, and wounds, or on Sinai's top,  
Or from some bloody whip in their own hands.  
They ran from cradle to cradle till at last  
Their beauty dropped out of the loneliness  
Of body and soul.

*Robartes.* The lover's heart knows that.

*Aherne.* It must be that the terror in their eyes  
Is memory or foreknowledge of the hour

When all is fed with light and heaven is bare.

*Robartes.* When the moon's full those creatures of the  
full  
Are met on the waste hills by countrymen  
Who shudder and hurry by: body and soul  
Estranged amid the strangeness of themselves,  
Caught up in contemplation, the mind's eye  
Fixed upon images that once were thought;  
For separate, perfect, and immovable  
Images can break the solitude  
Of lovely, satisfied, indifferent eyes.

*And thereupon with aged, high-pitched voice  
Aherne laughed, thinking of the man within,  
His sleepless candle and lahorious pen.*

*Robartes.* And after that the crumbling of the moon.  
The soul remembering its loneliness  
Shudders in many cradles; all is changed,  
It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,  
Choosing whatever task's most difficult  
Among tasks not impossible, it takes  
Upon the body and upon the soul  
The coarseness of the drudge.

*Aherne.* Before the full  
It sought itself and afterwards the world.

*Robartes.* Because you are forgotten, half out of life,  
And never wrote a book, your thought is clear.  
Reformer, merchant, statesman, learned man,  
Dutiful husband, honest wife by turn,  
Cradle upon cradle, and all in flight and all  
Deformed because there is no deformity  
But saves us from a dream.

*Aherne.* And what of those  
That the last servile crescent has set free?

*Robartes.* Because all dark, like those that are all light,  
They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,  
Crying to one another like the bats;  
And having no desire they cannot tell  
What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph  
At the perfection of one's own obedience;  
And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;  
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,  
Insipid as the dough before it is baked,  
They change their bodies at a word.

*Aherne.* And then?

*Rohartes.* When all the dough has been so kneaded up  
That it can take what form cook Nature fancies,  
The first thin crescent is wheeled round once more.

*Aherne.* But the escape; the song's not finished yet.

*Robartes.* Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents.

The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow  
Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel  
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter -  
Out of that raving tide - is drawn betwixt  
Deformity of body and of mind.

*Aherne.* Were not our beds far off I'd ring the bell,  
Stand under the rough roof-timbers of the hall  
Beside the castle door, where all is stark  
Austerity, a place set out for wisdom  
That he will never find; I'd play a part;  
He would never know me after all these years  
But take me for some drunken countryman:  
I'd stand and mutter there until he caught  
"Hunchback and Sant and Fool," and that they came  
Under the three last crescents of the moon.  
And then I'd stagger out. He'd crack his wits  
Day after day, yet never find the meaning.

*And then he laughed to think that what seemed hard  
Should be so simple - a bat rose from the hazels  
And circled round him with its squeaky cry,  
The light in the tower window was put out.*

## The Celtic Mythology of Ireland: An Underpinning of Irish Poetry

Reading the work of William Butler Yeats can be a personally rewarding experience based on the startling beauty of his verse alone. Understanding the deeper meanings of much of his work, however, can be enhanced with a basic primer on the Celtic mythology embraced by the Irish. Not understanding, for instance, a reference to *Fergus* might interrupt your train of thought and ruin the rhythm of his poetry for you. *Fergus* was a Celtic/Irish hero and warrior king, a lover of Queen Medb and a powerful symbol of male virility. Also referred to as "the great horse," many phallic marvels are attributed to him.

This abbreviated primer will provide basic background and also will lead the serious reader to sources for in depth study.

Celtic mythology is a mythology of polytheism, the religion of the Iron Age Celts. Among Celts in close contact with Ancient Rome, such as the Gauls and Celtiberians, their mythology was obliterated for the most part by the Roman empire, the subsequent conversion of these Celts to Christianity, and, ultimately, the loss of their Celtic languages. The Celtic peoples who maintained either their political or linguistic identities (such as the Gaels, Picts, and Brythonic tribes of Great Britain

and Ireland) left vestigial remnants of their ancestral mythologies, put into written form during the Middle Ages.. It is thanks in large part to early Irish Catholic monks that Celtic mythology, languages, and history have been preserved at all. (Read Thomas Cahill's history, **How The Irish Saved Civilization.**)

The mythology of pre-Christian Ireland did not entirely survive the conversion to Christianity, but much of it was preserved, shorn of its religious meanings, in medieval Irish literature, which represents the most extensive and best preserved of all the branches of Celtic mythology. Although many of the manuscripts have failed to survive, and much more material was probably never committed to writing, there is enough remaining to enable the identification of distinct, somewhat overlapping, cycles: the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle and the Historical Cycle. There are also a number of extant mythological texts that do not fit into any of the cycles. Additionally, there are a large number of recorded folk tales that, while not strictly mythological, feature personages from one or more of these four cycles.

### The Mythological Cycle

The Mythological Cycle, comprising stories of the former gods and origins of the Irish, is the least well preserved of the four cycles. The most important sources are the **Metrical Dindshenchas** (or **Lore of Places**) and the **Lebor Gabála Érenn** (or **Book of Invasions**). Other manuscripts preserve such mythological tales as *The Dream of Aengus*, *The Wooing Of Étaín*, and *Cath Maige Tuireadh* (*The Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh*). One of the best known of all Irish stories, *Oidheadh Clainne Lir* (or *The Tragedy of the Children of Lir*), also is part of this cycle.

**Lebor Gabála Érenn** is a pseudo-history of Ireland, tracing the ancestry of the Irish back to before Noah. It tells of a series of invasions or "takings" of Ireland by a succession of peoples, the fifth of whom was the people known as the Tuatha Dé Danann ("Peoples of the Goddess Danu"), who were believed to have inhabited the island before the arrival of the Gaels, or Milesians. With the arrival of the Gaels, the Tuatha Dé Danann retired underground to become the fairy people of later myth and legend.

**The Metrical Dindshenchas** is the great onomastic work of early Ireland, giving the naming legends of significant places in a sequence of poems. It includes a lot of important information on Mythological Cycle figures and stories, including the Battle of Tailtiu, in which the Tuatha Dé Danann were defeated by the Milesians. (It is important to note that by the Middle Ages the Tuatha Dé Danann were not viewed so much as gods as the shape-shifting magician population of an earlier Golden Age of Ireland.) Texts such as **Lebor Gabála Érenn** and **Cath Maige Tuireadh** present them as kings and heroes of the distant past, complete with death-tales.

However there is considerable evidence, both in the texts and from the wider Celtic world, that they were once considered deities. Even after they are displaced as the rulers of Ireland, characters such as Lug, the Mórrígan, Aengus and Manannan appear in stories set centuries later, betraying their immortality. A poem in the **Book of Leinster** lists many of the Tuatha Dé, but ends “Although [the author] enumerates them, he does not worship them”. Goibniu, Creidhne and Luchta are referred to as Trí Dé Dána (“three gods of craftsmanship”), and the Dagda’s name is interpreted in medieval texts as “the good god”. Nuada is cognate with the British Go Nodens; Lug is a reflex of the pan-Celtic deity Lugus, the name of whom may indicate “Light”; Tuireann may be related to the Gaulish Taranis; Ogmia to Ogmios; the Badb to Catubodua.

## The Ulster Cycle

The Ulster Cycle is traditionally set around the time of Christ, and most of the action takes place in the provinces of Ulster and Connacht. It consists of a group of heroic tales dealing with the lives of Conchobar mac Nessa, king of Ulster, the great hero Cú Chulainn, the son of Lug (Lugh), and of their friends, lovers, and enemies. These are the Ulaid, or people of the North-Eastern corner of Ireland and the action of the stories centres round the royal court at Emain Macha (known in English as Navan Fort), close to the modern town of Armagh. The Ulaid had close links with the Irish colony in Scotland, and part of Cú Chulainn’s training takes place in that colony. The cycle consists of stories of the births, early lives, and training, wooings, battles, feastings, and deaths of the heroes and reflects a warrior society in which warfare consists mainly of single combats and wealth is measured mainly in cattle. These stories are written mainly in prose. The centrepiece of the Ulster Cycle is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Other important Ulster Cycle tales include *The Tragic Death of Aife’s only Son*, *Bricriu’s Feast*, and *The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*. *The Exile of the Sons of Usnach*, better known as the tragedy of Deirdre and the source of plays by John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats, and Vincent Woods, is also part of this cycle. This cycle is, in some respects, close to the mythological cycle. Some of the characters from the latter reappear, and the same sort of shape-shifting magic is much in evidence, side by side with a grim, almost callous realism. While we may suspect a few characters, such as Medb or Cú Roí, of once being deities, and while Cú Chulainn in particular displays superhuman prowess, the characters are mortal and associated with a specific time and place. If the Mythological Cycle represents a Golden Age, the Ulster Cycle is Ireland’s Heroic Age.

## The Fenian Cycle

Like the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle is concerned with the deeds of Irish heroes. The stories of the Fenian

Cycle appear to be set around the Third century and mainly in the provinces of Leinster and Munster. They differ from the other cycles in the strength of their links with the Irish-speaking community in Scotland and there are many extant Fenian texts from that country. They also differ from the Ulster Cycle in that the stories are told mainly in verse and that in tone they are nearer to the tradition of romance than the tradition of epic. The stories concern the doings of Fionn mac Cumhaill and his band of soldiers, the Fianna.

The single most important source for the Fenian Cycle is the **Acallam na Senórach** (Colloquy of the Old Men), which is found in two 15th-century manuscripts, the **Book of Lismore** and **Laud 610**, as well as a 17th-century manuscript from Killiney, County Dublin. The text is dated from linguistic evidence to the 12th century. The text records conversations between Cailte mac Rónáin and Oisín, the last surviving members of the Fianna, and Saint Patrick, and consists of about 8,000 lines. The late dates of the manuscripts may reflect a longer oral tradition for the Fenian stories.

The Fianna of the story are divided into the Clann Baiscne, led by Fionn mac Cumhaill (often rendered as “Finn MacCool”, Finn Son of Cumhall), and the Clann Morna, led by his enemy, Goll mac Morna. Goll killed Fionn’s father, Cumhal, in battle and the boy Fionn was brought up in secrecy. As a youth, while being trained in the art of poetry, he accidentally burned his thumb while cooking the Salmon of Knowledge, which allowed him to suck or bite his thumb in order to receive bursts of stupendous wisdom. He took his place as the leader of his band and numerous tales are told of their adventures.

Two of the greatest of the Irish tales, *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne) and *Oisín in Tír na nÓg* form part of the cycle. The Diarmuid and Grainne story, which is one of the few Fenian prose tales, is a probable source of Tristan and Iseult.

The world of the Fenian Cycle is one in which professional warriors spend their time hunting, fighting, and engaging in adventures in the spirit world. New entrants into the band are expected to be knowledgeable in poetry as well as undergo a number of physical tests or ordeals. There is not any religious element in these tales unless it is one of hero-worship.



## Yeats' Search for Rest: A Journey in Snapshots

By Marylin Mell

*My Soul. I summon to the winding ancient stair;  
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,  
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,  
Upon the breathless starlit air,  
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;  
Fix every wandering thought upon  
That quarter where all thought is done:  
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?*

—Excerpt from *The Winding Stair* (1928,

1939)

In a life cocoon wrapped by tumult, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) lived through World War I, World War II, and the Easter Rising where Irish rebels failed to oust occupying British forces, and so in his life and art, he continually sought peace, eventually emerging as its broker. To set the stage for his search for peace, a review of variations on the term “peace” is in order. The Italian and Spanish etymological roots of peace underscore its meaning as a way “to fasten,” “to covenant or agree.” In Old French, *pais* signified reconciliation, silence, or permission. In Old English “peace” was equated with happiness and, by the 12th century, a concept of “peace of mind,” emerged. It should be understood as similar to the underlying, more complex meaning of the ancient Hebrew greeting, *Shalom*. While generally understood to mean “peace,” it conveys multiple levels of meaning in its original Hebrew, including a depth of feeling, intent, emotion. More than simply peace, *Shalom* translates as complete peace: contentment, completeness, wholeness, well being, and harmony— health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfection, fullness, rest, the absence of agitation or discord.

The “peace” Yeats sought was both that of pacts and fastenings, and the higher, spiritual, complete “peace.

As a poet, Yeats understood he was born into responsibility. Until the 16th century, Celtic poets held the rights to serve as official protectors of the land, guarantors of a pact, functioning symbolically at the same hierarchical level of power as an archbishop. He understood too the weight of Roman culture. In Latin the word *pacem* indicated a compact, agreement, or treaty ending a war and offering tranquility. Yeats accepted the responsibility that after a war, or occupation by foreign forces, a poet should find a way to assist a culture in being reborn like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

As a young man, Yeats accepted the role of bard and worked to reconnect his contemporary Ireland with its past, consciously reviving his country’s almost forgotten heroes, including Cuchulain, Fergus, and De Danaan. (See Ancient Irish Heroes) Yeats wrote

*Easter 1916* as a tribute to the men who died for the cause of failed Irish nationalism. Here he illustrates what happens when peace is interrupted. And he documents it in a photographic, even snapshot style. Vivid faces are shown diminished, beginning to blur, until they slowly disappear into the grey of 18th century Dublin streets. He cautions how “too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart,” and so warns us against mucking about with undue ugliness for too long.

If we fail to establish a “*place of stone*,” discover and keep returning to our sanctuary spot where we can reset, we will be lost. Yeats’ entreaty to retreat and find a space to redirect our failed energies surfaces as pivotal throughout his work: poetry, drama, essays, and miscellanea.



Living in a tumultuous age that forced him to keep reinventing himself, keep ascending the winding ancient stair and discover what had been lost or tossed aside, Yeats realized that every so often a person must stop and carve out a space apart for himself and even for his people. Born to an age characterized by intense violence and cycles of chaos, he understood that peace would never arrive as stationary, or final, that is, as something constant and fixed. Instead, it needs to be understood as something to be courted, stylistically granted its own space, set forth as a moment’s respite. Peace became for Yeats something in need of crafting.

Slowly the bard came to the realization that peace must be molded within our lives, embraced, welcomed. In one of his early poems, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, peace is shown as sculpted in the space where we might hold ourselves, not aloof, but for a time apart:

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree. . .*

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,*

*Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core. (1892)*

As early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Yeats declared that peace needs to be called out to and held taut within its own framing moment. We can stir it up, shake it loose, spread it around us, but not nail it down. Peace will be elusive. It becomes the duty of the animated imagination to offer us that space where we can breathe, to move about more easily. Poetry becomes a space for stopping, and rejecting the savage effects of total chaos. It offers us the capacity of entering, even if only momentarily, into the stillness held at the center.

Yet for the poet and those who would regenerate themselves in the midst of crisis, peace must be scripted as essential, and honored in the fullness of its transitory presence. Peace surfaces as part of a sequence, as a contribution to the processes of renewal and transformation. Yeats will later share his meditations upon life's dramatic and patterned movements in **The Vision** (1925, 1937.) He chose to detail these movements in spiraling forms he called gryes.

Yeats' intricately patterned movement of these gryes has baffled readers and annoyed critics for decades. In their elemental form, the gryes are spiraling circles. He used depictions of whirling rings round one upon another to chart how movements in history and in individual lives can be seen as interrelated, often moving together in tandem. Arguably, his system of notations is unduly complex, incorporating funnels, cones, squares, diamonds, hourglasses and other double helix-like structures. Yeats and his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees invented and diagramed these forms to plot out how history and individual lives may become conjoined. It might be thought of as how a stream empties into a river. Yeats' interest in astrology and the occult, and his membership in "The Golden Dawn," (For details, see **The Golden Dawn**.) led him to believe that both historical and human paths could not be fundamentally altered, although their tempos could be quickened or slackened.

After writing *The Second Coming* (1921), Yeats felt it would be helpful to release to the public this elaborate system of notations, and so he published his first edition of **The Vision** in 1925, and then his second edition, radically revised, in 1937. In an elemental fashion, the gryes function as a way to illustrate how our lives flow within an accordion-like movement, maximizing a potential, if you will, and then flattening out until the next expansion. Thus, one gyre often can be seen collapsing into the next, allowing single patterns to be doubled. Living in Thor Ballylee Castle and inspired by the "Automatic Writing" of his wife Georgie Hyde-Lees, (See **Automatic Writing**.) Yeats eventually

insisted upon the need for even greater complexity, and so incorporated the Twenty Eight Phases of the Moon into his own already overly elaborate system. Writing to his publisher, Yeats did admit that he might be delusional, but boasted "this book (is) my book of books."

Yeats continued to believe that the world should be grasped within these fantastic patterns of expansion and collapse. As a trained astrologer, he could not help but be fascinated by how the moon's waxing and waning energies seemed to typify life's repeating patterns of progression and regression. His 1919 poem *Phases of the Moon*, styled as a conversation between an old man and his companion, explores how the different phases of the moon can be correlated to different personas. Robartes offers his thoughts while watching the moon wane:

*Hunchback and Saint and Fool are the last crescents.  
The burning bow that once could shoot an arrow  
Out of the up and down, the wagon-wheel  
Of beauty's cruelty and wisdom's chatter –*

## The Spirit Moves Me: Automatic Writing

**George (Georgie) Hyde-Lees**, the wife of **William Butler Yeats**, claimed that she could write automatically. Yeats, fascinated with her "automatic writing" experiments, was an adherent of the belief that the creative impulse to write can be "automatic," often beyond the control of the author.

It is not unusual, in fact, for writers, including famous contemporary authors to describe being taken over by the voices of their characters, to explain why they write as simply "because I must."

Automatic writing as a spiritual practice was reported by **Hyppolyte Taine** in the preface to the third edition of his famous **De l'Intelligence**, published in 1878. Later, **Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa**—the multi-lingual Portuguese poet, writer, literary critic, translator, publisher, and philosopher, described as one of the most significant literary figures of the 20th century and one of the greatest poets in the Portuguese language—believed that writers not only are visionary but are taken over by creative spirits. In his work, he described "ethereal visions" and "magnetic auras." He also claimed to have experienced automatic writing. In his own words, he felt "sometimes being owned by something else" or having a "very curious sensation" in the right arm which "was lifted into the air without" his will.

In 1975, **Wendy Hart** of Maidenhead claimed that she wrote automatically about Nicholas Moore, a sea captain who died in 1642. Her husband, who did research on Moore, affirmed that this person had resided at St Columb Major in Cornwall during the English Civil War.

*Out of that raving tide – is drawn betwixt  
Deformity of body and of mind.*

In the personas or mask phases Yeats lists and develops in **The Vision**, the Hunchback, Saint, and Fool are affixed to the moon's final crescent stages. Specifically, the movement of the *arrow*, *wagon wheel*, and *tide* indicate the proverbial "up(s) and down(s)" of life. Something can be shot, rolled and pulled, or ridden across us like waves crashing. Continually things can be seen as building up or petering out. Throughout his oeuvre, Yeats will reveal this proclivity to rely upon images whose movement mimics that of the moon and waves. His interest in nature—human and superhuman, earthly and divine—is to chart how we must relinquish our illusion of control. Peace, it would seem, can at best be intermittently experienced and maybe most fully in our conscious acts of acquiescence. It arises again and again in snapshot moments.

Yeats' search for equilibrium, for the ability to be at rest—mentally, physically, spiritually—leads him towards acceptance of a pre-set order beyond his control. Yeats' meditations on the Hunchback, Saint, and Fool suggest a concern for exploring all aspects of being human, even those lived at the edges. Here types of individuals are shown as embodied in the space "*drawn betwixt / Deformity of body and of mind*. These phases emerge as instances, or the outcome of a chain of experiences.

It seems that for Yeats peace continually arises at that juncture within his system of double gyres where two opposites, most crudely grasped as the base and the apex of any given gyre, interact. It is the minimal of one element implying the maximum of its opposite. Peace arrives just before, or just after, chaotic movements pushing towards a state of full coalescence or dissolution. It surfaces and must be seized in snapshot-like fashion.

In *Phases of the Moon* the Hunchback, Saint and Fool mirror some of the extreme movements of the *arrow*, *wagon wheel*, and *tide* illustrating how poetry must offer instances where the self can be seen at rest and in action, ironically often wobbling in progress towards its own zenith and nadir. The early phases of the gyre represent the Beginning of Energy. Stage Two is configured as Self, or a Child of Nature, but by Stage Five Self-Consciousness emerges in tandem with a Separation from Innocence, so that now the Disturber and the Wanderer may appear. As a bard, one who speaks upon behalf of the collective, Yeats seeks to locate and then comment on the movement of experience across these stages.

Peace is pinpointed as occurring at almost this exact point of exchange. Even as the total volume of one gyre begins to lessen, its opposite increases. What happens is that there can never be more than a momentary predominance of one element over its opposite.

Yeats' search for peace zones in on the realization that balance depends upon recognition of

## Vico and Hegel

**Giovan Battista (Giambattista) Vico** was an Neapolitan political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist of the 17th and 18th centuries. He criticised the expansion and development of rationalism and was an apologist of classical antiquity. Vico is often credited with inaugurating the modern concept of the philosophy of history. Although the precise term is not found in his texts, Vico did discuss a "history of philosophy narrated philosophically."

**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** was a German philosopher of the 18th and 19th centuries and a major figure in German Idealism. His historicist and idealist account of reality revolutionized European philosophy and was an important precursor to Continental philosophy and Marxism. Hegel developed a comprehensive philosophical framework, or "system", of Absolute idealism to account in an integrated and developmental way for the relation of mind and nature, the subject and object of knowledge, psychology, the state, history, art, religion, and philosophy. In particular, he developed the concept that mind or spirit manifested itself in a set of contradictions and oppositions that it ultimately integrated and united, without eliminating either pole or reducing one to the other. Examples of such contradictions include those between nature and freedom, and between immanence and transcendence.

the interdependency of all things. For the purpose of easy visualization here, consider the imagery of Yin-Yang. Even a glimpse of this Chinese Mandala suggests that seemingly opposite forces are to be understood as interconnected and interdependent. In the imagery evoked in the poem *The Winding Stair*, the "*broken crumbling battlement*" is juxtaposed to the "*breathless starlit air*," the *star* to the *hidden pole*, and "*That quarter where all thought is done*" is placed beside "the problem of *Who can distinguish darkness from the soul*." The deteriorating battlement symbolizes earthly struggles set against a celestial heaven. To ascend is to move towards the next step, towards what is hidden, and as yet not known.

In this poem, Yeats locates the spot "*where thought is done*" as existing close to the space where theological questions begin as in "*Who can distinguish darkness from the soul*"? Ideas, or phases of life, once believed to have been finished will need sometimes to be reawakened. Borrowing from Eastern thought, Yeats underscores life and its energies as cyclical. Where is the mystic who will, for example, be able to locate and then be able to explain differences between darkness and the soul? Peace is reinforced by abilities to discern and embrace the wobbling nature of life, its fits and starts, leaps and starts.



Yeats' poetry dances in this snapshot space, the phases in between, but also at the points of full development, even when they can only be seen as transitory and fleeting. Movement characterized by both the Chinese Yin-Yang and the Phases of the Moon are to be grasped as incremental, that is, as slowly unfolding. It is as if Yeats slowly comes to believe that life is what we must lean into, rather than against. Winds of change will prevail even if we fight against them.

Following the philosophical lineage of Georg Hegel, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, Yeats explores how systems may be best interpreted within cycles of their own constant movement. It is best to both observe and name these cycles, whether personal or historical. *Zeitgeist* shall have its dance, and there will be great benefits when we finally come to understand both the need for and consequences of adaptations. Understanding the rhythms of an era or a life allows for us to be adept at recalibration. Patterns of frenzy and rest will be interspersed. Yet inside Yeats' poetry, peace is repeatedly captured in snapshot style as if one could momentarily still the base or apex of an experience before it deteriorates and falls away.

Yeats has the astonishing capacity to pinpoint these key points of fluctuations with great precision as is seen in his search for a centralizing lament in *Sailing to Byzantium*:

*An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing . . .*

*Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity. (1926)*

Reference to Yeats' specialized use of the term *tinctures* is helpful to cite here to help us see the tension between the One (race, collective) and the Many (individual, subjective). The aging man epitomized here is both himself and all of us. In his working out of the Automatic Script with his wife Georgie, Yeats understood that since a man's life begins in his body, it is likely that he will spend his life fighting against disillusionment, too easily falling prey to false pursuits and illusion. Inevitably, there will be stumbles.

In the imagery used in *Sailing to Byzantium*, an aged man is pictured as a "tattered coat upon a stick" and understood as a "paltry thing" since he is separated from his "soul" which might "clap its hands and sing." With finesse, man as "paltry thing" signifies both the individual and his race. What interests the poet here is focus upon the deterioration of the body. The heart may be asked to consume itself as if "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal." This imagery of self-consumption is placed beside the "artifice of eternity," to that which stays and

exceeds the temporal. As in "that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea" evoked in "Byzantium" (1930), a tension is poetically established between life and death, or between what changes and what is immutable: "a mouth that has no moisture and no breath" is juxtaposed to "changeless metal" and the "flames begotten of flames" that "no faggots feed, or flames have lit."

In his youth, Yeats revived the wisdom of Celtic kings and Druids, but as an older man he offered homage to one of the world's great civilizations, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire. With the finesse of great artistry and the insights gathered by studying what many have considered the esoteric, Yeats finds peace by doubling back to Byzantium and its eternal glory. Not unlike the many world tourists who still flock to see the Blue Mosque and visit Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, he seeks to revere, but also uncover its abiding appeal. Yet, more dramatically, he is aware that in his own attempts to offer us glimpses into the greatness of Byzantium's past glory, he offers us a spiritual tipping point. Here was a great civilization in search of making the divine tangible, and it, too, vanished. In looking back at the glory that was Constantinople, Yeats wishes to offer us a snapshot of the majesty of the world. He wants to grapple with the human capacity to design intricate patterns. He wants to explore our need to glorify what remains beyond human touch and sight. Here he holds the tension tight between human limitation and spiritual expansion.

Inside the poem "Byzantium," this centralizing tension is named as the space where "all complexities of fury leave, / Dying into a dance, / An agony of trance." As readers of the poem, we understand Yeats is praising the glory days of Constantinople as one of the moments where humanity veered closest to the divine. Here where the sleeping soldiers fell asleep beneath one of the world's most gorgeous starlit domes, we can see Yeats in search of his elusive peace. Dynamic rest is pursued inside this poem. We are offered several poses where the human soul can be pictured at rest, and shown how to reconcile our wrestling between body and spirit.

Within our bodies, we are all too easily wearied. Spirit is what brings us closest to permanence. Yet for Yeats, it is the tension between the two that enchants him, and he would lead us there. When residing within worldly space, we are encased inside our frustrations even as we seek to slip past them. Hagia Sophia stands as a marvel and a testament to the praise we would offer the divine.

Inside this poem, Yeats calls out to the presence of the other world. He invokes the presence of "Spirit after Spirit," as if in welcoming them, he could unite worlds too often rather harshly split apart.

Positioning himself as an inheritor of the pre-Socratic tradition of "warring opposites," Yeats utilized variant forms of doubling in his work, especially polarities, contraries, and oppositions. It might be suggested that part of these concerns flow from his work as a trained astrologer, and his charting of trines, squares, and conjunctions. In setting up his theory of *antitheticity*, literary critic Hazard Adams indicated

that his search here was for “sameness with a difference.” In setting up his poles within **The Vision**, the *Primary* is identified with the Dark Side of the Moon and the *Antithetical* with the Full Moon.

Yeats is interested in how they can be seen as two sides of the same coin, a flipping, a redistribution of a centralizing energy into its parts. Yeats borrowed inspiration from Giambattista Vico's concept of “poetic wisdom” and William Blake's concept of “contraries.” In searching for rest, Yeats often needed to allow for a doubling, one that might be held as stationary if only for a moment.

His search was for what was most exquisite.

At the age of 24, Yeats created this mantra for himself: “hammer all your thoughts into unity.” In the poem *To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing* (1916), Yeats works through the dichotomy of success and failure:

*Now all the truth is out,  
Be secret and take defeat  
From any brazen throat,  
For how can you compete,  
Being honor bred, with one  
Who were it proved he lies  
Were neither shamed in his own  
Nor in his neighbors' eyes;  
Bred to a harder thing  
Than Triumph, turn away  
And like a laughing string  
Whereon mad fingers play  
Amid a place of stone,  
Be secret and exult,  
Because of all things known  
That is most difficult.*

Here he seems to suggest that failure may ultimately be a public, rather than personal experience. He indicates that there are many who would lie, extort, and cheat to achieve their ends. But for those who are “honour bred,” they must recognize that they march to a different drummer.

Inside this poem, Yeats locates peace as “amid a place of stone.” Most elementally, it is to be understood as a place apart. It will be the place where others will not be able to assist you in your recovery. After public failure, you will need to establish your private peace. Alone you will need to transform your failure into success. This “place of stone” owes its linguistic origins to the ancient Iranian Avestan language. Etymologically, *stone* registers as a *heap*. This origin of the world playfully suggests how the word stone reverberates with a sense of abundance. Yeats saw that we could thrive “amid a place of stone.” We could build a fortress within the psyche, a place where we might “Be secret and exult.”

*To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing* offers its own unique climax. To learn to dance when those about you would have crushed you is an extraordinary achievement. Peace here is gorgeously presented as occurring in the aftermath of trouble. The

peace “which comes dropping slow” flattens out ugliness, eroding and toppling it. Finally, peace can be appear as if singular. What pulls us away from peace has been exorcised. Pragmatism is wrapped up inside mysticism.

This poem offers practical and powerful instructions on how to recover from grief. We are advised to imitate the vibrations of a “laughing string / Whereon mad fingers play.” Repeatedly, Yeats' wisdom is to yield to madness, to accept the craziness of the most recent injustice experienced. In recognizing the depth of the intent of others to harm you, there can be a breakthrough. Success follows after failure. We must learn to walk through fire. In Yeats' desire to hammer all into a unity, all progressions must be counted. Attempting to focus on what is only singular cannot be sustained. Whatever is being experienced already holds, inside of it, its opposition. Failure for Yeats is the doubled down side of success.

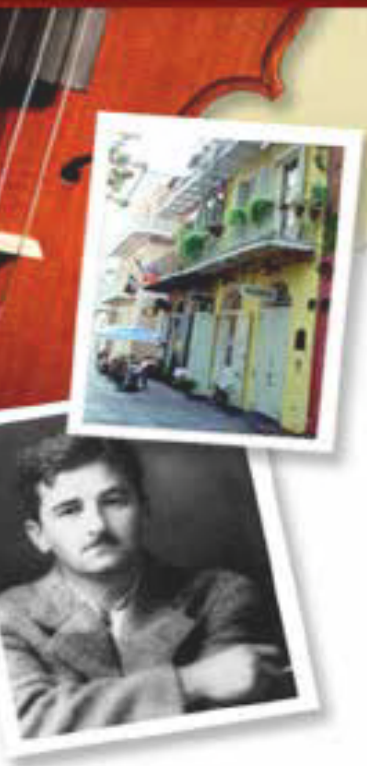
As a master poet, Yeats can be seen as continually seeking to find his place of rest. This should not be understood only as escape, since it also figures as an arrival. In the midst of chaos, we have the obligation to find a momentary buttress, a place where the worst of the world can be held at bay. In his poem *To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing*, Yeats locates us as never far from the “laughing string / Whereon mad fingers play,” and suggests the importance of being able to step aside from the fray.

At the very least, we need to train ourselves to be prepared for assault.

Finally, we might praise William Butler Yeats as the one who insisted that we must learn to live amidst the depth of spirits – those of our ancestors and those of our own deepest selves.

**Marylin Mell, Ph.D.**, coordinator of the Department of English at Dillard University in New Orleans, teaches, poetry, film, novel, essay, literary criticism, and literature of major authors, currently is working on a film theory book entitled, **Caught: Queens, Cinema, and the Loss of the Dialectic**, a work reviewing over 250 films and exploring how the majority of films focused on queens tends to represent them as transfixed by romance rather than empowered by their political status. She also is completing a novel, **Twisted Branches**, a work set in New Orleans focusing on how modern families are still haunted by the unresolved burdens of their ancestors. Her recent courses have focused on focused on the poetry, plays, and essays of William Butler Yeats, Shakespeare, Critical Theory, and a film course on the Representation of Women in the Media or, more precisely, **The Woman Tricked**.

## New Poetry



*The Wanderer, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*



## After The Storm: A Brick As Fragile As A Dream

By Rodger Kamenetz

This would be coffee. This would be tea.  
The right hand, wounded. The left hand, alone.  
In the air, a chimney. In the eye, a flame.  
And a hammer. And a hammer.

With so much building, dust coats the eyelids,  
The sponge of the lung. The attic's finished  
Before the basement's exposed. That's being lofty.  
But now the foundation must be ripped out

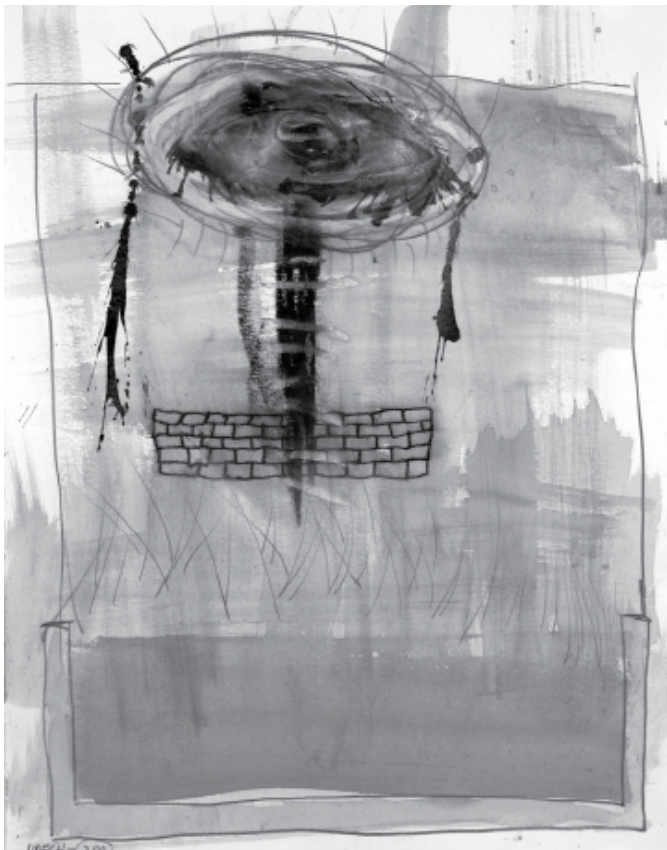
And a new one dug. The earth has teeth.  
It's no place to go barefoot, it's raw.  
Blood clay. If you find an old bone,  
Be sure it's not canine before you call 911.

Working in the dark means working  
Without a plan. Without semblance of order.  
Form & content? Digging and sifting,  
Even tasting the dirt, is more like it.

The gods of the Chevrolet and the Volkswagen agree:  
This would be coffee. This would be tea.  
Here is a hammer and here the fireplace.  
Here the hand missing a finger. Here cruel water  
That burns a mark on stone.



*In a cross-pollination of the arts, internationally noted poet and non-fiction author **Rodger Kamenetz** and fine artist, **Michael Hafftka**, an abstract expressionist, collaborated to produce the new collection, **To Die Next To You**.*



## My Maker

By Geoff Munsterman

Her bare feet smolder like showered fires.  
Her skin cold like the night rippled  
quick as reflections of old tugboats  
grunting doomed canals.

My maker.

I hiss with a crack, turned to the fur  
of birth. Before. This maker menaces  
this horseshoe driveway I daily played  
while the music of roofers boomed off  
levee heavier than any hammer swing.

Here I am dead and no way in hell were  
my last words: *oh my god this cheesecake  
rocks or I just so happy I could die right now*  
because that's not the way I'd ever talk  
unless I was nervous around strangers.

My maker is no stranger. Decades, she  
dressed me down from her front porch  
for playing too close to bushes filled  
with garter snakes, subbed in when my  
Algebra teacher blew her chalk hand off  
sawing through a live wire, called cops  
when the Ohio sirens sang my crimes.

Gold flecks at brown pupils' edges robbed  
her stare of bold black irises of dominance.  
Compensates with brows that tower two  
swollen eyelids smeared burnt amethyst.  
Old age makes my maker cranky, makes her  
mother-who-outlives-her-children strong.  
Her lips that breathed you into existence  
also the kiss that greets failed finally flesh.

Her whole life reduced to stalking mine.  
She is omnipresent, she is deaf to everything  
but me and my defeating.

My maker, unaware  
that when she looks me in the eye I'll flash my  
didn't-brush-enough-or-floss-at-all smile,  
nod, and make my maker play with me

& all this horseshoe driveway left unchalked  
until her hard soles soften, her cracked eyes melt,  
& childhood beats the need to make anything  
but sundaes, smiles, and sprinkler rainbows,  
telling my maker *I'll let go if you do first.*

## Grace Notes

By Geoff Munsterman

Your station in life is waiting  
in the line of a po-boy shop  
where grease sneers hood vents  
itching to be steamed.

Before your number comes up  
you hear from three blocks away  
the church organist practicing.  
Her felt flats collapse brass  
peddles as her fingers figure  
how to best tickle visions  
to her parishioners' heads.

Face and forearms bathed  
in a gravy no napkin saturates,  
you catch the organist mistaking  
b flat for b sharp.

Sometimes

we need our deities to feel  
human for a minute,  
to curse their errors,  
compelled to return  
to first measure.

## Tell Me True

By Geoff Munsterman

Now the old ghost dangle their bare feet  
from tailgates—chins uplifted by the gift  
of no wishes left to watch rot. Pickups  
made up of too much rust to tow, they  
oxidize among a neglected quilt of weeds  
& cede troubles of the living to the living.

Deaths letting them move on, the dead  
don't feel the need to say that a load of grief  
increasing heartbeats won't buckle the porch  
because the porch was built to last. That,  
or articulating waters always retreat back  
to the swamp with time won't stop a hungry  
fawn from wondering whether there will ever  
be enough grass to graze.

Instead, they unknot  
rolled-up twists of denim slipping over spectral  
ankles cooled in the yellow grin of water & wade  
toward home.

*Geoff Munsterman's poems have been featured in Poets for Living Waters, The Southern Poetry Anthology, story | south, The New Laurel Review, and Margie to name a few. His debut collection Because the Stars Shine Through It is just out from Lavender Ink and he is hard at work on the follow-up, the book-length poem Where Scars Wake. His shingle hangs in New Orleans. Geoff, who has been a part of The Double Dealer team since he was an intern while attending New Orleans Center for Creative Art, is now Associate Editor.*



## Reading Billy Collins' "The Names" with My Daughter

By Jane Satterfield

Partway through middle school,  
partway through the poetry unit  
they wonder why read them, why write  
them? as they read, aloud, as a class  
Billy Collins' "The Names." I started  
to cry, she says, and I couldn't  
stop myself. Even now, as she looks  
out to our yard from the window seat  
next to my desk, she's tearing up.  
The poem, all those names, it's  
so so so sad. The crying in front  
of your classmates, I ask,  
or something about the poem?—which  
I don't know and which she reads to me.  
It's unseasonably warm for January.  
The window's open; the robins  
and starlings have not yet arrived.  
The poem, marking a moment, makes  
that moment stretch on past the frame of its making—All  
sad  
she says, going silent. All those names  
meaning people. Their lives! But Mom—  
I remember so little—  
I was six, school stopped, suddenly  
and for no reason, the principal over  
the loudspeaker and then the teachers  
whispering out in the halls. Mrs. Denning  
had two girls of her own in another school,

did she worry while she asked us to get  
up out of our seats and go to the reading  
corner, leaving our math books open?  
Then story after story  
which I don't even remember,  
just reading like that until parents  
arrived, one after another.  
We guessed an accident, something  
grown-ups wanted  
to hide and I still liked my plaid  
uniform then, my oxford shoes. An attack  
you told me, not a war. The radio a room  
away, out of your hearing—all day I  
kept it running. The breeze of the present kicks up;  
children trail from the school, small squadrons  
in our alley. A poem, she sees, is a monument.  
A field of meaning. We witness and we wake.

From **Her Familiars** (Elixir, 2013), published here  
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Jane Satterfield

*Jane Satterfield's most recent book is **Her Familiars**, published in 2013 by Elixir Press. She is the author of two previous books of poems: *Assignment at Vanishing Point*, and *Shepherdess with an Automatic*, as well as **Daughters of Empire: A Memoir of a Year in Britain and Beyond**. Her awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in poetry, the William Faulkner Society's Gold Medal for the Essay, the Florida Review Editors' Prize in nonfiction, the Mslexia women's poetry prize, and the 49th Parallel Poetry Prize from *The Bellingham Review*. Satterfield is the literary editor for the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative* and teaches at Loyola University Maryland. Ms. Satterfield has agreed to judge the 2014 poetry category of the **William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**, which opens for entries on January 1.*

## Egyptian Spring

By Andy Young

it begins with human wicks  
and ends with laughing women  
and an anklet-ed dove

a wedding with a tank backdrop  
a wedding couple inking  
fingers at the first election

it begins with a vegetable seller  
and ends with human wicks  
cross crescent unbelievers



Christians circling  
Muslims praying circling  
praying Christians

it begins with human wicks  
and ends with the martyr  
who died with a smile

on his face it begins  
with the New Year's bomb  
in the church it begins

with Khaled Said's face  
printed in papers beaten  
by cop thugs in daylight it ends

with paper saved from burning  
that bomb was ordered  
by the Interior Ministry it begins

with tens of thousands lining up  
no one claiming the martyr's  
body everyone there to see its smile



**Andy Young** is the co-editor of *Meena*, a bilingual Arabic-English literary journal, and teaches Creative Writing at New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. Her work was recently featured on National Public Radio's "The World" and published in *Callaloo*, *Mizna*, and *The Cortland Review*. Her chapbook, *The People is Singular*, collaboration with Egyptian photographer Salwa Rashad, which focuses on the Egyptian Revolution, was published in January 2012 by Press Street Press. Her chapbook, **All Fires the Fire**, a beautiful edition on handmade paper, was published by Faulkner House Books. Andy is a winner of the Faulkner Society's gold medal for Poetry.

## Because People Ask What My Daughter Will Think Of My Poems When She's 16

By Beth Ann Fennelly

Daughter, the light of the future is apricot, and in it you are not the thigh-child pointing her earnest index finger to the yellow balloon clearing the willows and drifting higher, you're the balloon. I'm the grasping hand. Or I'm the oo in balloon. I'll meet you there. I'm the brown strings, formerly violets, you didn't water. I'm the hole in the photo, you're the un-safety scissors. I'm the lint in the corners of my purse after you steal the coins, brown-bag lunch you pitch after leaving my house, buttons you undo after I've okayed your blouse. Poems you burn in the sink. Poems that had to go and use your name. never mind that soon you'll be 16, hate your name. I'm the resemblance you deny, fat ass you hope your boyfriends never see. I'll meet you there, that is my promise and my threat, with this yellow balloon as my witness, even if I'm dead, I'll meet you there.



**Beth Ann Fennelly's** new book, **The Tilted World**, is a novel co-written with her husband **Tom Franklin**. Her books of poetry include **A Different Kind of Hunger**, **Tender Hooks**, **Open House** and **Unmentionables**. She directs the MFA program at the University of Mississippi.

## Tales of Transformations, Shamanistically Speaking

By Liv S.M. Evensen, Ph.D, of Oslo, Norway

(**Editor's Note:** Dr. Evensen's new poetry collection, **Tales of Transformations**, are stories created through connections with her inner muse, her personal Shaman, in dreamscapes. Presented in poetic "wrappings," her dream-inspired works are healing tales, inspired in part by the experiences of two close friends, who have been healed through natural healing arts including especially shamanistic dream therapy and interpretation, whose experiences have inspired similar soul-healing experiences for the author.)

### Spiritual Snakes

Outside in an open square  
 elongated in fact  
 like the one where Lady Fair  
 once sat on a gentleman's horse  
 transformed from a small darkened dragon wings spread  
 wide  
 in humor and delight  
 where the Lady wore a Middle Ages tall hat  
 with a shimmering beautiful trail  
 a younger one looked at snakes in various shapes and siz'  
 a bit fearful, however too not much, she approached these  
 light  
 snakes crawling around and she knew somehow their  
 sounds

the snakes bore an air around them  
 they were actually deeply alive  
 kind, these snakes of light crawling about  
 so the young lady of slight fear felt she needed to feed  
 them  
 so that they would not go away again

one loved potatoes, the boiled ones she knew herself  
 to like very much and so a bowl was given the thickest  
 snake where teeth were merely two "fangs" once  
 connected  
 in strong love to the gentleman now gone with the winds  
 that once blew over the Middle Ages Lady and her  
 dragon friend

another snake was small, oh so small, just a thin-k black  
 line  
 actually, so the less and less fearful young, motherly one  
 put the "black line"-snake very carefully into a glass  
 saucer  
 and poured in some water, while she looked over to an  
 even  
 younger one standing in front of a radio playing full

volume

the classical piece of Vivaldi's 4 Seasons...

the Lady-of-the-Spiritual-Snakes knew that this poem is  
 about  
 thick "snake-like" living bonds to loved one, now gone,  
 yet somehow feelings are still alive, yet not connected  
 now  
 and so feelings are of spiritual love in a forgiven fashion  
 snakes are moving smoothly around as The Lady of slight  
 fear asks the younger one to turn the music full blast  
 down...

The younger one refuses to turn down the music  
 no need to hide the beauty of music and soul, snakes and  
 all...

the day wore on in lightness not gone...

### God A Gentleman

God, a Gentleman, lent her his dinner jacket  
 large and dark  
 when she was cold and saddened  
 got it back  
 with question of him being tired  
 rings around his eyes  
 had been up with her  
 through long silent night  
 ...trust came about...

a cupboard appeared in thin thin air  
 some small lidded plastic jars with alcohol that's left  
 like medicine for a man's once broken spirit  
 his broken hearted ways  
 to sooth a woundedness now in the past  
 like in a nurse's, her, hands  
 undrinkable, thank goodness for that  
 the place of venue where she once had found  
 a letter to the other  
 and she found that God the Gentleman  
 was around after all "in the fodder"  
 a youngster came around with a laugh  
 happily she asked what that was all about  
 the once saddened one answered with a smile  
 "thank you for asking, darl'n bairn"

she saw God in his dark suit walk to edge of line  
 a darkly clad group of people, followers he had  
 going on, going home for some

she, the once cold and saddened one  
 who had fallen in love  
 with the  
 light drinking-for-soothing

once so broken hearted man  
once and for all  
dropped her once defenses  
once large and fear,  
spoke to God, the dinner jacket clad one:

see you around!

...god inside of every one....

## A Cross Over Fine

Series of Transformations-end-of-lines

A Cross-Over Fine for Blue Dressed Ladies  
standing in Line with Young Orphaned One  
who accidentally caused the death of a brother  
yet there is no such thing  
as dresses are weaved of the very thing  
that caused Blues of Heart Bonds once broken  
and tears were all Tokens of how  
much she had cared now contains  
broken loves now gone the cross-over  
to the other side in love and laughter  
and meetings fine in laughter and smiles

relationships gone  
death only symbol of broken love  
loves and life live on  
cross-over from tragedy once  
or twice  
and  
so  
on  
...

## THE GOLDEN TENDER ONE

I watch her there in front of window pane  
large and clear and clean, her head  
turned away, I see a profile, tender, golden one  
the impressionable poet sits while thinking of  
who knows as loved ones are all gone  
yet here she is in front of window pane  
large and clear and clean as seen  
by colleague, head and chest turn up  
as he's looking in from outside window  
and no harm ever came from having shown  
herself, her naked poet's soul  
the golden tender one

with poem long for colleagues bright  
who needed something warm and light  
to take home end of school year  
one Holy Christmas Night

## Thank You

Thank you for reminding me of what I already knew  
thank you for showing me in a dream, that I am like a kid  
going on a huge ship, going home, to sweet true home  
me too, on planet earth, for all, for the time to come,  
as there will be changes, so do not fear, no water will  
come  
into the boat that we are in, like a child I sit in the  
darkness  
of the bottom of the boat, am being shown a circle in the  
floor  
no water will come in, I get to see this as I am also being  
asked  
by Richard's father, the real one, to remember him only as  
he was  
a young boy with "greased hair" a cocky youngster once  
with his own dreams, as a child of his mom who cared,  
to remember only this  
as the rest has been freed up, worked through  
nothing real happened between you in all those years  
there was really nothing there  
even if you lived in same house, similar journey  
"same life" you shared nothing real, later Richard has  
answered the call from his heavenly father to come up  
from the cellars of his hidings and memories are cleared  
he has left also the past behind, it's gone, his father is  
asking  
you to remember only that: he was also once a young  
child  
and a youngster without fear, a romantic without a hat.

**Liv S.M. Evensen** is a resident of Oslo, Norway, where  
djr was born in 1949. She presently a language teacher  
to youngsters with hearing impairments, and am a school  
librarian at her school. Her professional background as  
a teacher is also that of drama and special education  
for "ordinary" youngsters. Through her background in  
expressive arts, she is a freelance speaker with her own  
firm: The Fabel Lab Creative Workshops. She holds a B.S.  
from the University of Oslo, Norway, with the subjects  
Drama, Media and Communications and Educational  
Sciences. The latter is with emphasis on "Myths, fables  
and fairy tales in multicultural communications, drama",  
and includes and includes training in arts therapy, such as  
intuitive painting, tai chi, meditation on sound/toning and  
dreamwork, and drama courses over the last ten years.



**Editor's Note:** The following poem and accompanying art image are from the new book, **Nocturnes**, released this year by Luna Press, a new press created by the husband and wife team Dalt Wonk and Joséphine Sacabo for the specific purpose of creating beautiful books representing a cross pollination of the arts.

## Twilight

By Dalt Wonk

Softly, our renegade fragments  
fit back in the broken puzzle.  
Sight curls up, its claws withdrawn.  
And separateness grows blurred,

like a sunken hull, absolved  
at last from destinations —  
those bright toys, dangling forever  
out of reach, to waken

the joyful avarice of a baby's smile.  
And the infinite — revealed slowly  
like the landscape on a fan —

promises the refuge  
of some greater question, its summit  
glimmering intermittently with hope.



*Twilight* by Joséphine Sacabo

**Dalt Wonk** is a well-known New Orleans actor, playwright, poet, and visual artist. With his wife, internationally noted actress, art photographer, and author **Joséphine Sacabo**, he is co-founder of the new Luna Press, a New Orleans publishing firm devoted to creating fine art books. The first offerings of Luna Press are **Nocturnes**, a collection of Joséphine's images and Dalt's poetry, and **French Quarter Fables**, a collection of Dalt's fables and watercolor illustrations. Latest books issued by Luna Press are **Inventing Reality: New Orleans Visionary Photography**, a curated anthology of work by 27 contemporary New Orleans photographers, an incredible showcase of New Orleans talent, and **The Riddles of Existence**, a fabulous art deck of cards taking off on Tarot Cards, written and illustrated by Dalt for having fun instead of predicting the future. Dalt and Joséphine, founding members of the Faulkner Society, were our special guests of honor for **Juleps in June, 2013**. Dalt and Joséphine each contributed one of their fabulous images for auction to benefit the literary and literacy projects of the Faulkner Society. They in fact have contributed to "the image" of the Faulkner Society since it was founded in 1990. The image here is Joséphine's **Twilight**. Copies of their books may be obtained through Faulkner House Books, [Faulkhous@aol.com](mailto:Faulkhous@aol.com).

Special thanks to **Josephine Sacabo**, who has been responsible for the Faulkner House image since its inception. Most recently, Josephine and Dalt donated work for the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society's Juleps in June, 2013.

She has graciously provided images for *The Double Dealer's* 2013 section covers, such as "The Moon Over Time", shown at right.

Josephine's work can be found at A Gallery For Fine Photography at 241 Chartres Street.

# New Fiction



*The Moon Over Time*, photograph by **Josephine Sacabo**

## New Fiction: Leslie Lehr and Mother Love

### Competition Success Story: Leslie Lehr

Leslie Lehr's new novel, **What a Mother Knows**, is unsettling, emotional and suspenseful novel of the unshakable bonds of motherhood, in which Michelle Mason not only loses her memory after a deadly car crash, but can't find her 16-year-old daughter, the one person who may know what happened that day. But the deeper Michelle digs, the more she questions the innocence of everyone, even herself.

A dramatic portrayal of the fragile skin of memory, **What a Mother Knows** is about finding the truth that can set love free.

Leslie won the Pirates Alley Faulkner Society Gold Medal for Novella in 1998. When Hurricane Georges forced the **Words & Music** festival to close early that September, she flew home to California empty-handed – only to return to New Orleans a year later to meet the agent she met through the conference and her new editor from Random House, who published her winning manuscript as her debut novel, *66 Laps*. Ms. Lehr's new novel, the literary thriller, **What A Mother Knows**, is a culmination of all of her work since then.

Lehr never planned to be a writer, but she always wrote. After leaving Ohio for USC's School of Cinematic Arts, she spent several years in film production, including work on "Barfly" with poet, Charles Bukowski. Once a mother, she wrote humorous essays that evolved into her first nonfiction book, *Welcome to Club Mom*.

Soon after, she gambled everything on a writing career with her first serious work of fiction, *66 Laps* – and won. Her screenplay, **Heartless**, a romantic thriller, was produced as an independent film, financed five other films for Santa Monica Pictures and has been screening in Europe for eight years. After her essay in the infamous **Mommy Wars** was lauded on the **Today Show**, she wrote several more parenting books including **Nesting**, as featured on Oprah. Her second novel, **Wife Goes On**, is a book club favorite that led to the screenplay, **Club Divorce**, for Lifetime Television.

The *New York Times Modern Love* column and *Huffington Post* feature Lehr's recent essays, along with the *Girlfriends Group Book Club* blog and the Tarcher/Penguin Series **Now Write**. With an MFA from Antioch University, Lehr teaches at the world-renowned Writer's Program at UCLA Extension and mentors writers both privately and as the Novel Consultant for Truby's Writers Studio. She is member of The Authors Guild, Women in



Leslie Lehr's new novel is  
**What a Mother Knows**

Film, Writers Guild of America, PEN, and The Women's Leadership Council of L.A.

On the personal side, Lehr is incognito as Chemo Chick in the breast cancer blog, *SickofPink.com*. She has two daughters and lives in Southern California with her husband, story consultant, John Truby—and a kitten who can fetch.)

#### A Conversation with Leslie Lehr

**Q.** What was the inspiration for your new novel, **What a Mother knows**?

**A.** There is a sculpture my late grandfather used to have called the *Judgement of Solomon* that was on my mind while writing this book. It portrayed two women both holding the same baby. The Jewish testament told the tale of two women claiming to be the mother of the same baby, and when the young King Solomon declared he would cut the baby in half for them to share, one woman withdrew her claim and allowed the other to have the baby. Solomon knew that the real mother was the one who gave up her claim for the sake of the child. This book is a lot about mothers, what they do to protect their children, often crossing boundaries and hiding truths, doing what they feel is the right thing to do, and the different ways to be a good mother on a manslaughter case in which two women were suing the driver of a car that crashed into a sports bar and killed their sons. We had to decide on the value of their loss. And so, in the worst of what-ifs, I started worrying about what my daughter's value was to me,



who I was without her...and how far would I go to protect her. That experience inspired the book's theme of how maternal love transcends religious differences, especially in the courtroom scene of my novel.

**Q.** You write a lot about mothers, from **Club Mom** to **Mommy Wars** to **What a Mother Knows**. What's the biggest challenge of motherhood so far?

**A.** I write about motherhood because I never expected it to be so overwhelming! I'm always worrying if my children are in real danger, or if they're just dealing with typical challenges—that part never ends. I wanted to explore how our mothers affect our own parenting styles and how there is no right way. All of the women in this book, including different generations, are devoted mothers, yet they each go about it very differently. They bend the rules according to their own version of what is necessary. When my daughter was in middle school, she started crying at night, every night - and I felt so helpless. I imagined the worst. I wrote an essay called *Parenting Paranoia* that Arianna Huffington excerpted in her book, **On Becoming Fearless**. But I was still afraid.

**Q.** Why did you choose to set the book in Hollywood/L.A.?

**A.** I moved out to L.A. from Ohio to go to film school and work in the entertainment business - without realizing how it might affect raising children of my own. This is a place that magnifies the struggles women face all over the country. The women working behind the scenes in Hollywood are juggling work and parenting just like everywhere else. And yet there is so much pressure to "be pretty," the competition is intense, plus many parents work "on location" for months at a time.

**Q.** How did your background in screenwriting play into the way you write fiction?

**A.** I'm a visual storyteller. As much as I love language, first I envision each scene before I write it. You get to watch the story unfold, as well as learn what the characters think. It's the best of both worlds.

**Q.** There are a lot of musical references throughout the book. Why - are you a rock 'n' roll f

**A.** Yes - so much so that during high school, I splurged on license plates that read: ONLYRnR. I'd cruise along the Ohio River Valley and blast the music until the first snow. I was captivated by *The Doors*; Jim Morrison exemplified the dark side of rock and roll. He wrote *Roadhouse Blues* about a real place I drove past often in Topanga Canyon. That's where the car accident happens in the Prologue.

\*\*\*

*A missing daughter, a lost memory, and a desperate need*

*to find the truth propel Lehr's achingly moving suspense drama. Dark and unsettling, but with a ray of hope like a splash of light, and a knockout ending you won't see coming.*

—Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* bestselling author of **Pictures of You**

## What A Mother Knows

A Novel

by Leslie Lehr

### Prologue and Excerpt

No one saw the deadly crash in the canyon on that gray October morning. The weather was strange, an out-of-season sprinkle from the coastal fog drifting inland. Soggy hitchhikers huddling under the umbrella of an ancient oak tree were the last to see the black SUV as it hydroplaned past them into the Santa Monica Mountains. A muffled bass beat trailed as it climbed the winding lane, up and around the evergreen scrub, until it disappeared in the forest crowning the coastal range. A mile farther, at the lovers' lookout above the vast checkerboard of Valley streets, tire tracks puddled with mud were the only signs of human life.

As the headlights tunneled into the mist, no one noticed how the worn wipers flailed at the thrumming rain, how they blocked the bird's-eye view of the gorge that inspired the Tongva name "Topanga," a place above. No one could testify how the engine groaned as it climbed that ear-popping stretch of sacred land. Or how the vehicle veered around the dizzying curve, spraying water over the edge of the rocky cliff.

When a coyote streaked past to scale the hillside, the bumper dipped into a flooded pothole. Bright headlights bobbed across a plywood peace sign, then lit a tall pole flying a plaster pig toward heaven. A few yards farther, the beams flashed across the ruins of a legendary roadhouse like the spotlights of decades past. Echoes of Arlo Guthrie and Neil Young lingered in the air, but it was Jim Morrison's tribute that haunted the highway beyond. "Keep your eyes on the road, your hands upon the wheel...Let it roll, baby, roll."

The Explorer dove off the cliff. Airborne, the bass boomed louder and reverberated across the canyon, accompanying a chorus of screams. It crashed against a scrubby ledge, then spun through the shower of pine needles, shredded branches and shards of broken grill, hurtling down, down, down, ribs snapping against the steering wheel, head splitting on the dashboard, music still blaring until the SUV smashed against the rock wall, shearing off the side mirror, shattering the window, shooting out into the ravine where the chassis flipped. The car exploded into the creek bed, airbags popping, bones cracking, flesh tearing, as the two ton cage of steel folded

like origami into the mud.

Raindrops fell.

When the sky cleared, the canyon Cub Scout troop began its weekly hike. They wandered out from the willows lining the flooded creek as the last plumes of smoke rose from the smoldering wreckage. Crows hidden in the hillside canopy flew out in a dark feathered cloud. A rabbit burrowed into his den beneath a steaming puddle of blood. Soon, sirens wailed in the distance.

By afternoon, the muddy canyon was clogged with emergency vehicles. The sky pulsed with the thwack-thwack-thwack of news helicopters circling for a story. Reporters soon pieced together the who, what, when, and where. But no one could explain the why. The only witness was trapped inside.

*[Eighteen months later, Michelle Mason has recovered from Traumatic Brain Injury enough to go home, but home is not the same. She learns that a boy died in her car, her sixteen-year-old daughter is missing, her husband is living in New York for work and her son is at boarding school. Here is part of the deposition by Greenburg, the Beverly Hills attorney for the estate of the boy, whose music made millions after his death...].*

"Mrs. Mason, what was your daughter's relationship with Noah Butler?"

She toyed with her water glass. "I don't know. Did you ask the other boys in his band?"

"We haven't found teenagers to be a reliable source of information," Greenburg said, fixing a cuff link. "Did you approve of the relationship?"

Michelle looked at her lawyer.

"Objection," Kenny said. "Even if a relationship were to be established, what mother thinks anyone is good enough for her daughter?"

The others chuckled. Dillenger, attorney for the car company, waited until the room was quiet. "Since we are unable to verify the nature of Nicole Mason's relationship with the deceased, perhaps, Mrs. Mason, you could enlighten us as to yours?"

"I was Tyler's mom," Michelle said. "He was Tyler's pitching coach."

"Why was he in your car on the day of the accident?"

"I don't know." Michelle strained to remember.

"Where were you going?"

"Good question." She felt Kenny's gaze. "I don't know."

"Isn't it true that, as a Hollywood producer, you gave him his first big break?"

"I don't know." She reached for the water glass.

"I may be from out of town, Mrs. Mason, but we've all heard of the casting couch. Could it be that you offered the deceased this opportunity to star in his own video in exchange for sexual favors? Could this be why your daughter has eluded subpoena? Out of embarrassment? Or to avoid ruining your reputation?"

"No! Isn't it more likely she saw the Seatbelt Recall card in the mail?"

"Conjecture," Kenny cried. "Strike that."

"I'm sorry," Michelle said to him. "Can't we just apologize, or give them money, or whatever it is they want?"

One by one, they heard the sharp echo of her words. There was no more laughter, no more conversation, no one even looked in her direction. The clock tick-tick-ticked and stopped.

Kenny put his pen down. "They want their son back."

They all looked towards Noah's picture. Greenburg's phone interrupted like a funeral dirge, but this time he didn't answer.

Michelle stood up so fast that her chair toppled over. Her arm sprang loose and knocked over her glass. Water dripped on Kenny's notepad. He snatched it up, knocking his folder to the floor. It landed open, exposing the accident photos. Michelle saw blood and pulp and tufts of hair. The room started spinning, the walls were caving, and the ceiling was pressing against her head. She had to escape.

She ran to the door but couldn't budge it. She turned to shove it with her hip and saw the boy on the easel, the smile that was gone forever. The door opened as the secretary returned. Michelle stumbled out to the hallway. She heard the lawyers' buzz behind her, but not a word they said. She fled down the hall to the ladies room and slammed into a stall. She didn't ever want to go back to that room, to those eyes, to the horror she had tried to forget.

After a few minutes, the bathroom door banged opened. Heels tapped across the tile floor. The latch of the next stall slid shut. Michelle slunk out to the sink, then heard another noise: retching. Michelle gagged at the acrid odor. The toilet flushed and Ms. Rodriguez, the insurance company's attorney, emerged.

Michelle noted the bulge beneath her jacket.

"When are you due?"

"September." She pulled a toothbrush from her purse and brushed.

The child would be a Virgo, like Nikki, Michelle thought. She wondered if Ms. Rodriguez would count baby teeth or billable hours. She was young enough to believe both were possible. Michelle used to believe that, too. "Good luck to you."

Ms. Rodriguez put her toothbrush away. "Thanks. I lost the first one. I wasn't even trying then." She put her hand on her belly and looked up at Michelle in the mirror. "I'd do anything to protect this baby."

Michelle smiled. "Welcome to the club."

Ms. Rodriguez smiled back, then looked alarmed and hurried out.

Michelle looked at her reflection, disappointed. She had gone from friend to foe within the space of a sentence. Or was it during those weeks she couldn't remember? Or the months that she didn't get the damn

seat belt repaired? She could smell her armpits now, a blend of baby powder and fear.

Muffled voices seeped under the door. Kenny called, "Michelle? You okay?"

She shook her head—she would never be okay again. But she could pretend. She pulled her sleeve down over her limp hand, smoothed a lock of hair over her scarred forehead, and marched out.

"Murderer!" The word hissed down the hallway.

"Keep walking," Kenny said.

Michelle held her breath through the poisonous cloud. She averted her eyes from the man in mirrored shades outside the conference room until she realized it was Noah's father. When he turned away, the Harley-Davidson wings on his jacket resembled an angel rising from his back.

He took the elbow of a woman walking slowly, in a daze. Like Michelle, she was wearing black, but her caftan wasn't stylish. She was in mourning.

Michelle had avoided thinking about Noah's mother, but here she was, painfully real. She stole a glance at the woman's glassy eyes and stumbled. She wanted to say she was sorry, but Kenny pulled her past.

"They have to blame someone," he said.

Michelle nodded as he led her out to the lobby, but she couldn't get that word out of her head. Murderer, the man had called her. What if it was true?

*Copyright, 2013 by Leslie Lehr, published here with permission of the author.*

Leslie Lehr is a prize-winning author, screenwriter, and essayist who grew up in Ohio. After graduating from USC's School of Cinematic Arts with a Student Emmy, she spent several years in film production, rising to be the West Coast Production Manager of a commercial and music-video company, then went freelance to work on feature films. Once a mother, Lehr started writing seriously. Her humorous essays evolved into her first book, *Welcome to Club Mom: The End of Life As You Know It* — but the publisher changed the subtitle to *The Adventure Begins*. And it did.....

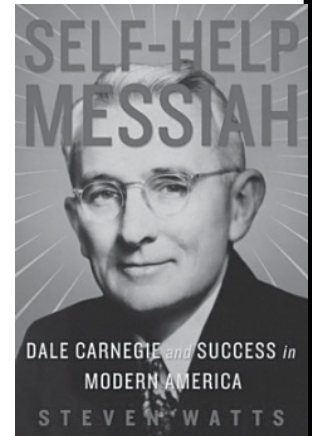
The what-ifs of modern motherhood drove Lehr to write her debut novel, *66 Laps*, winner of the Pirates Alley Faulkner Society Gold Medal. Soon after, her screenplay, *Heartless*, was produced as an independent film. The romantic thriller financed five other films for Santa Monica Pictures, aired on USA TV and has been screening in Europe for eight years. Her next books were the nonfiction tomes, *The Happy Helpful Grandma Guide*, excerpted on FisherPrice.com; and *Wendy Bellissimo: Nesting*, featured on Oprah. Her second novel, *Wife Goes On*, was a featured selection for the Pulpwood Queens Book clubs, with 250 chapters of tiara-wearing, book-sharing readers. She next wrote the screenplay, *Club Divorce*, for Lifetime. What a Mother Knows, her new literary thriller, available at bookstores

across the country, is a Recommended Read at Target. Lehr's essays have been published in the New York Times Modern Love column, Huffington Post, and anthologies including *Mommy Wars* (lauded on the Today Show), *The Honeymoon's Over*, and Arianna Huffington's *On Becoming Fearless*. She blogs for the Girlfriends Book Club and contributes to the Tarcher/Penguin Series "Now Write." Lehr has an MFA from Antioch University and is a popular panelist at literary and film conferences around the country. In addition to private manuscript consulting, she teaches at the world-renowned Writer's Program at UCLA Extension and mentors writers to publication as the Novel Consultant for Truby's Writers Studio. She is a member of PEN, The Authors Guild, WGA, Women In Film, and The Women's Leadership Council of L.A. On the personal side, she is currently incognito as Chemo Chick in Karen Rinehart's breast cancer blog, *Sick of Pink*. sickofpinklogo Lehr has two daughters and lives in Southern California.

## Recommended Reading: Non-Fiction

**Steven Watts**, who teaches history at the University of Missouri, is a master in the realm of biographies on popular figures. His major works include **The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life**, **Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream**, and **The People's Tycoon: Henry Ford and the American Century**,

which was chosen as one of five finalists for the 2005 *Los Angeles Times* Book Award in biography. His new book is destined for major success, too, as it deals with an icon of American hopes and dreams. **Self-Help Messiah** is a biography of the man who taught Americans "how to win friends and influence people." It tells the story of how Carnegie—born in rural Missouri, his father a poor farmer, his mother a successful preacher—and how his own story gave rise to the movement of self-help and personal reinvention. To make ends meet he tried his hand at various sales jobs, and his failure to convince his customers to buy what he had to offer eventually became the fuel behind his future glory. Carnegie quickly figured out that something was amiss in American education and in the ways business people related to each other. What he discovered was as simple as it was profound: Understanding people's needs and desires is paramount in any successful enterprise.





## Head Games

By Shari Stauch

### Chapter One

After all these years, I still hate days that begin with a morning, none more than Mondays. Laptop bag in one hand, skinny latte in the other, I kick my office door shut behind me before my poor assistant can follow me in and torture me with today's list. I need ten minutes of silence before I face it. The phone lines are already ringing and I hit the mute button. The laptop comes out of its bag, connects to the power strip under the desk and the emails begin pouring in. I kick off my shoes and prop my bare feet on the sterile glass-top desk, hoping I'll leave a smudge. I glance at the screen, then look away, putting off the inevitable. Eight more minutes.

But what else is there to stare at? Not a single sheet of paper litters the room; Carrie is too good at filing it all. The wall calendar is naked, just for show. Everything on my schedule lives on my Macbook, all synced to Carrie's computer. She knows my schedule better than I do. The opposite wall is a photo showcase of our top earners. Not a hair out of place, a sparkle in every eye, bleached smiles and kohled eyes and smoldering looks. I drop my feet off the desk and swivel my chair to look behind me. More photos, plaques, meaningless awards, and ah, an old black and white photo that looks desperately out of place here, and it is, with purpose.

There, boxed in by a stark black frame, a much younger me crouches low over a pool table, about to sink a shot, frozen in a moment. So many years ago... twenty-five? Jesus, I'm getting old. My dad and his buddy Lou smile back at me through a thin shield of glass, beaming in the front row. Dad and Lou made up ten percent of my fan base back then. Dad's wearing a sweatshirt with a big trout on it that says, "Women Want Me, Fish Fear Me." It stretches over his Sicilian belly earned eating decades of pasta. Of course, no one around here knows that's my dad, or that I ever had a dad. No doubt they assume I was manufactured, unpacked here with the cold furniture. I smile back at dad, knowing that if he could see me now he'd be laughing his ass off.

I'm not sentimental; I've kept the damned photo around all these years only to remind me why I do what I do now, why I quit playing. Lousy pay, no fans; women's pool was a real sucker's bet back then. But sometimes, like now, it makes me almost wistful. So much has changed since then. If I were being honest, though I seldom afford myself the luxury, I might even say I miss those days. But the memory stays strapped in, barred by the four walls of its frame. Next to the aging photo, this year's Women's Pro Billiard Tour poster screams "Chicks with Sticks!" in bold white type on a neon green background. Underneath, "Wait 'Til You See These Ladies Clear a Table." Colorful pool balls exploding into fine china... campy, but

effective. A PR woman out of Baltimore thought that one up for a local event; I snatched her idea and took it national. If cigarettes could still sponsor sporting events, women's pool would have been a natural for Virginia Slims and "You've Come a Long Way, Baby."

It occurs to me, sipping a latte that someone else made, staring at photos that someone else took of women players who actually do the playing these days, that I've become the perfect parasite. I feed off other people's ideas and talents, then promote the hell out 'em for an "end," pool player speak for commission. I traded up the cue for a laptop and a big fat paycheck as a promoter. The stakes may be higher, but this game doesn't hold the thrill I used to get from those bleak, broke days. Back then we were a bunch of bad-ass girls in a man's game, playing in pool halls they called "the last bastion of male dominance." We'd pile into beat-up rides with no air-conditioning, travel through endless miles of cornfields, just to play each other for little more than a few hundred and bragging rights, in whatever tournament a poolroom owner might scrape together in some dusty city; Moline, Illinois or Sandusky, Ohio, some little dive in rural Kentucky or truck stop in Oklahoma.

Nowadays, it'd damned well better be a top 40 media market or the board would have my ass. I send women out on \$30,000 exhibitions and produce six figure tournaments for ESPN and a dozen international networks. We're bigger in Asia and Europe these days than in the U.S. and there's money opening in the Middle East too, provided I make the women cover their usually exposed body parts. I feed on the adrenaline of it all, sitting at the table with the "big boys," manipulating my way through contract negotiations and TV deals. I show up at endless sponsor shindigs and board meetings to justify my ridiculously high fees.

But lately the rush is wearing off. Maybe it's too easy, like a lopsided pool match, taking candy from a baby. Even the once "big" deals are getting to be a bad routine. I can't remember the last time I've had an original thought or said an original thing. And Lord knows I haven't *heard* anything new in ages. Same arguments about too little cash, and wise investments, and bottom lines. Doesn't matter, in the end, they all ante up. Sponsors want to be talked out of their money and have their egos stroked ever so gently before they head back to their corporate glass offices, fooling themselves into thinking they've made a good investment, that they've bought into something "cool." Ah, the smoke and mirrors of sports marketing, what a load of crap.

And the players; they're even worse. Prima donnas griping about stiff commissions, whining about sponsor appearances and press conferences. Hell, twenty years ago we'd have fallen over if a TV station walked in the door of a tournament. The only "press" we got was a puffy piece in whatever weekly rag came out of Mayberry, RFD. Wannabe reporters who all started with the same clever line, "So, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" They'd grin and we'd laugh as if we'd never heard

that one before, and then roll our eyes when they weren't looking.

But I do miss the primitive thrill of competing, the satisfying plop of a ball finding its way home into a worn leather pocket. The metallic smell of wrinkled, faded twenty-dollar bills, rolled together with nothing more than a rubber band, tiny but potent payoffs for a game well played. I can't remember the last time I've seen a twenty-dollar bill. Everything around here transacts in satin-smooth checks, or dots on a screen organized into columns and decimal points and dollar signs. Plastic gold cards pay for my meals, my airfares, my wardrobe. My office smells like citrus and fresh flowers; why do I suddenly long for smoke and chalk dust?

Likely because it's Monday, and Mondays always suck. The intercom buzzes, ending my brief gallop down memory lane, and I snap back to attention. "Yes, Carrie," I say as I tap the mute button again to face the day.

"I assume you saw the *Post*," she says. "The phones are already ringing."

The phone has started its Monday morning cacophony thanks to one of our idiot players getting arrested at a party Saturday night. "No, but I heard," I groan. "Bring it in, let's see what we're dealing with."

Two seconds later – I have no idea how she moves so fast – Carrie drops the offending page on my desk, then disappears back through the door before she gets an earful of expletives. There she is, Tammy Lee, our newest and hottest star, nearly naked on page five of the *New York Post* sports section, dark mascara rings under her eyes. I keep telling her less makeup. So does Susan, our image consultant. There's a headline, too, screaming in 72-point type: **Shark Bait. Hustler Behind 8-Ball.**

### **Hustler Behind 8-Ball.**

Could be worse, I guess. Could be page one. Could be the *Times*. And our local rag doesn't have a scoop yet. News about anything other than banking takes the slow train here to Charlotte. Maybe the board of directors won't pick up the news yet. When they do, it'll mean hours on the phone, talking them down off the ledge. Fascinating how corporate directors find this sudden desire to micromanage whenever there's a crisis.

There's another buzz in my office and Carrie's voice over the intercom. "Observer, line two."

So much for the slow train to Charlotte, then. I take a deep breath and slam on the intercom button. "Carrie, my office, please."

Carrie's the best assistant I've had in twenty years; I have to give her that. But she tends to panic in a crisis. Like now. "Yes, ma'am?" she says as she enters, fidgeting

with her pen in one hand, her eyes darting around my office, no doubt looking for safe harbor from my wrath.

"First, tell Joey he knows damned well it won't be me making a statement. Second, get Marcy on the phone. I need to speak to her before she issues anything."

Carrie backs out of the doorway. A minute later the line lights up and the intercom crackles, "Marcy, line four."

"Marcy," I say as I push line four, mustering my last bit of calm. Breathe in, breathe out. I realize I've been chewing a hole in my cheek from the inside. I reach for a piece of gum.

"Jen, I am so, so, sooo sorry about this," Marcy croons. She's got that annoying therapist tone to her voice, the

kind of voice that makes her a perfect public relations person. I just don't like it when she uses it on me.

"You know Tammy would never be involved in this on purpose," Marcy continues. "She's just naïve; we both said so, right? Some jackass no doubt taking her to some jackass party and--"

"Marcy?" I interject.

"I know. Perception is reality."

"Right. So—"

"Create a new perception. I just wanted to call and let you know—"

I interrupt her. "Let's get on it," I say. "And Marcy? I never called Tammy naïve. I believe the word I used was moron."

I hang up before she can defend Tammy anymore. I realize Marcy thinks I'm a bitch. They all do.

Nothing to be done about that. I'm dialed in on damage control.

This is the part of the job I hate, and the part I end up doing most. It doesn't matter if the title on the door is agent, manager, commissioner or publicist; the job description usually boils down to babysitting. We do our damndest to make sure our golden boys, or, in this case, golden girls, appear to float a moral plane above the common man. Then we clean up their messes when they blow it. The last decade has been good to women's pool. While politicians were getting their hands slapped out of cookie jars and celebrities were busted for shoplifting and insider trading, we'd been building a guarded collection of cue angels. The women's pro billiard tour isn't as well known as golf or tennis yet, but our gaggle of headliners are really turning heads.

And everybody loves us, at least until this morning. Women love that we're kicking ass at a man's game. Men love beautiful women whose hair and makeup look perfect at the table and whose asses look even better bending over it. ESPN loves that they can claim a little less sexism and still draw a 90 per cent 18-34 year old male demographic. And sponsors love that ESPN loves us. We're experiencing celebrity nirvana, that gossamer thin strata



*Shari Stauch, creator of Where Writers Win*

where an athlete can enjoy the perks and stave off – albeit temporarily – the hatred of a fickle public.

But once any star reaches a height too dizzying for the common man, fans usually become eager to drag their heroes right back down to earth. I've watched it happen too many times in other sports, with other athletes. First they lose fans, then they lose sponsors, and then the guy in my position usually loses his or her damned job.

Which all boils down to this: One idiot move like Tammy's can bring our angels tumbling down to terra firma, and we're a month away from entering into contract renegotiations with ESPN and a half dozen sponsors. Her timing couldn't be worse. I lean back in my chair and rub my temples, trying to visualize what might divert the media feeding frenzy from Tammy's ill-advised weekend.

Carrie's voice comes through the intercom again. "I know you said no disturbances Ms. Morgan, but it's Lou, I mean, Mr. Finelli. He says it's real important."

Jesus. Ordering the right beer is important to Lou. The win-loss record of any Chicago sports team is life and death to Lou. I don't have time for either. But he's also about the only person who could interrupt me now and get away with it, even if he's just calling to laugh at my predicament.

I push line two and take a deep breath. "Hi ya, chief. Let me guess. You're calling to gloat."

"Gloat?" Lou asks. Guess I should know better. Lou's strictly a *Chicago Tribune* guy; my pending humiliation hasn't reached the Midwest yet.

"Oh, never mind. So, how are the Cubs looking?"

"Jennifer, I've barely gotten past my heartbreaking Bears. Give me time, girl. Spring is still a ways off."

I laugh just to hear Lou's crotchety old voice. He's been my stand-in dad since mine left the building, so to speak. When it came time to figure things out, Lou took over running the family pool hall for me. There's nobody else I'd have trusted with that, and no way I could've stayed in Chicago after...

"Okay then, no sports talk. What's so important I have to hear your grouching on a Monday?" I ask.

"I need you up here."

"Why? Lose your janitor? Need someone to scrub urinals?"

"Funny, but no. Actually, I want you to check out a girl for me."

"Huh? Lou! You found a woman to put up with you? That's fantastic!" The thought of Lou with a girlfriend makes me almost crack a smile. Must be one hard broad.

"No, Jen," Lou laughs, "not a girl for me. A girl for you, a player."

"For god sakes, Lou. I've got enough player troubles today. The last thing I need on my plate is a wannabe. Tell the broad to pound the pavement and qualify like everybody else."

"It ain't like that, Jen. This girl. I mean, I've never... well, maybe you... But she's..."

"What are you babbling about?"

"The girl's a natural, Jen. Stone cold, killer natural. I'd

stake my life on this one."

"Yeah, you'd stake your life on whichever pony you liked in the fifth at the OTB. Besides, that's what you said about me. You're still here."

Lou's a little prone to exaggeration. "Still would, lady," he answers. "You quit. Your choice."

Maybe, I thought. But the fact remains I sure as hell don't have time to fawn over some kid who's no doubt put kindhearted Lou up to this. That's the trouble with nice guys. Crotchety or not, they get taken for rides.

"Lou, you know I love you. But I'm up to my eyeballs right now. I've got a player to fine, bad press to squelch, TV negotiations coming up, and half a dozen sponsor contracts that may bail on me after today. I honestly don't have a day to come running up to Chicago because some star-struck amateur convinced you to bother me. If she could hack it, she would've already qualified."

"Aw Jen," Lou sighs. "You ought to know I'd never put you in that spot. Look, the girl doesn't even know about you. Probably doesn't know who you are. I don't... Well frankly, I don't think if I drove her to your door she'd get out of the car. Kid's a hard case. Think maybe she's had it tough."

"Yeah, right. What's she doing in the 'burbs, then?"

"Gambling, what else? She lives in the city, heads out here Mondays with Hank for the handicap tournament. Matches up after, usually with one of the other kids, once in a while with a roadie. And she always wins. I mean *always*, Jen."

"I don't need a gambler. She's playin' for Hank the Hat?" There I go, slipping back into a Midwest twang. Another minute and a "youse guys" might escape my face. I ought to get back to work, but Lou's got my attention, against my better judgment.

"No, Hat's just her ride out here. Doubt she has her own wheels. Says he doesn't know much about her except she shows up outside Little English Billiards every Monday afternoon like clockwork. That's where he picks her up."

"Little English? That place still around? Tough neighborhood."

It used to be the kind of club I hated, the kind I wish would close. A cruddy pool hall in a bad neighborhood that only helped further the perception of pool as a seedy sport full of degenerate gamblers. I'd been fighting that perception my whole life. And my dad before me. And guys like Lou.

"Yeah, Little English is still open," he answers. "It's actually a nice place these days. A woman bought the joint. Spiffed it up."

"Yeah? Great. Still don't need a gambler, though, Lou."

"I know, I know. But last week, well..."

"Well, what?"

"Well, a couple of the Filipinos came through. And she matches up with little Joe. He gave her a little weight, call eight, but Jennifer, I swear to Christ, she dusted him. Five ahead for five hundred."

I whistle. "Jesus." These days, there's nothing more dangerous than a Filipino player on solid American



equipment. Conditions in Manila are the worst. Local players hone their skills on poorly leveled tables, set up outdoors on humid street corners, with worn, damp cloth and badly warped cues. To borrow from Ol' Blue Eyes, if you can make it there, you'll make it anywhere.

"Yeah, right," Lou continues. "So I start to really watch her and she's got a slip stroke like... like you wouldn't believe. I'm tellin' ya, this girl can play, Jen."

He's got my full attention now. "So what happened after that set? Did Little Joe press her? Raise the bet?"

"No, he pulls up on her, but she don't seem to care. Just broke down her stick and walked out with her five bills, like that's what she'd come for. The Hat followed her out like a big brother. Damnedest thing."

Lou gets quiet a moment and then he starts in again. "Anyway, I figure I've got to give you the year-end stuff for the club anyway. Monday's the only day the girl gets out this way. Otherwise you gotta' catch her at Little English. She's not real... friendly. But Jennifer, I'm asking you. And I don't ask you for much. Just fly up next Monday afternoon and see what's what."

I groan. "That's low, even for you, my friend. Okay, you win, but I—"

"Monday, Jen, I'll see you here."

And with that the line goes dead, too fast. He didn't even pause to tease me about my sad social life. He's holding out on me, I can feel it. But hell, maybe it's time I head back for a visit, check up on the old place. I could recharge before things get to be a real circus around here. I punch the intercom. "Carrie, book me a flight to O'Hare for next Monday, noon-ish, get me back on Tuesday. Oh, and get Marcy back for me."

By lunchtime Marcy and I have brainstormed our way to a straight story: Tammy Lee was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to help a friend by picking her up at a party. We'd let the press know she'd be suspended for sixty days, but would of course still headline the Pediatric Aids exhibition the following week. That would give us a week to prep for the trashy questions they'd throw at her.

Unlike my usual control-freak self, I leave the details to Marcy. I toy with a few other projects, but I can't keep my mind on work. I'd like to blame Lou for my mood, but maybe this is more than being intrigued by a potential player. I keep finding myself wishing it was me on a table somewhere, running racks, instead of looking over tournament budgets and skimming quotes from production companies. I look up at the photo on my wall again, swear at Lou under my breath.

By four o'clock I'm itching to escape.

"Off to a meeting," I say as I breeze past Carrie's desk.

"What meeting? I don't have any meetings on your schedule."

"Oh, nothing special," I say. "Waste of time, probably. Call my cell if you need me."

And with that I'm out the door and into the cool

breeze of a January day. Odd, the sun is shining, and I can't remember the last time I've appreciated that. I've gotten used to getting to the office at dawn and leaving when the last streaks of light have already dipped below downtown's skyline. I suppose that's another side effect of too many long nights in pool halls, catching sleep in the early daylight hours before a big night's session. Stock phrase of the nocturnal pool player: "I hate days that begin with a morning."

Obviously I'm still living by that one...

Twenty minutes later, without quite knowing why, I'm in the heart of the Noda Arts district, climbing the worn wooden steps to a walk-up wine bar with a couple pool tables. There's not much pool played here anymore; poetry slams are the big deal with the art crowd these days. But one of the owners is like me – a former player – which means the equipment is still to tournament specs and in better playing shape than any other room the city has to offer. I take a deep breath before I step across the landing and tug at the old wooden door, still wavering. This probably isn't a good idea. It's definitely not on my agenda. Hell, maybe it's the way Lou talked about that girl player that's got me suddenly itching to pick up a cue. Or maybe it's wishing I still looked like that twenty-year-old on my office wall. Up until today, even though I haven't played in ten years, I've remained the only woman player they talk about from Chicago. It doesn't sit right that there's some kid trying to impress the locals, *my* locals.

The heavy door thuds closed behind me and I squint my eyes a little to adjust; the room is dim and empty. Business won't pick up 'til after dinner. No windows; it could be night here any time of day. I love it. "Hey Kel," I say as I lean on the edge of a stool, bag slung over one shoulder, trying to look casual, like stopping into a poolroom in the middle of a Monday afternoon is something I do all the time.

"Whoa! Jen Morgan? *The* Jen Morgan?" Kelly arranges her face in mock awe. "Nice to see you this close to the tracks. You lost?"

"Nah, just thought I'd cruise by," I answer.

Kelly cocks her head at me, but she knows better than to ask. "Well, then," she says, smiling. "Guess that calls for me to crack open a vintage bottle. What'll it be?"

"Dry cabernet, and um..." I swallow hard, nodding towards the rack of cues behind the bar. "Hand me a cue from back there?" I know they're the best of Kelly's private stash. I also know she'd trust me with any of them.

"Why, you want to dust it off?" says Kelly, a smartass to the end.

"Funny, but no, I was thinking I might hit a few."

"Wow, never seen that happen."

"First time for everything," I try to laugh it off. I hear an unnatural sound, more of an ailing dog's bark. Come to think of it, I can't remember the last time I've coughed up a genuine laugh. Not about pool, anyway. Pool is just business, and laughing is something reserved for clients, to let them know I think they're clever. They seldom are,

but that's the game. I'm damned good at it. Problem is, Kelly's not a client and I left my game face back at the office. I'm still not sure what the hell I'm doing here. Maybe this is a bad idea.

Too late now to change my mind. Kelly hands me a cue, grinning like the village idiot, and pushes a tray of balls towards me. I give her a warning look and head off to the more remote table in the darkest corner of the club. I throw nine balls and the cue ball out on the table slide the tray and the remaining balls under the table. A bit awkward and out of practice, I bend over the first shot, a simple cut on the one ball. I miscue terribly and the cue ball skids sideways off the tip of the cue. "Chalk's free," Kelly calls from the counter.

"Yeah, yeah, so I'm a little rusty," I yell back. I grab a blue cube from the side rail of the table and feather it across the cue's leather tip before leaning down over another shot. This time the one ball finds its way home with a satisfying *thwack*.

The rest of the first rack feels clumsy, but I get the job done. Within minutes I'm back on the bike. Kelly's cue feels good in my hands. The balls obey my every whim. No drills, no practice, no damned score. I lose myself in it, playing just to play. Playing for fun. I search my memory for the last time I'd played for fun. I come up dead empty. It's pure childish abandon with a slight thrill alongside, like hiding under the covers as a kid with a book and a flashlight, long after bedtime. I keep sinking balls, attempting more difficult shots, running out from everywhere. Kelly drops off a second glass of chardonnay and whistles in appreciation as I nail a cross-corner bank and end up perfect on a case nine ball. "Damn, girl, look who can still see the end rail," she says, grinning. "Let me know if you need a sparring partner to kick your ass back to humility, where it belongs."

My ego considers matching up with Kel for a moment, but no, I pat it down, tell it to go back to sleep. I just need this, to have fun with this, for now, anyway. The bright colored balls whizzing around the table, the soft colliding clicks as the cue ball connects the dots. I stop for a sip of wine, then throw the remaining balls back onto the smooth, pine green surface, watching as they dance under the lights hovering over the table.

And as I bend down over the next shot, I'm transported back to that day in Chicago, the day still

staring at me from that old black and white photo...

I couldn't breathe. The bigger problem was, when I stopped breathing, I started to shake. The choice: pass out from lack of oxygen or throw an epileptic fit in front of all fifteen spectators. Neither option appealed.

I cleared my throat and the sound echoed, mocking me. I walked back to my chair and took a sip of water, as if it were just a little thirst between me and victory. An inner voice whirred: *Two more lousy balls. Just two! First the eight, hit it real soft, soft enough so the cue ball slips just past the side. You'll need perfect position for the nine.*

The announcer picked this very moment to cut in with commentary over the loudspeaker, an optimistic gesture by the promoter to provide adequate sound to the "crowd." Also optimistic: the rows of chairs that stood empty, and a naked wall of bleachers. The sound of the announcer's booming voice crashed up against my pounding heart, pressing on my lungs. "Jen Morgan now just two balls away from the title. Position's a bit tricky on this shot folks; let's see where she's going with it."

*Jesus, not now, I thought. Focus woman, focus. Breathe, deep breaths. Don't choke, don't choke. Oh, shut up and shoot already.* I made my way around the side of the table to check the shot from

behind. I was stalling for time. Sharon, my opponent and chief rival, knew it. I felt her eyes from her chair less than ten feet away, boring into the table, willing it to beckon her back. God, I knew that will to win, that silent prayer. I'd prayed it myself at least a hundred times, so often against her. Only then did it occur to me.

It was my turn.

Somehow, just like that, I knew. And with that sudden clarity, I stepped into the shot like it had been waiting for me all my life. I pocketed the eight to a smattering of applause, but the cue ball slid a bit farther than I planned. Someone cleared his throat and I wondered if it was in disapproval, even though I knew I should be shutting out everything else, just me and the table. It was still a make-able cut shot on the nine, game ball. All that stood between me and a championship. No, *the* championship.

*Okay, I told myself. You needed perfect position on the nine. You blew it. But you can do this, you can. Steady. Cinch the ball, stop the cue ball. Cinch the ball, stop the cue ball.*

The chant fell into perfect rhythm with my swinging



**Shari Stauch** in Florence with her children

arm. Three, four times back and forth, and then... contact.

The nine ball disappeared over the lip of the pocket with a satisfying plop. The cue ball came to rest in the center of the table.

I'd won.

I jumped up out of my careful stance; raised my cue above my head in an age-old victory pose. It's not a move I'd practiced often and I felt awkward, a wicked pool imposter. Meanwhile, my back had been bending over shots for the past two hours and I'd just sent it arching the other way. It offered a loud crack in retaliation. Make that an embarrassed imposter.

A few spectators clapped. Most were anxious to file out, having been polite enough to stay until the end. It was one in the morning.

The tournament director's voice boomed, "And that's it folks. Twenty-year-old Jennifer 'Mighty' Morgan wins the national title, defeating number one ranked veteran Sharon 'The Shark' Lancaster on the hill, nine games to eight in a real nail-biter final!"

Okay, so the guy had his good points. I listened as he continued, "And how 'bout a nice round of applause for our runner-up and defending champion, Sharon the Shark, who's just announced her retirement from the game!"

I snapped my head around in her direction. It couldn't be true! Sharon walked over and smiled, offering her hand in congratulations. "You wanted it, babe. You done good."

Ten seconds ago I'd have basked in her praise, in the humiliation of her losing to me. Hell, I'd been in her spot too many times not to. But I forgot all that for the moment. "What's he talking about? You're really quitting?"

"Yeah, time to go. I've been looking at the four walls of a poolroom for too long, Jen. I'm tired. John's tired. Gonna' try something else. We're... we're thinking' about having a kid, actually."

"Oh, you're knocked up?" I blurted. That at least made some sense.

"No, Jen," she grinned. "I said we were thinking about it."

I just nodded, at a loss for words. She'd been a rival for so long, on and off the table. Time was I'd have been envious about making a kid with John Fields; I endured a serious schoolgirl crush on that blonde hair and dazzling smile. It didn't matter that they were both a decade or more ahead of me. Back when I'd first met the couple I'd been a sixteen-year-old kid surrounded by poolroom potbellies, and John was anything but soft. But then he always liked Sharon more. Truth was, most people did.

I should've told her to stay, to think it over, but no one stood to gain more from her leaving the game than me. So I said nothing. We hugged, barely touching, and John joined us and offered his brief congratulations. Then they were gone.

It occurred to me that I felt like less of an imposter, knowing how bad she must've wanted to go out a winner. That was the beauty and the bitch of sports. Her loss really was my gain.

Dad and his buddy Lou were hanging back, but stepped up as Sharon and John walked off. "Good job, girl," Lou said. Even dad offered a rare hug and a wink. He didn't need to say anything. We both knew.

"Thanks, boys," I grinned. "Wanna eat?"

"Nah, you'll want to be with your crowd without the old farts hangin' around. We're heading back out of the city tonight."

"Okay then, drive careful. I'll ride back with Danny."

My dad rolled his eyes. "Be nice," I said. He never much liked Danny, on or off the table. The fact that I was running around with a thirty-five year-old coach made him even less endearing to dad, and all the more interesting to me. Not quite a father figure, but dangerous enough to piss dad off just the right amount. Anyway, that was my crowd. Dad still hadn't picked up on the fact that I was the only twenty-year-old girl in the city even playing pool. Everyone else my age was into tennis - or worse - bowling. I wasn't sure who he expected me to hang out with besides him and crotchety old Lou.

I looked around. The room was emptying. No TV cameras. No newspapers. The men's finals were the main event. Most of the fans left when they'd finished, before the women's final was even introduced. But Danny was still standing in the corner, scowling. I knew I was in for some real shit, not getting shape on that nine ball. Maybe if I smiled big enough and offered to buy him dinner, which is about what my lousy winnings would cover, he might lighten up.

I waved at him. He jerked his head in a familiar half-nod as he watched me put my cue away. A couple of players from the men's division walked by on their way to somewhere else (no doubt the hotel bar) and gave me a thumbs-up. "Hey, not bad for a girl," laughed Alan, a bleached blonde player who hoped women mistook him for a surfer so maybe he'd get laid. From what I'd heard that wasn't working out for him.

"Yeah, too bad nobody was here to see you, huh dolly?" added his echo of a friend, Jimmy.

"Fuck off," I said, holding up a matching finger. I knew the profanity was out of line, but there was no upside to being nice to those guys. They'd screwed half the girls on tour and were doing their best to make their way through the rest. Who they couldn't screw they'd say they had. I'd avoided both lists, so far.

Alan made a hissing cat noise and both men slithered off, laughing as if they'd said something funny. That pissed me off more. I liked cats. "Hey," I called after them. "How'd you two do?"

Now that was funny. Neither had cracked the top half of the field.

I turned towards Danny and the exit when out of nowhere, an elderly couple stopped in front of me. From the corner of my eye I saw Danny start fidgeting near the door. The man held out a program and a pen so I could autograph the page with the women's chart on it. He'd written my name into the blank above the word, "Champion." It felt unsettling, creepy even, to see it there,



as if I'd run into it on a headstone instead of a winning chart. I signed the program quickly and passed it back. I realized they must have been there a moment ago. I hoped they didn't hear me swear; it didn't look like either one could hear much at all. But then the old woman clucked, "Don't you worry, honey, your time's coming."

I managed a lame smile as the two of them teetered off. I finally had two whole fans and I'd gone and acted like an ass in front of them. I glanced back for a last look. The table, my small field of glory, done hosting its fierce battle, stood void of all the balls save the cue ball, creamy white against the deep green wool.

Then I saw the emcee heading towards me. I heard Danny let out an exaggerated sigh, his foot already out the ballroom door. "Sorry about the commentary," he apologized before I had the chance to berate him. "Just trying to wake folks up out there, y'know!"

He laughed at his own cleverness. Great, a bastard and a comedian.

"Anyway," he continued, "the promoters wanted me to make sure you got your prize check. They were off to meet some folks for dinner at Lawry's before the men all fly home tomorrow. You understand."

"Of course," I said, smiling. "At least they made sure not to include you, either."

Out of the corner of my eye, Danny's wicked grin put me on alert. He probably hoped I was going to slap the guy or make a scene. I turned and walked away before I could act out any of Danny's fantasies.

"Hey," I said, finally getting within two feet of my coach.

Danny nodded, just a little. "Not bad, Morgan, not bad."

"Went too far on the eight," I said. Best defense was a good offense.

"Nah, it worked. That kept your focus on cinching the nine, I expect."

"That it did." I offered my warmest smile, relieved, grateful. He wasn't going to ream me.

"So, I'm thinkin' you owe me dinner," he said, and almost smiled in return.

"You bet," I grinned, my guard down for the briefest moment.

"Great," said Danny. "Then we can figure out why the hell you break like a 10-year-old girl."

And the moment passed.

It's after seven before I realize I've been playing for hours. Customers begin wandering in and Kelly's staff is doing a sound check for tonight's poetry jam. It occurs to me that I'm booked on a six a.m. flight to Bristol, Connecticut tomorrow for an ESPN production pow-wow. I haven't prepped or packed. I scoop up the balls, return them to the counter and pay Kelly for the table time and the drinks. "Cue plays great," I say, almost reluctant to hand it back to her.

"Yeah, well, come back and visit it any time, Morgan. Nice to see your fat ass out from behind a desk."

I sigh and grin at her. "Yeah? Quit looking at my ass."

It's a twenty-minute trip home and as I drive out Tyvola Road and draw near my cloistered neighborhood of three-story pastel houses and brick-pillared mailboxes, I find myself singing along to a stupid 80s song on the radio. I shut it off. This won't do. I need to be working out a strategy for tomorrow's meeting. But my mind wanders off again, back to Chicago and Lou's mystery player. She must have a game if Lou's anxious enough to want me up there on a moment's notice. Hell, the way I played today, I might still give her a run. But then, who cares? If she's as good as Lou thinks, I'll make a bigger score peddling her to the highest endorsement bidders. If I'm real lucky, she'll be black or Hispanic. Too many blonde WASPs in the hive and sponsors are crying out for diversity.

That's when it occurs to me that I never asked Lou the girl's name.

## Chapter Two

After a long week of negotiations, most of which are still in uncomfortable limbo, the reason I'm hopping a plane to Chicago this morning is getting under my skin. I haven't even met Lou's girl yet and already she's a pain in my ass. I can feel the resentment building in increments, scratching from my insides, as I try to plow through a commercial log for next week's programming before I head out. Tammy Spencer's ill-timed photo-op had lost us one sponsor, despite our careful damage control. That left me six thirty second spots to fill. No great loss; the donut chain wasn't a great fit from the start, and most of us were sick of looking at the endless boxes of sugar-coated fat rings they supplied to every player's lounge and hospitality suite anyway. Regardless, I'm still not sure where I'm going to get the last two spots, and if I have to eat them then I'll need a new graphic on the in-house website spot, which means I'll need to book studio time in Wilmington.

ESPN is breathing down my neck about next year's schedule, too, and I'm not about to tell them I'm still juggling dates and now need another event sponsor. Add to it, Carrie is on the intercom every seven seconds, relentless, scrambling what's left of my brain.

"Miss Morgan? Tammy's calling again. Wants to know why she can't have her own blog. Says everyone else has one, even the foreign players. What should I tell her?"

Tammy has already called three times today. I bite down on my lower lip and inhale. "Tell her a blog is not like a new puppy, and before she gets her own blog, she'll have to prove to me that she can spell blog, because I haven't seen any evidence of that."

"Fine, but she's going to keep calling."

Too true. Tammy would be on suspension for another seven weeks. I know she's bored. But the last thing I'll do is let her loose on our fans.

"Okay, here's what you'll do," I tell Carrie. "Get Marcy on the phone and have her schedule a live chat session on the site for whenever Marcy's also available to ghost-write her through it. Then tell Tammy to use the extra time

on her hands to work on her kick shots. She was shooting blind in Florida.”

“They’re both going to hate you,” Carrie warns.

“You mean still hate me. Have her call Billy. He’s an old pro and a kicking machine. Tell her to spend a week with him in St. Louis; we’ll foot the bill. Then he can hate me, too.”

That ought to keep Tammy busy for a while, but I realize now I’ll never finish this log before I head to the airport. I jam my laptop into my favorite black leather bag, toss the papers I won’t need into a bin behind my shiny desk, and look around once to make sure I haven’t forgotten anything. My office looks so damned sterile. Glass and chrome and a bit of blonde wood; they call it Swedish décor. Their decorating taste must be as cold as the damned country. I’d hated the stuff from the day we moved in, but it did make it hard to overlook anything. Sure enough, through the clear glass desktop I see the cord to my laptop still plugged into the power strip underneath.

The flight to O’Hare is short enough to make me feel guilty that I don’t visit Lou more often. In less than ninety minutes, Charlotte’s green trees and red dirt give way to the shades of gray that define Chicago’s winterscape. The sky is a tired gathering of dirty, malnourished clouds, reflecting the dull palette below. I might miss Lou, but not enough to spend winters in this place. I try to remember how – or why – I spent thirty years here. Then, typical of a flight to O’Hare, the pilot’s smarmy voice over the intercom announces, “Well folks, due to accelerated morning traffic at O’Hare, they’ve asked us to do a quick turn before making our approach. We should have you touching down right on schedule though.”

What a load of crap. A spin at O’Hare was another twenty minutes at the very least. Now that the all-electronic-devices announcement has been made I’m laptop-less. I settle back and close my eyes, willing myself not to grind my teeth at the delay.

Just as I doze, a jarring bump wakes me; the plane touches down on an endless cement landscape. Our perky flight attendant offers a canned welcome to the windy city. I peer out the tiny window at the dreary landscape and marvel that I ever called this place home.

Moments later I’m shuffling through O’Hare’s crowded, narrow halls. I wait half an hour for my luggage and another twenty minutes for a shuttle to my rental car. Finally out of that mess, I decide to duck the expressway and pull onto Irving Park Road instead, figuring I’ll take the long way out to the suburbs, maybe stop and grab a real Italian beef sandwich somewhere. There’s no such thing as *real* Italian beef in Charlotte, in the whole southeast for that matter. I fumble at the red light, trying to turn off the damned On Star system telling me to turn left towards the city. The light turns green and before I can get my foot from the brake to the gas pedal two cars behind me wail on their horns. Welcome home, I think, and weigh the trade off of southern hospitality vs. good, greasy

Italian food.

Twenty miles, several rude horns, and a huge beef and sausage with sweet peppers later, I pull up to my hotel, bloated and cranky, maneuvering the rental car through a parking lot coated in salt and slush. I haven’t been back but once since dad’s funeral and the dirt and weather remind me why. Damn Lou. His “girl” better be worth this lousy trip.

After I check in, I empty my case onto the bed, find my computer plug amidst the mess and set up at the spacious guest room desk. I grab for the security of my cell phone and speed dial “1” for my office, then “3” to check in with Marcy on the Tammy situation. I hit “2” for Lou, then change my mind and click the phone closed. I’d rather surprise him.

I let the latest press and emails work their way into my download folder while I jump in the shower. By the time I emerge, dressed for comfort in jeans and a warm cashmere sweater, the download folder is full, but I set the reading aside for later tonight. Recharged by the shower and less uncomfortable now as the greasy beef and peppers settle inside me, I’m eager to hang out with Lou for awhile before I get my first look at this mystery player.

The streetlights are just coming on outside my hotel window and the nearing darkness makes the piled up snow look less gray. The sky too has changed from its earlier dirty pallor to a cleaner shade of inky blue. Traffic will be hell as people leave work and make their way home to cozy fireplaces and pot roast, but leaving now will still get me out to the poolroom before the night action gets rolling. I grab the only jacket I’d thought to bring along, soft black leather, but thinner than I’d probably need, and head out to my old playground.

I’d spent my formative years in dad’s poolroom, so it’s natural to feel a little tug as I pull into the once-familiar parking lot. I’d learned to play here. I’d survived teen angst here. I’d watched the best pool players in the world come through here, tournament players and gamblers alike. I own years of knowledge, anecdotes and bad jokes stored up from those days, filed away in some murky green, felt-covered corner of my head. Am I the better or worse for it? I expect I’ll never ponder the question long enough to come to any solid conclusion.

The lot is still pretty empty, but I know within a couple hours players will be fighting for a spot far down the street. The place had never been too crowded on Monday nights until dad started doing these Monday night handicap tournaments. “First Stop 9-Ball” he called them, long before 9-Ball became the tournament game of choice. A lot of that was his doing, too. Dad sensed TV might broadcast some pool with the advent of ESPN, but not a boring game like straight pool, which is what the die-hards were playing. A lot of other room owners caught on to the trend, followed by promoters, and TV did come on board.

But what really made those First Stop events legend was that our joint, Cappy’s, stayed open 24/7, taking

advantage of being just outside city limits. Lots of gamblers came out on Monday and stayed until Tuesday, sometimes longer. Mondays made Cappy's the place to be, for them, and anyone who got a vicarious thrill out of watching them. It was like a giant zoo exhibit, gambling pool players in their natural habitat. Mid-week they'd move off and head towards the city for weekend events, stopping at joints in Maywood and Berwyn along the way, then predictably find their way back out to Cappy's the next week.

Twenty years later, and Cappy's is still open 24/7, still the place to be on Monday nights, at least for any local player not on tour. No gambling for the touring pros – not in public anyway. I hear of a money match once in awhile – the men's tour is less strict with their pros – but mostly it's all above board these days. More money to be made charging spectators to watch two pros play for fifty-large in an exhibition match.

I shudder as I enter now; maybe it's just the cold. But I look around and start feeling wistful again. I can't help it; nothing has changed here in twenty years, not even the plastic potted plants. Same beat-to-crap vending machines. Same front counter, years of photos under polyurethane coating showing off the night one-eyed Sal broke the world record, pocketing the most balls in 24 hours. Same payphone in the corner, always busy before the days of cell phones. It looks lonely now; I wonder when the last "I'll be home late, honey" call was placed from there, the coin rattling through the metal box as the receiver was placed back on its hook. I remember my mother, fastidious about germs, wiping the receiver down with Lysol as she cleaned up after all the slob in this place, which was all the time. I haven't seen her since the funeral either. She was remarried already when dad passed away, living up somewhere in northern Wisconsin. I've never seen her place. They grew apart, my folks, and since I'd been so close to my dad, ma assumed I'd taken sides. That used to bother me until I got busy being bothered by more important things. And maybe I had taken dad's side, at least in that I liked him more. We'd been so alike, introverts who saw life in varying shades of gray. Ma was just the opposite, vivacious, black and white and all judgmental, all the time. Truth is, she wore me out trying to live up to who she thought I ought to be. Her turning her back on both of us was liberating, at least for me.

I try to brush away the cobweb of memories and take in the view of the main room, where half a dozen players are already hitting balls and bantering back and forth, getting ready to compete in the tournament. But more memories waft in on the dust of talc and chalk and a hint of cigarette smoke. Out of pity for the addicted, Lou has cornered off a back section for the smokers. A half-wall separates them from the rest of the room, even if a bit of smoke leaks past its borders on its way up to the giant air cleaners installed in the twelve-foot ceilings. Today, so many places are smoke-free, even in tobacco country, that it's easy to catch the comforting scent right off. I quit over

ten years ago. Once cigarette sponsorship left pro sports, there was no upside. A shame too, *Players* would've been a great brand for a partnership.

I don't recognize any of the faces warming up, but they could have been any of the players I knew growing up. The sport might have matured, but many of the rascals it attracts had not. I think back to the days I used to play runner to dad's customers, running to Denny's up the block for food, running to the drugstore for NoDoz and eye drops, running to the gas station two miles down Lake Street for cigarettes. I could've bought cigarettes at the drugstore, or even from the machine next to the bathrooms at Denny's, but these were pool players, and the cigarettes at the gas station were 25 cents cheaper. My time and fuel costs were never taken into account. They seldom offered a tip, but that was okay. Dad had a knack for relieving them of their petty cash.

I grin at the recollection. Dad was the best kind of gambler, the rare breed who wasn't the least bit addicted to gambling. He'd invent these crazy pool games and these crazy card games, games that obviously gave him an edge and kept him in the black. That never seemed to matter to the guys who lost to him, though. He owned the place, and Cappy's was where they felt most at home. And after all, "It musta' been a fluke." Dad's flukes supported us through my entire childhood. God, I miss him.

Nobody's at the front counter, so I slide my briefcase behind it, help myself to a cup of coffee that might have been fresh two hours ago, and move back around the other side to pull up a barstool and check the place out. Lou was probably in the back grabbing supplies, but I'm fine waiting here for him, trying to see if I can detect any changes at all in the old joint. So far I haven't spotted many. A new fake tree here and there, maybe.

The sign above the bulletin board listing table rates still boasts, "Home of the World Record." One-eyed Sal sank over five thousand balls in 24 hours that day. The bummer was, he'd stopped soon after he knew he'd broken it, went home, took a shower, changed, and came back to sink some more while everyone waited for the reporters to come. The reporters came, and he had his record, but it was broken a year later by someone in St. Louis who obviously wasn't concerned as much about looking and smelling good for the press. No matter, we didn't care about that other guy. The record had still been broken here. The sign stayed. I'm guessing he's still the only guy with one good eye to do it, anyway.

"Aw, hell," I say out loud. It's too much, all this history bricking up around me. I fumble in my jacket pocket for the lifeline of the cell phone that can connect me with my real world. Then I remember it's an hour later back home. The office is closed by now. Marcy's probably online with Tammy. I don't have anyone else to call.

Then I see Lou come through the office door at the back of the building. And he sees me. I click the phone closed and brace myself, preparing for Lou to lumber forward and crush me in a bear hug. "Mighty Mouse! Never believed you'd really show up. How the hell are



you?" he cries, lifting me and spinning me dizzy.

"Put...me... down," I gasp.

He does, with a thud. I feel the cement floor through the thin carpet blast right up through my spine. "Not getting any younger, I'm afraid," I answer him with a wince. "And I see there's still nothing delicate about you."

"Tough as nails, kiddo. Never need to worry yourself about ol' Lou."

"Well, that's something," I say.

Lou focuses on my face for a long moment. "Hang on, you look all misty. Dog die or something?"

I clear my throat. "Nah, something in the air's all."

"This ain't Florida, Mighty Mouse," Lou says. "Last time I checked, not a lotta' ragweed in Chicago in January."

"True," I answer, knowing better than to argue a point with Lou. "Probably brought it with me. Plane air; screws up my sinuses worse every time I fly."

He shrugs. "If you say so."

"I do. Now tell me more about your girl before she gets here. Start with her name."

"Name's Elena," Lou says. "Elena Rosario."

My greedy ears perk up. "Hispanic?" Man, what a coup! Would open up a whole new market; my only decent Hispanic player is getting too old to appeal to the 18-34 set. Maybe this wouldn't be a wasted trip after all.

"Look at you, Jen, scheming already. Let yourself be surprised for once, would you?"

He could try and pawn that casual air off on me but somehow I know better. He's being evasive again. I decide to play along for now. "Listen pal, you called me. Least you could do is make me a fresh cup of coffee. This stuff's nearly chewable."

"You never change, do you Morgan?" Lou smiles. I know he must be thinking he's dodged a bullet.

He turns away to start a fresh pot and I take stock of my dad's old friend. He still looks good for an old guy, a little grayer, thicker around the middle, but otherwise healthy. Lou runs the old place just the way dad would've wanted it, too. It warms me to think of my father's dream living on here. I can't help but wish that he'd stuck around for mine. But my dream died with him. This is what's left of it, siphoning cash off other players' dreams, brutal success.

Before I can get wistful again, the bell hanging from the front entrance jingles as a gust of wind blows in with several more customers. I recognize Hank the Hat right off, clutching the old-fashioned brim hat to his head. His real name was George "Hank" Harvey, but he'd been "The Hat" for as long as I could remember, and he'd worn the same damned eyesore as well. He'd put it on when he first started losing his hair, long before I knew him. Supposedly, that hat hadn't come off since, even though there was no shortage of suckers willing to bet Hank real cash on a game against his removing his headgear. George never lost a bet. Nobody I know had seen that head yet.

I don't see any girl with him, though.

"Uh, Lou? Tell me I didn't waste a trip up to this god-forsaken weather to—"

The rest of my sentence is cut short as the door opens again, and the creature I'm afraid will turn out to be Elena Rosario comes crashing through it.

I'm a helpless spectator, looking on in barely concealed horror as she makes her first, indelible impression: tall, bumbling, sloppy, desperately unmarketable. Her long, dark, wavy hair might look passable if she'd thought to comb it, but the rest is disaster. The baggy jeans are too short for the long skinny legs that jut out through them. I can't help thinking her height would be a game advantage though; short girls had to stretch for every shot. She's wearing canvas gym shoes that look well-worn and soggy. To confirm it, she stomps slush through the length of the front entrance, oblivious to scraping them off on the nubby rubber mats left at the door for that purpose. She looks red-faced from the cold, but otherwise no makeup. Trust Lou? What had I been smoking?

She trudges towards us, looking mad at the world, and shucks off an oversized Chicago Bears jacket, dropping it on the floor next to the counter. She drops a beat-up cue case on top of that and yells at Lou, though he's right next to her, "Hey! Got my coffee ready?"

Well, we have one thing in common. Lou winks at me, sets down two Styrofoam cups, pours them full, then measures a plastic spoonful of Coffee Mate into each. He passes one to Elena on his right, and one towards me to his left, gesturing as he does. "Elena," he says, "Meet an old friend of mine, Morgan."

Funny he doesn't use my first name, but I ignore it. I extend my hand towards her, determined to make the best of this. "Hi Elena."

She looks at me, nods her head, mutters, "Whatever," and walks away, clutching her coffee with both hands.

"Charming, Lou. Real nice," I say.

"Patience, Mighty Mouse," he answers. "I warned you she was a little rough around the edges."

I cringe at his old nickname for me and give him my darkest look, but turn to watch her as she carries her coffee to an empty table. She sets it down so she can tug at the rolled up sleeves of her flannel shirt. It's a ghastly shade of grey-green plaid; no doubt handed down by a relative adept at fixing toilets or chopping down trees. Once she gets them unrolled they must be too long; she rolls each side back up twice. "Real piece of work, this one," I say.

Lou ignores me. When she finishes screwing around with her sleeves she fishes an elastic band from her front jeans pocket and in a fluid motion that seems second nature to her, sweeps up her unruly locks with one hand and stretches the band over them with the other.

The effect, no doubt in spite of herself, is dazzling. Even unkempt, the girl does have classic features. Our image consultant would already be salivating over the makeover possibilities. She looks a little familiar to me, but I can't put my finger on it. Actress? Model? It'll come to

me. As if reading my thoughts, Lou pipes up. "Could be a looker, eh? Maybe even marketable enough for you, *Miss Morgan*?"

I watch her slurp up another sip of her coffee and toss some balls out on the table. She glances around and then remembers her cue is still laying up here at the end of the counter where she dropped it. She heads back towards us and I have to smile. Pretty or no, her gait is as awkward as a baby giraffe. What an odd creature. Then she notices me staring.

"Hey, bitch," Elena looks towards me as she retrieves her cue. "Take a picture. It'll last longer."

I don't look away. Might as well see what she has in her. "Excuse me?" I say.

"Yeah, okay, you're excused. Just quit friggin' looking at me, would ya?"

"Why?"

"Jesus, lady," she says, clucking for emphasis.

"So Lou, you lettin' her kind in here now? Man oh man, everywhere I go, goddamn lesbians. And now, in the poolroom? It ain't right, Lou."

"Elena, that's enough," Lou says. "I don't want to have to kick you out... again."

I'm sure he's trying not to laugh out loud behind me. I'm torn between staring her down and turning to take a swing at him.

"Yeah-right-whatever," Elena says, in single, well-practiced word. She hands Lou a \$20 bill and glares at me. "There's my entry fee. Tell your friend she can go ahead and bet on me if she's got the balls. Oh yeah... she probably does," she smirks and grabs her cue as she walks back towards her table.

"God dammit, Elena," Lou says. But she's already halfway back to her table, screwing together her cue on the way.

"So, Lou?" I ask. "What'd you kick her out for?"

"Her mouth, what'ya think? Couldn't shut her up one night. It's kind of hard to be telling the guys there's no swearing with women and kids around when the female kid in the room is louder and raunchier than any of 'em."

"I see."

"I know, I know. Like I said, she's a little rough. But stick around pretty lady. Here comes the real show."

Lou grabs a Mr. Microphone from behind the counter and announces that he's now taking entries for the tournament. He turns back to wink at me and I wonder again what I'm getting myself into.

## Chapter Three

Over the next couple of hours I get caught up in it. I can't help myself. There's no substitute for balls-out pool in a real poolroom. It's pure aggression and speed and sound in primary colors, punctuated by flashes of brilliance. The pro scene is so different, sterile, from *this* pool, the stuff played here in the trenches. They may play for less cash, but they put on a show, these amateurs, pocketing thriller shots a pro would never chance, taking to the air with risky jump shots, banking game balls two

and three rails. I can't remember the last time I've felt this awake as a mere spectator. Billiard balls spin past in vivid trails of blue and red and yellow, speeding across vibrant green under the low-slung lamps spotlighting each table. It's the only lighting in the room. The effect is twelve brightly lit stages, dark and hazy around the edges where the railbirds lean in on stools at pub tables, sweating the action. Soft clicks as balls collide, gentle plops as targets fall into worn, soft leather pockets. And in between, punctuating cracks of break shots and amateurs hitting the balls too hard. Sinatra accompanies the rhythm of the room, crooning from the corner out of the ancient jukebox. I have to walk over and see it for myself. Lou refuses to put in a c.d. jukebox from this century. Sure enough, songs I used to play twenty years ago are still in there, too, old 45s that crackled and popped decades ago. I slide in a few quarters and play some old Bob Seger and Santana. Hell, no trip down memory lane should be without a little genuine guitar. Then I punch in a couple more Sinatra favorites. Dad had always been partial to *My Way*. Danny liked *Fly Me to the Moon*. I punch in the numbers for both.

Around the room, players assume their designated roles, also reminiscent of the days when I played here, though I doubt I ever stopped to notice back then. The younger, inexperienced players wolf at each other: "I got fifty right here says you can't come within two games of me in a race to five."

Stupid bet. The older, wiser players show restraint, don't prattle on about their skills. "Up for a game?" they'd ask, voices soft, calm. They might not speak again for several racks.

Hank the Hat falls into the latter category. He's still a pre-event favorite in any mini-tournament around Chicagoland, but on this night he goes down in the semi-final to Cowboy, so nicknamed after a legendary old player from Texas who had died several years back. He plays nothing like that Cowboy, nor does he look like him. He does have the snakeskin boots, though. Not every nickname makes sense. Nor does the Hat losing, until I see him match up with Rocketman back on table twelve. I'd have bet even money that Rocket would be a vegetable by now after all the chemical damage he'd done to himself in the 60s. But there he is, making a gimmick game with the Hat. Guess I have some catching up to do. Then again, I've probably missed nothing. If Rocketman starts crooning Elton John any time in the next hour, I might believe I'd never left.

Meanwhile, Lou's protégé is holding her own, and he's right about one thing, the girl knows how to wield a cue. She dusts the first three guys she plays and breezes through to the semis. Granted, she picks the wrong shot most of the time, but she manages to overcome her ignorance of the game's finer points, running out from pretty much anywhere on the table.

I settle onto a stool near the other railbirds to watch her play Cowboy in the semi-finals. Lou walks up behind me and punches me in the shoulder. "See what I mean? She's something, Jen. No matter how bad she lands, she

ends up smelling like a rose, eh?"

I look at Lou and almost smile. "A rose by any other name, huh Lou?"

"I thought you might see it my way."

"No, you knew I'd see it your way. Damn, Lou, and I'm the most manipulative person I know, ask anyone. I wonder what that makes you?"

"Your mentor," he grins. "So now... you get to be hers."

"Think you got the better end of it."

"Maybe, Mighty Mouse. Maybe not."

"Well, let's not rush into anything. This one might be a tough sell," I say.

The final race between Elena Rosario and some punk I don't know is over before it begins. Lou favors winner-break, unlike the alternating break crap we use on tour. Alternating breaks is about business, not sport. Blowouts don't sell sponsor spots; alternate-break keeps matches tighter. Elena breaks and runs the first three racks before her opponent is allowed back to the table, and then it's to kick at a ball he can't see to hit straight on. He kicks rail first, misses the ball completely and she runs out the set, five games to none. A sponsor might hate that; this crowd loves it. So do I.

I watch Elena look around the room, trying to size up any fresh meat for a match-up, even as Lou hands her the \$200 cash for her win. He turns to wink at me as he pays her. His meaning is clear. It looks like her ride is still busy taking whatever cash Rocketman has left in his pocket.

It occurs to me then why the Hat had lost early, why he's boring himself to tears back there, matching up against Rocket. Lou is a true chess player, ten steps ahead. He's choreographed everything, the whole damned evening. Man, I hate being another pawn. But my gut knows he's right; the only way I'm going to break this girl down, get her to listen to me, is to play her. It's an unspoken rule. Players only trust other players. And the only way I'll earn this one's respect is to beat her.

It would be arrogant (and foolish) of me think I can beat her heads-up. Last week's stolen afternoon at the poolroom could hardly be considered practice. I hadn't played for a year before then. But that's the beauty of this sport. There's as much going on in anyone's brain as there is on the chalk-marred surface of the table. This kid won't be so tough to crack if I put the screws to her, mess with her head a little. That's something I've had considerably more practice at, after all.

I wink back at Lou and dial in on my prey. "Hey, Rosario," I call out. "Ready to put that \$200 in my pocket?"

Elena looks confused – she knows I didn't play in the tournament so she's assumed I'm a spectator only – but that only slows her down for a moment. Then she smiles, as if she's weighed the options and still sees herself coming down heavily on the win side. "Sure thing, lady," she says. "What's that I heard Lou call ya? Mighty Mouse?"

Damn Lou, and damn me for going too low. I should know better, to scare her out of what she doesn't have, not what she's already holding and can afford to lose. I'm

rusty, and I'm also tired. I realize it's an hour later back in Charlotte. I lost my enthusiasm for all-nighters years ago. Lou raises an eyebrow. I scramble to recover. "For now, you can call me Morgan. In fact, why don't you put your money where your ignorant smartass mouth is, kid? Make it a thousand, race to seven, straight up."

It's a good recovery. Now I have her. She can't afford the thousand. I can. We both know it. We both also know I've been watching her play; she hasn't seen me hit a ball. I could be anyone or no one. And she lets me get away with calling her kid, another mistake. I've lowered her a notch in the pecking order.

"Short race for a grand, ain't it?" she says.

"Nope."

She considers this. "Okay, cool. Heads or tails, lady?" she says, flipping a quarter expertly off the end of her thumb and onto the table. Looks like she's decided pretty fast. That's the brutal truth about ego. Its abundance is inversely proportional to the age of its host. I glance at Lou. I'm getting too old for this crap. He just grins. Lose, and no excuse will be good enough for him, I know.

"I love to play against the odds, Rosario. It's tails." Then I call to Lou. "Got a cue back there for me?"

I walk back up to the front counter Lou hands me a weapon from the rack next to the register. He's still grinning. I don't understand why until I look down at the cue he's passed me. It's my old favorite, left behind to warp here with the rest of the memories. Only it looks like old Lou has kept it in pristine shape. That sentimental fool. Laser engraved in tiny letters on the ivory butt plate is my own long lost nickname, "Mighty Morgan."

I give him a warning look as I shuck off my leather jacket and pass it to him. "Hope you know what you're doing," I hiss, then move back to the table where Elena has set up a fresh rack. I chalk up, and Rocketman croons from the back of the room,

"...and I think it's gonna' be a long, long time,  
'til touchdown brings me 'round again to find..."  
Hell. I'm in for a long night.

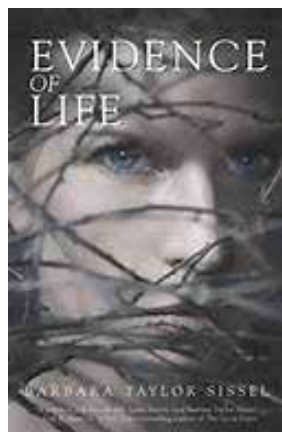
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*Shari Stauch is the author of four books, Precision Pool 1st and 2nd editions, and Pool Player's Edge 1st and 2nd editions. (Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL c. 1998, 2003, 2007, 2010), written with fellow pro player Gerry "The Ghost" Kanov. She spent twenty years as a touring pro pool player, inducted into the WPBA Hall of Fame in 2004. Shari is the CEO and creator of Where Writers Win, providing marketing training and tools to emerging authors. Shari has been involved in publishing, marketing and PR for 30 years.*



## Recommended Reading:



### **Evidence of Life**

By Barbara Taylor Sissel

Barbara Taylor Sissel, author of the new novel **Evidence of Life**, has been a finalist in the *William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition*. Born in Honolulu, Hawaii, she grew up in a number of different cities and states mostly in the Midwest. She attended college in Texas and worked

an eclectic collection of jobs from department store fashion model and flight attendant, to chair side dental assistant, admin assistant/personnel manager and a few others in between. She once lived with her family in Kentucky, in the Appalachian foothills, on the grounds of a first offender prison facility, where she interacted with the inmates and their families and was privileged to hear their stories, which although heartrending often were hopeful.

Several years later, after leaving Kentucky, she was able to pursue a lifelong dream of writing, and, not surprisingly, each one of her novels is a reflection of those experiences with prisoners. The focus of her stories is not crime per se, but how quickly and irrevocably lives can be altered in one single, shattering moment of misjudgment and how difficult it then is for family members to find their way back onto solid ground. In addition to **Evidence of Life**, published in 2013 by Harlequin/MIRA, she is author **The Volunteer**, 2012, and **The Ninth Step**, 2011. She has another, as-yet untitled, novel coming from Harlequin/MIRA in 2014.

An avid gardener and reader, as well as the mother of two grown sons, Barbara currently lives near Houston, TX.

Like Leslie Lehr, another Faulkner Society success story, also featured in this edition of *The Double Dealer*, Barbara Taylor Sissel draws heavily on her experiences as a mother to make her fiction ring true.

#### **About Evidence of Life**

On the last ordinary day of her life, Abby Bennett feels like the luckiest woman on earth. But everyone knows that luck doesn't last forever...

As her husband, Nick, and teenage daughter, Lindsey, embark on a weekend camping trip to the Texas Hill Country, Abby looks forward to having some quiet time to herself. She braids Lindsey's hair, reminds Nick to drive safely, and kisses them both good-bye. For a brief moment, Abby thinks she has it all—a perfect marriage, a perfect life—until a devastating storm rips through the region, and her family vanishes without a trace.

When Nick and Lindsey are presumed dead, lost in the raging water, Abby refuses to give up hope. Consumed by grief and clinging to her belief that her family is still alive, she sets out to find them. But as disturbing clues begin to surface, Abby realizes that the truth may be far more sinister than she imagined. Soon she finds herself caught in a current of lies that threaten to unhinge her and challenge everything she once believed about her marriage and family.

With a voice that resonates with stunning clarity, Barbara Taylor Sissel delivers a taut and chilling mystery about a mother's love, a wife's obsession, and the invisible fractures that can shatter a family.

## Competition Success Story: Barbara Taylor Sissel

## Reviews of the Book

*In Evidence of Life, Barbara Taylor Sissel delivers a brilliant thriller about love, obsession and secrets that can bring even the happiest of families to its knees.*

—Torre Puckett, *Texas Magazine*

*The slow pace of Sissel's novel allows readers to savor the language and the well-drawn characters. Exploring love, marriage, deception and trust against the backdrop of a gut-wrenching mystery leaves little time for the hinted-at romance. This quiet story is enjoyable and insightful.*

—M.H. Morrison, *Romantic Times*/4 out of 5 stars

*When does a mystery hit close to the heart? When a loved one is involved, of course. In Evidence of Life, Barbara Taylor Sissel melds mystery and relationship issues into a page-turner that is part psychological thriller and part family drama. Just how well do we know those closest to us? And to what lengths would we go to uncover their secrets?*

—Lourdes Venard, *Mystery Scene*

*If you love Jodi Picoult and Anita Shreve, read Barbara Taylor Sissel.*

—Joni Rodgers, bestselling author of **The Secret Sisters**

*As with her other novels, Ms. Sissel expands on an every day topic, adding suspense, romance, relationship dynamics and thought provoking scenarios culminating to a "never saw coming" finale.*

—Book blogger, *CMash Loves to Read*

## Recommended Reading: Mystery The Mysteries of Jack the Ripper

By N.S. Patrick

The **Mysteries of Jack the Ripper** takes an entirely new, carefully thought-through approach of just why five brutal murders of women were committed in London's Whitechapel District 125 years ago.

Modern forensic is ignored by the author. Instead, the killings are viewed through the mindset of the four social classes that composed the society of London during 1888: the Royals, the peerage, the middle class, and the lower class.

Four upper-class men have formed a whist alliance within the Polaris Club. A club steward informs one of the men of a particularly gruesome murder of a prostitute in Bucks Row the night previous. At the Sunday meeting of the alliance, Thayer mentions the murder to his card mates. Since the men were away from London over the weekend and did not hear of the murder, a lively discussion about why anyone would commit a horrific killing gets underway. With the death of a second prostitute, the whist alliance begins to examine the state of mind of the murderer. Dr. Carter puts forth the hypothesis that the murders are cathartic, and the killer is ridding himself of a deep-seated hatred of not only women, but possibly, a hatred of his workplace.

When the fifth and last murder takes place, the four gentlemen have uncovered the identity of **Jack the Ripper**, and for reasons known to the upper class, they undertake a pledge of silence. Thus, history is allowed to let the murderer fade into folk lore and the English fog. In a case of irony, the remaining survivor of the elite group, who could furnish the resolution, goes down with the Titanic.

Kenner, LA author N. S. Patrick told *The Double Dealer* that he has "always been fascinated by the story of Jack the Ripper." Patrick first became interested in The Ripper back in college in the 1950s. Through the years, he continued to read about the slayings of the five women, but was never convinced by others' research that they had discovered the true killer.

Who was Jack the Ripper? Since 1888, everyone from a cart driver to a prince has been named as the East

End, London serial killer. Patrick reveals his findings in his novel, **The Mysteries of Jack the Ripper**.

"With every book I read, I kept thinking, 'They're going about this all wrong,'" Patrick said. "They've all applied modern forensics to an old, cold case, and you can't do that." At least not successfully, in Patrick's view.

Once he retired and moved to Kenner in 2001, Patrick began researching the murders and turned his interest to why the murderer killed in such a gruesome manner instead of how the murders were performed. He began looking at the Whitechapel killings from the mindset of four classes of people in London at the time – royalty, upper- and lower-class and poor. "My study began revealing underlying philosophies and facts...and the answer to 124 years of silence was startling," he said.

Patrick's research took him to London where he found very few remnants from life in 1888, but he could stand in the spots where the victims met their horrific deaths. He read archival newspaper accounts of the events and police investigations in the respected, upper-class publications and tabloids. He said he found a marked difference in how events were covered, which offered insight into the various social classes.

From these accounts, his story and characters developed as incident upon incident led to what he feels is the logical conclusion.

How did Jack the Ripper create such a vast amount of confusion in Victorian England and get away with multiple murders?

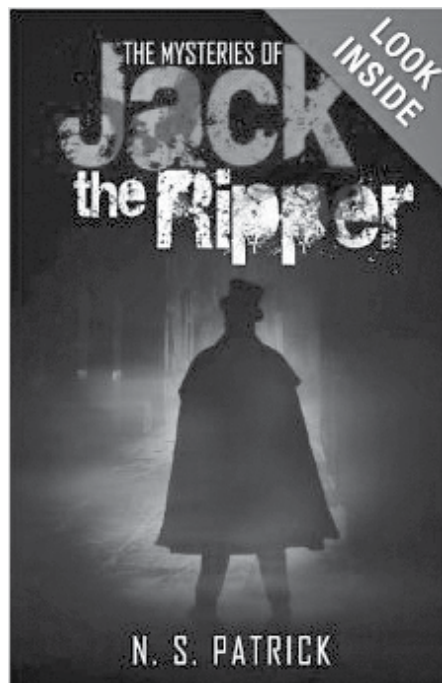
You'll have to buy the book and read it to get the answers but Patrick tells the tale through four members of his imagined Polaris Club for gentlemen, and the club's steward, who reveal The Ripper's

identity and answer "Why?"

Several notes said to be written by The Ripper taunting local police are reproduced in the book, and brief notes on the victims are included.

**N. S (Steve) Patrick** was born and raised in Michigan. He attended Albion College and received a BA in Business Administration. He was an officer in the Navy, serving in both the Cuban Missile Crisis (Guantanamo Bay) and the Viet Nam conflict. He has worked in the corporate world teaching business applications for the computer, owned several travel agencies, and a bar and Steve says, "If you want to know people, own a bar." Patrick currently lives in Kenner, LA with a rescue greyhound named Tango – as in the dance. Tango is featured in his soon to be released novel **The Murder of Wednesday's Children**.

The mystery takes place in 1926 in Boston, MA and introduces two new characters: Archer Reed and



Ione Wallace. April 13 at the 10th Jambalaya Writers' Conference, held annually in Houma, LA, an excerpt from the new novel took first place in the group's writing competition. Molly Bolden, one of the judges, described this as a "definitive win," when announcing the award.

Silver Knight Publishing LLC has picked up **The Murder of Wednesday's Children** to be published in 2014. The acquisition editor at Silver Knight had this to say about Patrick and his work: "You are a very talented writer of mysteries. You've definitely found your niche. The other acquisitions editor who also reviewed this title raved that it was a fun and intriguing read. She looks forward to future installments."

This novel is the first in a series of Archer Reed/Ione Wallace murder mysteries with Tango the Greyhound. Patrick is invited to appear at **Words & Music, 2014**.



*N.S. Patrick is shown here at a Faulkner Society meet the author event at the historic Cabildo, co sponsored by the Louisiana State Museum. With him is **Brenda Marie Osbey**, former Poet Laureate of Louisiana and author of the new collection, **History and Other Poems**, who appeared on the same program.*

## NEW FICTION: Short Story **Crossing the Dandelions**

By J. Ed Marston

"Oops." The word came unbidden when he pulled the ripcord and nothing happened. The wind wailed in his ears as he plummeted. The great circle of the earth pushed the horizons into his periphery as implacably as a ticking clock. He spread his arms and legs wide, but if it slowed him at all, he couldn't tell.

With five seconds of hindsight, "Oops" seemed a laughable first thought. He was plunging toward his death. Such a momentous realization should've conjured something more profound than "Oops" – an unprecedented string of colorful expletives at the very least. He wasn't a cartoon character. He wouldn't be bouncing back for the next scene like Wile E. Coyote. No, there would be no bouncing back from this one, though he might bounce up. He giggled. Twenty minutes earlier, Charlie the Instructor had told Lydia human bodies had enough elasticity for one good bounce when they belly-flopped full speed into the ground. What a thing to tell someone before her first jump. Old Charlie Boy had a dark sense of humor.

"Don't you have any regrets?" It was the same unbidden voice that said "Oops." He recognized the cultured Southern drawl, an echo of the Right Reverend Trayhill from First Christian when he was growing up. He'd been fending off the unbidden voice ever since the teenage version of himself pretended to sleep through twenty minutes of his mother exhorting him to get up for church. Nothing she could say ever persuaded him to go back to that hellish place again.

"Surely, there's something you wish you'd done differently," the voice said.

He ignored it as he tucked his outstretched right arm against his side to flip himself skyward before extending it out again to hold himself face up both arms wide and grasping.

Far above, he could see a red parachute like an upended rosebud in the blue. That was Lydia snuggled back to chest against Charlie in a tandem harness. He wished she hadn't been the one to suggest celebrating his fiftieth by skydiving together.

Lydia had a good husband and an excellent career. She was strong and happy despite the divorce when she was twelve and all his other mistakes. She didn't need him anymore. Mission accomplished. He hated to go and ruin everything by traumatizing her with his grizzly death.

"Don't worry," the voice said. "I'll comfort her."

"How is a voice in my head going to comfort anybody?" Crap. He'd answered it. Now, there'd be no shutting it up.

"I could give Lydia a sign you were at peace when you died," the voice offered.



“What do you mean?”

“These things usually go one of two ways,” the voice sounded pedantic, a teacher addressing an obtuse child. “If the bereaved thinks the death was pointless, well, it lingers with her, but a fitting end...”

“What kind of sign are we talking here?” Even if the voice was an expression of his wayward thoughts, it was irresistible.

“Some deaths are more dignified than others.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s the whole crapping your pants thing.”

“That ain’t going to happen.”

“Turn over.”

He tucked in his left arm and rolled so that he was hurtling face down. The ground greeted him as an expanse of green, hugely ready to swallow him up. His bowels rose up in filthy insurrection. He only just managed to control them. The panic was on him, but he was defiant.

“I held it in, you fucker,” he crowed.

“You didn’t hold anything in,” the voice said. “That was a sign of my good faith.”

The voice was right. He was in the hands of forces beyond his control, but he wasn’t willing to give in. “Clean underwear won’t convince Lydia of anything.”

“What do you want, then?” the voice seemed genuinely interested in his welfare – and hers.

“To live is all.”

“I’m sorry,” the voice said with unfeigned regret. “The laws of physics and such.”

“I thought you were all powerful,” he said clinging to his doubt.

“And, I thought I was just a voice in your head.”

Great. Just his luck to catch God in a sarcastic mood. “Obviously, I believe in you since I keep talking to you,” he said.

“Just the kind of begrudging faith every deity hopes for.”

“What kind of wise ass god are you anyway?”

“The kind that wants you to find peace.” The voice was warm. “I can make sure Lydia knows you were ready, but only if you really are.”

“Who’s to say, I’m not?”

“I know what you did.”

He hadn’t done it on purpose. Still, he’d felt the

twinge when he was packing his chute. In jump school thirty plus years ago, the training officer told him to heed that twinge and repack your chute whenever you felt it, but this morning he’d had a reason to ignore it, or at least he thought he did.

“You’re right,” the voice said. “The doctor has already left you a message.”

“Will you make sure Lydia knows?”

The voice didn’t have to answer. Dandelions carpeted the meadow below like a fuzzy headed mob rushing up to meet him. Between the recent rain and the tall weeds, he decided he probably wouldn’t bounce. He waggled his right arm to roll over on his back. The red parachute was still wending its way down. He settled his face into a genuine grin. He would hold her in his sight as long as possible with his arms extended as wide as they would go as if to say, “I love you this much.” And, he did.



J. Ed Marston

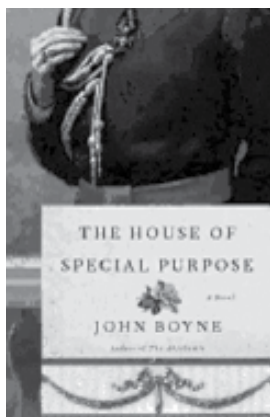
*J. Ed. Marston, born in small town Alabama and a graduate of Spring Hill College in Mobile, has worked as a public defense paralegal, a small town newspaper reporter, the manager of a non-profit serving homeless people, and currently leads communications for the Chattanooga Area Chamber of*

*Commerce. He is the founding editor of Trend Magazine and played a role in starting a local alternative weekly for which he was a regular contributor. Marston’s novel, **Kites All Quite Tall**, which was co-authored with Tad Bartlett, made the short-list for the finalist in the **Faulkner-Wisdom Novel competition** and his poem, the **Limit Perfected Fish**, was a finalist this year’s poetry competition. He was also a member of the Inaugural Oxford American Summit for Ambitious Writers. Marston claims dual citizenship as a resident of Chattanooga and a satellite member of the Peauxdunque Chapter of the **Words & Music Writers Alliance** of New Orleans.*

Be faithful in small things  
because it is in them that  
your strength lies.

—Mother Teresa

## FICTION: Good Words From Abroad The House of Special Purpose



By John Boyne

From the author of **The Absolutist**, John Boyne, comes a novel that covers all of the bases. Part love story, part historical saga, part tragedy, **The House of Special Purpose** illuminates an empire at the end of its reign. This compelling story of inappropriate love that simply will not be denied is set in the midst of the Bolshevik purge of Romanov Royals and their entourages of aristocrats.

And those who got away are not forgotten in this tale. As a long time addict of Russian history and fiction and fortunate to have been a traveler in Russia before its culture was Westernized, reading this book convinced me that Boyne, an Irishman, must have had a Russian somewhere in the family woodpile.

He has created a cast of believable, memorable characters and his landscapes ring true. His protagonist is 80-year-old Georgy Jachmenev, born the son of a muzhik on an Imperial Estate. As a young man living in a tiny village, Jachmenev distinguishes himself by saving the life of an Imperial Duke and gets appointed as bodyguard to the Tsar and his family, in particular to the fragile young, Tsarevich Aleksei, who suffers from hemophilia. His job is as much companion to Alekei as bodyguard, as the Tsarevich is not allowed the pleasures of normal pursuits such as tree climbing because, as a bleeder, could die as the result of a slight injury. Jachmenev, haunted by memories of suffering and death, has erected a virtual stone wall to keep unwelcome images out.

Jacmenev and his adored wife escaped the Reds and immigrated to England with his beloved wife, Zoya, where they have had a quiet, unremarkable life together. When Zoya is given a death sentence diagnosis, Georgy prepares for them to make one final journey back to the Russia that he once knew and loved, the Russia that both destroyed and defined him. As Georgy immerses himself once again in the past, the reader is transported with magical ease to St. Petersburg, to the Winter Palace of the Czar, in the early 20th century—a time of tumultuous social changes, including an especially bloody revolution. As Georgy overturns the most painful stone of the wall he has built against the past, we uncover the story of the house of special purpose.

Book Prize winner John Banville, author of **Ghosts, The Untouchable, The Book of Evidence, Ancient Light, The Sea** and other works of highly

acclaimed fiction, in reviewing his fellow Irishman's new novel said:

*John Boyne's novel is a tour de force, at once epic and intimate, and above all a marvelous read.*

Boyne "skillfully evokes the wrenching pain of loss and exile while presenting a tribute to enduring love, said *Booklist*, while *Kirkus Reviews* gave the book a starred review, stating:

*Narrator Georgy Daniilovich Jachmenev reviews his long life, from being household of Czar Nicholas II to his post-retirement years in London... Boyne re-creates both Georgy's personal life and the life of pre-Revolutionary Russia with astonishing density and power.*

And Paul Russell, author of **The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabakov**, hit the nail on the proverbial head when he said:

*In this richly textured, audaciously imagined alternate history, John Boyne chronicles a long and complex marriage forged out of the turmoil of the Russian Revolution. Georgy and Zoya are a memorable pair of lovers, and as this ingeniously structured narrative takes us deeper and deeper into their shared past, our understanding of their unremarkable present is increasingly colored by the extraordinary secrets, regrets and guilt they carry within them.*

A couple of reviewers, including notably *Publishers Weekly*, have chided Boyne for an excessive romanticism in this novel. But that, in fact is one reason why the book rings true.

The Russians are nothing if not excessive and they are incurable romantics.

—Rosemary James, *Double Dealer*

**John Boyne** was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1971, and lives there today. Author of nine award-winning novels—seven for adults and two for children, including **The Boy in the Striped Pajamas**, which was made into an award-winning film. The novel also won two Irish Book Awards, was short-listed for the British Book Award, reached the top of the *New York Times Best Sellers List*, and has sold more than five million copies. His novel, **The Absolutist**, hit number one on *The New York Times Bestsellers List*. His novels are published in 45 languages. For more information on Boyne, visit him at [www.johnboyne.com](http://www.johnboyne.com).



**Editor's note:** We often publish stories of writers who are literary heroes in some sense of the word—they overcome illness, natural disaster, or other changes in life but continue to write and produce work that is as inspiring as their lives. David Menasche, a former teacher who had to leave his beloved profession during a long battle with cancer, decided to document his journey across America to see how his former students fared. He is truly a literary and personal hero. The following is an excerpt from that book, *The Priority List*.

## An excerpt from **THE PRIORITY LIST**

by David Menasche (Touchstone, 2014)

### Prologue

I am sitting home, riding out the smoldering heat, oppressive even for New Orleans in June, wondering why I'm feeling so restless and low. As I stare out my window, past the front porch with brightly colored Adirondack chairs made of skateboards from my youth, to the showy pink blooms on the magnolia trees in my front yard and the canopies of Spanish moss dangling over my street, the answer hits me. The neighborhood school has closed its doors for the summer. It is as if I can hear the loud quiet coming from the playground. The sound of the silence is unsettling to me after months of listening to the happy chirping of the students and all of the hope and promise they represent. What I'm experiencing, I realize, is the same emptiness I felt when my own kids left for summer break and I was alone in my classroom, cleaning up the last remnants of the school year. I think this must be what empty nesters mean when they talk about what it's like when the last of their children leaves home.

But really I'm too young to be an empty nester—I'm just barely forty years old—and I don't have any children of my own. I'm a teacher, body and soul. "My kids" are my students. I always knew I loved them. But it has only been recently, as I've faced down death, that I've realized I live for them, too.

They are the breath that keeps me alive, long after

the medical experts said I would die.

### Chapter 1

My left ear buzzed. I didn't think much of it, except that it was as irritating as one of those pesky gnats that ride your head like a Wave Swinger at an amusement park. Only this buzzing was *inside* my head. I tried ignoring it, until one day, a few months after it started, the sound turned into a tremor that ran from my face, all the way down the left side of my body, and later, to the tip of my toes. *Time to see a doctor, Menasche*, I told myself. Paula made the appointment. She took care of anything in our marriage that involved organization. Without Paula, the lights would go out before I remembered that the electric bill hadn't been paid.

I went to my general practitioner, who sent me to an ear, nose and throat guy, who decided I needed to see a neurologist. His name was Dr. Paul Damski. He was young, not much more than my age at the time, thirty-four, and he seemed cool and direct. My kind of guy. I was hoping he'd chalk up my symptoms to a pinched nerve or a nervous tic, but instead he ordered a battery of tests. All of them had acronyms. EEG. EKG. CAT. MRI. I felt a huge sense of relief when the first three came back okay. The last one, the MRI, magnetic resonance imaging, was certain to tell a story, Dr. Damski said. I'd have to wait a few days for the outcome. No one likes the waiting part and I'm no exception. So I concentrated on the one thing I knew could occupy my mind in the meantime. I threw myself into my job.

Coral Reef Senior High is called Miami's mega magnet school for good reason. Students from all over the country compete to get into one of the six preparatory academies—International Baccalaureate, Agriscience and Engineering, Business and Finance, Legal and Public Affairs, Health Sciences, and Visual and Performing Arts. Selection is based on a lottery, except for the Visual and Performing Arts Academy. Those students have to audition to get in, and the competition is fierce. With so many aspiring performers, the atmosphere is a lot like what you see in the movie *Fame*. Girls and boys are always practicing songs and dance steps in the hallways. You just could not help but be in a good mood when you were there. Until I got sick, I had



**David Menasche**, teacher and author, will speak at *Words & Music 2013*



never missed a day.

I was one of the original staff when the school opened in 1997. It was my first teaching job, and honestly, at twenty-five, I wasn't much older than my students. I spent most of my sixteen years there teaching eleventh-grade honors and advanced placement English. I loved watching these fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds grapple with their first major life decisions—future careers, relationships, where to live, which colleges to attend, and what to study—at the same moment they're learning to drive, getting their first jobs, and experimenting with drugs, alcohol, sex, identity, and freedom. It's a transcendental time for kids. Miraculously, even though they're beginning to gain independence and are often eager for more, most aren't sick of school yet. And I felt very privileged to be part of their metamorphoses.

One way I tried to signal my eagerness to not be just another teacher to these kids was to have my classroom be always open. There were usually a half dozen to a dozen students who hung out there during lunchtime. Many days, someone would be rehearsing lines or singing or dancing, or playing the violin or guitar. Except for the times when a student came in crying over a boyfriend or a bad grade, and that was usually before or after school, it was a jubilant environment.

That's how it was the day I got my diagnosis.

It was the day before Thanksgiving, my favorite holiday. I was sitting at my desk with my best work friend, Denise Arnold, who taught senior honors English. Denise is petite and eats like a bird. When she did eat, it was usually a few M&M's from a bag she kept stashed in her desk. I'd usually buy something healthy at lunchtime and try to shame her into taking a few bites. That day we were splitting a salad from the cafeteria and kidding about how lucky we were because this time we got cucumber with our plastic container of wilted iceberg lettuce and soggy croutons. As we were finishing up, my cell phone rang with the ring tone from the old Mario Brothers video game. I flipped it open and saw my doctor's number on the screen.

"Hello?" I said, standing up from my desk.

"This is Dr. Damski's nurse practitioner," the voice at the other end of the phone said plaintively. "Your test results are in."

I guess it's my optimistic nature, but I'm always expecting things will turn out okay. "Oh," I said cheerily. "Great! What are they?"

She hesitated just long enough that I felt my heart quiver. "No," she said. "You need to come in. And you need to bring someone with you."

I felt like she'd kicked me in the gut. "I'm in school and I can't get there until later," I said.

Fear really plays games with your head. I think I was hoping that by saying I couldn't get there right away—by holding on to the normalcy of my life before that phone call—I could make the outcome different.

That the nurse practitioner would say, *Oh, no problem, let's schedule for another time.* She didn't.

"Don't worry about the time," she said. "The doctor will stay."

Now she was kicking me in the gut with cleats on. "Okay," I said.

I snapped my phone closed and turned to look at Denise. She was open-mouthed, her eyes wide with apprehension. "My tests came back," I said. "They said I have to come in to get the results. That has to mean it's bad news." My friend looked at me reassuringly. "It'll be all right, David," she said. "I know it will. C'mon! You're invincible."

I don't know how I got through my classes that afternoon. I do recall there were moments I was so involved in discussions with my students that I actually forgot about the doctor. At the end of the day I walked to the parking lot with Denise. We talked about what might be ahead and how I was holding up, things like that. When I got to my car, I turned to her and said, "This is the last time things are going to be normal." If only I could have frozen time.

**"David Menasche** lived for his work as a high school English teacher. His passion inspired his students, and between lessons on Shakespeare and sentence structure, he forged a unique bond with his kids, buoying them through personal struggles while sharing valuable life lessons.

When a six-year battle with brain cancer ultimately stole David's vision, memory, mobility, and—most tragically of all—his ability to continue teaching, he was devastated by the thought that he would no longer have the chance to impact his students' lives each day.

But teaching is something Menasche just couldn't quit. Undaunted by the difficult road ahead of him, he decided to end his treatments and make life his classroom. Cancer had robbed him of his past and would most certainly take his future; he wouldn't allow it to steal his present. He turned to Facebook with an audacious plan: a journey across America—by bus, by train, by red-tipped cane—in hopes of seeing firsthand how his kids were faring in life. Had he made a difference? Within forty-eight hours of posting, former students in more than fifty cities replied with offers of support and shelter.

Traveling more than eight thousand miles from Miami to New York, to America's heartland and San Francisco's Golden Gate, and visiting hundreds of his students, David's fearless journey explores the things we all want and need out of life—family, security, independence, love, adventure—and forces us to stop to consider our own Priority List.

## Cassandra Is Typing An Excerpt from a Novel in Progress

By Tom Carson

### *Good Dog*

Pushing 60 like it was a shopping cart full of rubble, Steve Druard was a man who'd always hated his own name. That was partly because its proper pronunciation was pretentious: "Druard," accent on the second syllable. He'd go for months without giving two hoots until he found himself correcting people, which usually meant his vanity was getting surly about not having other outlets.

When it did have them, he could be light-hearted about the dumb monicker he'd been stuck with. "Midway between druid and dryad. Anyway, a dry ad for something," he was to private-message Cassandra Akropoli on Facebook one day in the fall of 2013, thinking his long-distance correspondent would like the allusion to Greek myths and not totally sure what a dryad was other than that they were imaginary. "Probably Joanne Dru's id," she was to message back, since they both dug Howard Hawks movies even if Cassandra had no love for John Wayne.

Chunkily built, our man had the kind of frame and bearing that can carry a lot of weight pretty well until it all goes soft and you're just blubber. "You know, everything would have been different if I'd played high-school football," he once moped in his cups to the world's weariest audience, his second wife. "I was so *right* for it. Even Nixon played high-school football, for Christ's sake. But my fucking mother said no." He was also almost helplessly bearded, because how can someone named Steve Druard —let alone Druard —*not* have a beard? We're always the captives of what we despise.

He was a failed screenwriter with two credits for lip-smackingly lubricious 1980s teenage sex comedies and one aimed more at grownups. All three were so ancient that they didn't exist as computer files. He'd

written them on an honest-to-gosh typewriter in his crummy Hollywood apartment and then the Hancock Park home a guy with two hit sex comedies can afford, standing up as he typed. What had been good enough for Ernest Hemingway was good enough for him, and frankly, you could comb through all of **For Whom The Bell Tolls** without coming across a line as funny as "Uh-oh, Chet. I think my wallet just turned into a mallet" -- the top quote on *imdb.com* from a then 30-year-old Steve Druard's screenplay for 1985's **In The Pink**.

The sequel, **In The Red**, made even more money. Then **Birds of A Feather** attracted big stars, a huge budget and a name director. It laid the kind of egg that makes chickens pray they didn't come first.

Even after the last of his several unproduced attempts at a follow-up didn't get so much as optioned -- it was the 90s by then -- he still had a bit of a name in Hollywood. It was his agent's, and that stout-hearted man hadn't yet given up on Steve Druard. So he cooked up and sold a sitcom to Fox when the then fledgling network would stick pretty much any piece of crud on the schedule so long as it was tawdry enough to seem different. But even Fox would also yank any piece of crud from the schedule if that piece of crud kept being outdone in Los Angeles by reruns of vintage newscasts 30 or 40 years old, something KCOP was trying that year to tout its venerable status as the city's oldest independent TV station.

Hell, even Druard watched **The Rest Is History**. A Wisconsin-raised movie nut who'd turned gaga cinephile in his Ann Arbor college years, he'd spent his first days in Hollywood marveling at all the fictional and real 20th-century fables spread about him. The office building where Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe did his down-at-heels business, all of a block from the apartment complex where Ed Wood -- the director of **Plan Nine From Outer Space** -- used to live. Chaplin's former studio, by now the home of A & M Records. The Von's supermarket where Druard and his first wife did their "big shops" back when he was living on Cahuenga Boulevard -- the bodega at the corner of Franklin was fine for smaller ones -- stood on the onetime location of D.W. Griffith's Babylon set in **Intolerance**, for Pete's sake. There was actually a Ralph's closer by, but Druard insisted on going to the *Intolerance Von's* instead.



And so endlessly, almost guzzlably on. Not just during his days as a dazzled and frazzled Los Angeles newbie, but for years and years, no matter how often his succession of cars — rattletrap Honda Civic, aggressively sleek BMW that sometimes made him feel like the unwetted grounds in an elaborate cappuccino machine, restrained if still pricey Lexus— swept him past the former Chateau Elysee. Onetime home of a whole raft of movie stars— Bogart, Carole Lombard, Errol Flynn, although regrettably not George Raft —it was now the crown jewel of the Church of Scientology's Los Angeles empire. That gruesome fate often made Druard happily hum a few bars of the theme from **The Munsters** until the Hollywood Freeway's beckoning reckonings got intense again.

He might have gone from writing sex comedies to the “created by” credit on Fox's short-lived **The Crappers**, but Druard's heart was with the past's titans. Not only Golden Age Hollywood's, but the excitements of gorging at the University of Michigan's Cinema Guild on Bunuel, Godard, Truffaut, **The Wild Bunch** and Bertolucci's **The Conformist**. Like uncountable Hollywoodites since the Barrymores first smelled an orange grove, he dreamed of doing work someday that was true to his own taste.

Because everyone is like this, he went on doing so even after his taste had turned into reflexive postures and gestures, not the living and active thing that taste needs to be to be worth much. “Man, I'm usually good, but I just don't *get* Guy Maddin. What the fuck's up with that Carl Dreyer goes slapstick bit?” he heard himself say to some screenwriter pals— Adam Horse and Will Scramble, most likely —over Cuban sandwiches at Farmers' Market one day, and obscurely knew a corner had been turned.

Once Fox flushed **The Crappers** down its eponym, he discovered he had enough Hollywood in him to see the flop as a blow to his self-image instead of a chance to improve it. When his agent refused to even try peddling Druard's spec script for that year's Academy Awards show —spot the oblique fantasy percolating there, folks — our man had to accept that his knack for inane badinage might have gone dry for good. Still, he hadn't even known who the presenters or nominees would be, and how was a man supposed to work under those conditions, he asks you? He was at a crossroads until one of those career loop-the-loops whose details you think are too odd to explain until you realize they're boring. You can't even say “Only in Los Angeles” for fear your listener might say, “Nah -- it could have been Cincinnati.”

But thanks to a screenwriter pal whose onetime college roommate now ran a booking agency for civic associations and such all over Druard's hated Midwest, he'd wound up working as a long-distance hack speechwriter for motivational speakers with writer's block, disgraced politicians testing the comeback waters, and entrepreneurs so narcissistically impatient with whatever bored them that they'd have sent a flunky to the dentist in their place and barked “Hand over the teeth”

when the poor guy came back if they could. He and his second wife, who probably ought to be introduced soon, called those dispiriting years the “In conclusion, my friends” era.

Since it potentially applied to his own career, he secretly found the label chilling. But that was how he and Polly talked, substituting whimsical tags of their own invention for literalism. All of their household appliances had nicknames, and so on. He felt peculiarly bound to honor that trademark of their marriage while she stood by him at low ebb.

Things began to look up when he snared a job as the editor and in-house film expert at **The Big Box**, a gargantuan media conglomerate's new pop-culture website. Godzilla was spending oodles of money to see what would stick and Druard felt frisky as he caught on to the major perk of joining the online world at a management level, which was that he had no need to understand the practical means by which anything he told people to do would be carried out. With luck and an acquired manner of eye-rolling knowledgeability about problems that actually mystified him, he never would.

But he got downsized two years later when Godzilla realized that editing was superfluous and expertise was intrusive. He'd been pretty close to wondering aloud to his wife about bagging Hancock Park and moving in with her mother in Pasadena —both his own parents were as dead as the hula hoop, thank Christ —when the newly reorganized National Cinema Institute offered him a gig in Washington, D.C. He was to be their Director of Film Resources, a job title designating a peculiar hybrid of curator and publicist.

*Tom Carson is author of **Gilligan's Wake**, a New York Times Notable Book of The Year for 2003, and the new novel, **Daisy Buchanan's Daughter**. Currently GQ's “The Critic,” he won two National Magazine Awards for criticism as **Esquire** magazine's “Screen” columnist and has been nominated two more times since then. He also won the CRMA criticism award for his book reviews in **Los Angeles** magazine. Before that, he wrote extensively about pop culture and politics for the **LA Weekly** and the **Village Voice**, including an obituary for Richard Nixon in the latter that the late Norman Mailer termed “brilliant.” He has contributed over the years to publications ranging from **Rolling Stone** to the **Atlantic Monthly**. His fiction and poetry have appeared in **Black Clock**. His verse and other random writings can be found at [tomcarson.net](http://tomcarson.net). In 1979, he was the youngest contributor — with an essay on the Ramones — to Greil Marcus's celebrated rock anthology, **Stranded**. With Kit Rachlis and Jeff Salamon, he edited **Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough: Essays In Honor of Robert Christgau** in 2002. Born in Germany in 1956, he grew up largely abroad at the hands of the U.S. State Department. He graduated in 1977 from Princeton University, where he won the Samuel Shellabarger award for creative writing. A former resident of Washington, D.C., New York City, and Los Angeles, he now lives in New Orleans and can be found all too often at **Buffa's Lounge** on Saints' days.*



## Words On Music



*Summer Rain, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

## MUSIC CRITICISM: Stanley Crouch Draws on The Bible, Beowulf, and The Ancients In His New Book, Kansas City Lightning

By Caroline Rash

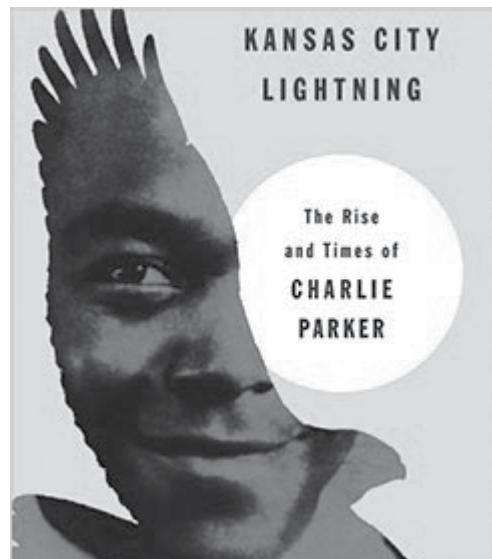
On Saturday, November 9, Faulkner House hosted jazz authority, critic, novelist, musician and scholar **Stanley Crouch**, whose new book, **Kansas City Lightning: The Rise and Times of Charlie Parker** (Harper), follows the iconic saxophonist who pioneered the “bebop” genre even as he battled the drug addiction that would lead to his untimely death at age 34.

The book has been anticipated for some 30 years by jazz fans and people following Crouch’s striking, often controversial, cultural criticism. In keeping with Crouch’s multi-genre writing career, **Kansas City Lightning** is more than a straightforward biography. It blends Crouch’s gift for storytelling with his critical eye, relating a tale of genius in a story arc rather than merely a timeline.

He had great material to work with, as no contemporary musician has lived a more transformational, or more tragic, life than Charlie Parker, one of the most talented and influential musicians of the 20th century. From the start of his career in the late



One of the most gifted of contemporary cultural observers, **Stanley Crouch** is shown here in a photograph by Zack Zook.



1930s, Parker personified the tortured American artist: a revolutionary performer who internalized all of popular music and blew it back through his saxophone in the form of a new music known as bebop.

No thread goes unraveled, no accomplice or mentor (**Lester Young, Buster Smith, Biddy Fleet, etc.**) unexplored. The reader must be patient; in fact, this first volume of a proposed two barely gets Parker out of his teenage years.

“People may wonder why I go off talking about people who aren’t Charlie Parker for pages in a Charlie Parker biography,” said Crouch. “But you can’t understand ‘Bird’ if you don’t understand his context and the people around him.”

During his presentation, Crouch compared Parker to **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart**, another tortured genius, who died young but not before he had revolutionized classical music, injecting Baroque forms with amazing and complex riffs.

In order to illuminate his larger than life protagonist, Crouch organized the book according to motifs and forms of great literature. He refers to Charlie Parker as “a classical hero,” and the reader can see Crouch giving more than a nod to Homer. **Kansas City Lightning** is only the first installment about a 20<sup>th</sup> century American tragic hero, Parker, just as Odysseus, sails through an Iliad and an Odyssey of his own.

Similarly, the story of Parker takes on a Biblical division of Old—Parker coming to understand jazz as it stood—and New—Parker the musician redefining a genre. Dwight Garner, writing for the *New York Times*, notes that Crouch also draws on **Beowulf**, beginning the book in media res at an important gig and dealing with “a monster: drug addiction.”

During his signing at Faulkner House, Crouch noted that **William Faulkner’s** 1942 novel **Go Down, Moses** also served as inspiration for the fragmented form of **Kansas City Lightning** (**Go Down, Moses** was, in

fact, originally published as a collection of stories, though Faulkner insisted it was a novel).

Crouch also discussed more general similarities between Faulkner and Parker. Both were technically uneducated in their art form, but the lack of formal training allowed them to inject vitality into existing forms. Both saw how other great artists created genius and were then able to recreate and extend their respective art forms.

“Some scholars will say that Faulkner only read **Shakespeare** and **The Bible**, just **Shakespeare** and the **Bible**, and will ask how did he do what he did, but Faulkner, like Parker, really saw what he was looking at,” said Crouch. “Most people can’t really see what they’re looking at.

And those scholars are wrong anyhow. It’s known, for instance, that Faulkner read and was influenced by Joseph Conrad’s works, including **Heart of Darkness**; Ford Maddox Ford, including **The Good Soldier**, James Joyce, including **Ulysses**, and other authors as well.

All of these writers, we might add, are writers that Stanley Crouch has read and can hold forth on, enlightening us and entertaining us all the while, and Stanley Crouch is no mean Faulkner Scholar himself. We are happy to report that Stanley has accepted our invitation to appear at **Words & Music, 2014**. Our theme for 2014 will be **Improvisation in Words, Music, and Life**. Stanley Crouch will be perfect for the subject. He is, like many of his musician subjects, a master of improvisation.

## What Others Have to Say About Kansas City Lightning

*The New York Times* says:

Mr. Crouch is an *essayist, novelist, columnist for The Daily News, MacArthur grant recipient, jazz purist, rap loather and jumbo-size personality. Since 1987, he has served intermittently as artistic consultant for jazz programming at Lincoln Center. If you can find a rare copy of “Ain’t No Ambulances for No Niggahs Tonight” (1969), a spoken-word recording of his early poems, you will be content for some time. Kansas City Lightning is ostensibly a life of Charlie Parker, the great alto-saxophone player, but it’s not even close to a real biography. Mr. Crouch doesn’t have the temperament of a biographer. He’s worked on this book, off and on, for more than 30 years. He’s done his share of*



*Stanley Crouch speaks at Faulkner House Books.  
Photo by Margarita Bergen.*

*interviews. But Mr. Crouch is not about getting his knees dirty, rooting around in old tax bills and manila folders and yellowing box-office receipts. He’s about aesthetics and ideas. His book is a 365-page riff on Charlie Parker, on America in the first half of the 20th century and on black intellect and feeling.*

**Booklist** gave the new book a starred review and says: *To jazz lovers, the prospect of music and cultural critic Crouch taking on the life of the iconic Charlie Parker carries the anticipation that fans would have had at the great battles of the jazz bands or the cutting contests vividly described here....*

**Publishers Weekly** says: *With the straight-ahead timing and the ethereal blowing of a great jazzman, Crouch delivers a scorching set in this first of two volumes of his biography of Charlie ‘Yardbird’ Parker, capturing the downbeats and the up-tempo moments of the great saxophonist’s life and music.*

**And Kirkus Reviews** says: *...Crouch is a phrasemaker, and the text is chockablock with memorable*

*lines... A story rich in musical history and poignant with dramatic irony.*

**Caroline Rash** is associate editor of *The Double Dealer*.

## Recommended Reading: Books on Music

**Verve: The Sound of America** by **Richard Havers** (Thames & Hudson)

Offers an in-depth look at one of the world’s most famous record labels.

**Train Songs** edited by **Sean O’Brien** and **Don Paterson**

A collection of poems and lyrics, from Tom Waits to Philip Larkin to WH Auden, makes for an enchanting tribute to the railways.

*continued on next page...*



## Recommended Reading: Ernie K-Doe: The R & B Emperor of New Orleans

By Ben Sandmel

If you are looking for a unique gift for the music- or New Orleans-lover, consider **Ben Sandmel's** coffee table book, *Ernie K-Doe: The R & B Emperor of New Orleans*.

Sandmel, a New Orleans journalist and regular at Ernie's popular Claiborne venue the Mother-in-Law Lounge, decided to write a book on the outsized New Orleans personality before the musician's 2001 passing, and was fortunate enough to get exclusive interviews with the K-Doe and his wife, **Antoinette**. Designed by **Alison Cody** ([alisoncodydesign.com](http://alisoncodydesign.com)), the book features 137 images from more than 20 photographers.

The book, which just won the **2013 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Living Blues Award for Best Blue Book**, follows K-Doe's rise to stardom with his 1961 hit "Mother-in-Law", the first hit to rule both black and white airwaves. On the national scene, that may be where K-Doe's story ended, but back in his home of New Orleans, it had just begun.

Sandmel respectfully follows K-Doe into his drug-fueled decline and subsequent second chances at both fame and love. The book is full of anecdotes about K-Doe's hyperbolic personality, which grew him a dedicated fan base as a WWOZ DJ and man-about-town. He had no problem making both wildly self-aggrandizing and wildly clever statements such as, "There have only been five great singers of rhythm & blues—Ernie K-Doe, James Brown, and Ernie K-Doe!"

Sandmel could have written on any New Orleans character or musician, and he chose K-Doe—to stand out as a character in New Orleans means a man must have *quite* the presence, and Sandmel's succeeds in endearing the reader to his subject just as Sandmel himself was endeared to K-Doe.

## What Others Are Saying:

Ben Sandmel's new book, "Ernie K-Doe: The R&B Emperor of New Orleans," features a lengthy, brilliantly researched biography that manages to make facts as intriguing as myths. It is a triumph. —*The Chicago Tribune*

Though K-Doe's trajectory (rapid stardom, reckless spending, substance abuse, career decline, and poverty) isn't surprising, Sandmel remains respectful and manages to hold the reader's interest, portraying K-Doe as an eccentric man who was by turns irritating, egotistical, and incredibly generous. —*Publisher's Weekly*

*The R&B Emperor of New Orleans* is ambitious, but never overstated in its oversized and eye-poppingly gorgeous

hardback that brims about the singer who called himself "Emperor of the Universe." To author and true believer Ben Sandmel, New Orleans didn't get any more royal than Ernie K-Doe – as the vintage photos and rich, scholarly text attest. —*The Austin Chronicle*

**Ben Sandmel** is a New Orleans-based journalist, folklorist, drummer, and producer. His articles about Louisiana music have appeared in national publications, including the *Atlantic* and *Rolling Stone*, and have been anthologized in such collections as *Da Capo Best Music Writing 2000* and *From Jubilee to Hip Hop: Readings in African American Music*. Sandmel has written liner notes for over a hundred albums. He is also the author of *Zydeco!*, a collaborative book with photographer Rick Olivier. Sandmel has worked for the Louisiana Folklife Program as a field researcher and writer documenting traditional music and occupational folklore. He produces the Allison Miner Music Heritage Stage, an oral history venue at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. He has produced and played on four albums, including the Grammy-nominated *Deep Water* by the Cajun/western swing band the Hackberry Ramblers.

...Continued from page 203

### **Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Story of Modern Pop** (Faber & Faber) by Bob Stanley

A grand narrative of pop music.

### **The Beatles: All These Years, Volume One – Tune In** (Crown Archetype) by Mark Lewisohn

The first tome in Mark Lewisohn's Beatles history examines the early days in exquisite, almost obsessive detail.

### **Opika Pende: Africa at 78 rpm** (Dust-to-Digital) Edited and text by Jonathan Ward.

A four-disc collection featuring 100 tracks taken from rare 78 rpm recordings of African music—from 1909 to the mid-1960s—none of which have ever been issued on CD until now.

### **A Scene In Between: Fashion and Independent Music in the UK 1983-89** (Cicada Books) by Sam Knee

"The mid to late 1980s indie scenes in Britain--from C86 to Shoegaze--are a neglected moment in music history. There's been much coverage of punk, postpunk and the acid-house rave era of the early 90s, but the scene surrounding independent guitar-based music of the mid-80s has been largely overlooked." —Artbook

## Tennessee Williams And The Protestant Hymnody

By Kenneth Holditch

To grow up in the American South in the last century as a Protestant was to be exposed, perhaps unconsciously, to church music, especially the time-honored and cherished hymns. These songs of praise or petition or penitence were to be heard not only in the sanctuaries of Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, and evangelical congregations but also in school classrooms and chapels and other places where religious people gathered in villages, hamlets, towns, and even cities. The hymns might differ from denomination to denomination—the Episcopal songs tend to be more subdued, less sanguine than, say, the Baptist or Pentecostal entries. Friends of mine, notably those from other parts of the country or those not brought up in a church, are amazed that I can, under the right circumstances, sing along with soloists, choirs, or quartets on gospel television shows, and I explain that “I had no choice.”

Why? Because I grew up in the First Baptist Church in Tupelo, MS and was in attendance, not always willingly, at Sunday School, morning and evening services on the Sabbath, and unless I could come up with an innovative and convincing excuse involving health or school work, at Wednesday night prayer meeting.

As the Southern comedian Jeff Foxworthy observes, “Going to church on Sunday wasn’t even negotiable.” Under those conditions, one—especially a young one—could not but absorb those melodies and lyrics as if through the pores of the skin. Wanted or unwanted, attended to or ignored, they have invaded our consciousness and taken up permanent residence in the corners of our memory, to come forth, unannounced, unexpected, when we least expect them—but perhaps when we most need them. I do not complain, for these hymns and the King James version of **The Bible** have been a treasure trove to be returned to again and again for inspiration and comfort. Their vocabulary, cadences, imagery, and symbolism nourished my creativity as they did that of William Faulkner, (though I must humbly admit that he made better use of the gift bestowed upon him), Tennessee Williams, and a multitude of other authors. In that regard, Willa Cather attributed much of the power of her prose to the fact that although she was not a believer, she spent thirty minutes every day before she began to write in reading the King James version.

I should note that for me, the singing was always the most appealing part of the service, infinitely preferable to the sermon. I could fully sympathize with Alma Tutwiler in Tennessee Williams’s short story “The Yellow Bird.” The daughter of a Presbyterian minister in Arkansas, Alma would bring one of her father’s long-



**W. Kenneth Holditch**, Founder of the *Tennessee Williams Journal* and Co-Founder of the *Tennessee Williams Festival* and the *Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society*.

winded sermons to an end by playing the offertory hymn, but on one occasion, when that method fails, she slams the hymn book down on the organ bench and shouts, “Papa... for the love of God, quit preaching,” an extreme measure that proves effective. Being a good little boy, quiet and courteous, I lacked the ability to use Miss Alma’s method so had to endure to the bitter end, just as I imagine a young Tennessee Williams, who, devoted as he was to his grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin, would have liked to have followed Miss Alma’s example on several occasions.

Tom Williams soaked up those devotional melodies and lyrics, and unlike Cather, for Tom their message remained true, though in varying degrees throughout the years. In a time of confusion, he wrote 30 August 1936 in his notebook, “Maybe if I look hard enough into this fog I’ll begin to see God’s face and can manage to find my way out.” However, the day after that entry, he wrote with conviction, “I do believe in God. I know I do. There are times like this when all doubt is forgotten—when reason is put away—and when I feel that God is sitting right at my side with one hand on my shoulder.” And in 1953, “I am sure that God will help me. Nothing else can.” He repeatedly asserted his belief in the efficacy of prayer, and, of course, many of the classic Protestant hymns, the singing of which is the congregation’s most active part in the old-time Protestant services, are musical petitions to the divinity for aid and support.

Tennessee Williams was always drawn to music of various types—blues, sentimental ballads, church hymns, and Christmas carols. As a child in the Mississippi Delta, he was exposed early to one of America's most indigenous art forms, the blues, and later he would compose his own lyrics in that genre, among them "Lonesome Man," "The Kitchen Door Blues," and "Gold Tooth Blues." He employed in his plays popular songs that related symbolically to the character and their situations, for examples, "You're the Only Star in My Blue Heaven," in **This Property is Condemned**, and in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," "Paper Moon," and "From the Land of the Sky Blue Waters," all of which reflect Blanche's progressive disassociation from reality. The one major musical form for which Tennessee expressed disdain was, surprisingly, grand opera. He wrote in his notebooks that the only opera he really cared for was *Carmen*, although it should be noted that there are influences from that genre in his plays. Consider the occasional allusions to operatic elements in the plays, as when Blanche refers to Mitch as her "Rosenkavalier," and the wonderful arias Tennessee created for his divas—a message that Andre Previn ignored or simply did not understand when he adapted *Streetcar* as an opera.

Other musical elements are certainly present in the dramas of Tennessee Williams, but in play after play, there are allusions to hymns and even occasions when they are sung by one or more of the characters. In Act One of *Spring Storm*, the early play Tennessee wrote while in college, Heavenly Critchfield and Richard Miles on their "high windy bluff" hear music rising from below where a church picnic is in progress and people are singing

*Now the day is over  
Night is drawing nigh,  
Shadows of the evening,  
Steal across the sky.*

The hymn is in the traditional ballad stanza, so popular in English and American poetry: four iambic lines with four feet in lines one and three, three in lines two and four. It was the favorite metrical pattern of one of Tennessee's favorite poets, Emily Dickinson, who most likely learned it from the Protestant hymns sung in the church her family attended in Amherst, Massachusetts. "Now the Day Is Over," composed by Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865, has lyrics that are typical of the time, and Tennessee, I think, would have been especially drawn to the second stanza, for in it is expressed an idea frequently repeated in his plays and poetry:

*Jesus, give the weary  
Calm and sweet repose,  
With thy tend'rest blessing  
May mine eyelids close.*

The fourth stanza is a petition, much like those in hundreds of other hymns, to bless the children and the sailors "tossing/ On the deep blue sea," a plea that reflects Tennessee's often expressed belief that humans

need divine intervention, even when it is not forthcoming. And in the penultimate verse, the traditional summoning of angels to guard the needy "Through the long night watches..." so that when the morning comes the one who prays may awake "Pure and fresh and sinless..." Attesting to the efficacy of this music and others, Heavenly and Richard, who have been arguing in Tennessee's play, are changed, as indicated in the stage direction: "The soft poignant quality of the hymn penetrates their mood and softens them both."

Often imagery of worship and worshipers, some of it humorous or even ironic, are used as integral elements of the dramas. In *Battle of Angels*, completed in 1940s, Eva complains that during choir practice, Birdie's "voice always cracks on that *Te Deum*. She can hit 'A' pretty good but she always floats on 'B.'" (Surely young Tom, that "little pitcher with big ears," as Miss Edwina described him, must have heard such catty remarks from members of his grandfather's congregation.) A few years later, in *The Glass Menagerie*, one of Tennessee's always fascinating stage directions indicates that there is to be "MUSIC UNDER" the action and dialogue and that music is "AVE MARIA," as Amanda, who is very angry with her son Tom, nevertheless reacts sympathetically and maternally, when he burns his mouth with hot coffee.

In the opening scene of **Sweet Bird of Youth**, Chance Wayne hears Easter music emanating from churches and identifies them as "The Alleluia Chorus" from the Episcopal church and bells from the Roman Catholic. **Period of Adjustment** is set on Christmas Eve and the music of the season is recurrent as carolers in the neighborhood sing "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen, May Nothing Ye Dismay" —Tennessee misquotes the title—and later the plaintive "I Wonder As I Wander." Both hymns are composed in a minor key, which perhaps is what leads Isobel, herself a wanderer on her wedding night, to say, "Little Boy Jesus so lonesome on your birthday." There are Christmas hymns in *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* on the eve of the holiday; when a carol is heard at a distance, Miss Alma comments that "The Methodist carolers have already gone out," and later, having gone to the Episcopal church herself and returned, she remarks, "I sang one carol," and then reports that the combines choirs are doing Handel's *Messiah*."

Miss Alma is, of course, called—perhaps sarcastically by some—"the Nightingale of the Delta," and in **Summer and Smoke**, she informs Dr. John that she will be singing "The Voice That Breathed O'er Eden" at an upcoming wedding.

*The voice that breathed o'er Eden that earliest  
wedding day,  
The primal wedding blessing, it hath not passed away.  
Still in pure espousal of Christian man and maid  
The Holy Three are with us, the threefold grace is  
said.*

It is in many ways typical, somewhat saccharine hymn, typical of the late Victorian Age, the sort of song



one would expect Miss Alma to sing; but woven into the four stanzas and the chorus, all composed in the popular ballad stanza, is the theological discourse on the nature of the Holy Trinity.

Tennessee, believe it or not, wrote his own Christmas hymn, although it falls outside the boundaries of the traditional in terms of content and message. In "The Mutilated," a sad little drama—Tennessee called it a "Slapstick Tragedy"—about two down-at-the-heels prostitutes living in a shabby hotel in New Orleans in the late 1930s. Tennessee's "Production Note" states that the verses printed with the drama "will be set to music and sung (probably a *cappella*) as 'rounds' by a band of carolers."

*I think the strange, the crazed, the queer  
Will have their holiday this year  
And for a while, A little while,  
There will be pity for the while.  
A miracle, A Miracle!  
A sanctuary for the wild.*

*I think the mutilated will  
Be touched by hands that nearly heal,  
At night the agonized will feel  
A comfort that is nearly real.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
A comfort that is nearly real.*

*The constant star of wanderers  
Will light the forest where they walk  
And they will see and they will hear  
A radiance, A distant call.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
A vision and a distant call.*

*At last for each someone may come  
And even though he may not stay,  
It may be softer where he was,  
It may be sweeter where he lay.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
Stones may soften where he lay.*

*The lost will find a public place  
Where their names are not unknown  
And there, oh, there an act of grace  
May lift the weight of stone on stone,  
A miracle, a miracle!  
The finding of a love unknown.*

*"Oh, but to love they need to know  
How to walk upon fresh snow  
And leave no footprint where they go,  
Walking on new-fallen snow.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
No footprint on new-fallen snow.*

*The wounded and the fugitive,  
The solitary ones will know  
Somewhere a place that's set apart  
A place of stillness cool as snow,  
A miracle, a miracle!  
A place that quiets the outraged heart.*

*I may be in a public park  
That has a bench that's set apart,  
And not by daylight, after dark,  
With winter mist upon the park.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
A mist that veils a winter park.*

*For dreamers there will be a night  
That seems more radiant that day,  
And they'll forget, forget they must,  
That light's a thing that will not stay.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
We dream forever and a day.*

*Now round about and in and out  
We will turn and we will shout.  
Round about and in and out  
Again we turn, again we shout.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
A magic game that children play.*

*I think for some uncertain reason  
Mercy will be shown this season  
To the wayward and deformed,  
To the lonely and misfit.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
The homeless will be housed and warmed.*

*I think they will be houses and warmed  
And fed and comforted a while  
And still not yet, not for a while  
The guileful word, the practiced smile.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
The dark held back a little while.*

*I think they ones with measured time  
Before the tolling of the bell  
Will meet a friend and tell their friend  
That nothing's wrong, that all goes well.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
Nothing's wrong and all goes well.*

*They'll say it once and once again  
Until they say it to themselves  
And nearly think it may be true,  
No early tolling of the bell.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
Nothing's wrong, all is well!  
And finally, oh, finally  
The tolling of a ghostly bell  
Cries out farewell, to flesh farewell*

*Farewell to flesh, to flesh farewell!  
A miracle, a miracle!  
The tolling of a ghostly bell.*

*The tolling of a ghostly bell  
Will gather us from where we fell,  
And oh, so lightly will we rise  
With so much wonder in our eyes!  
A miracle, a miracle!  
The light of wonder in our eyes.*

*But that's a dream, for dream we must  
That we're made not of mortal dust.  
There's Jack, there's Jack, that's Jack in Black!  
Expect me, but not yet, not yet!  
A miracle, a miracle!  
He's smiling and it meant not yet.*

*I'm Jack in Black, who stacks the deck,  
Who loads the dice and tricks the wheel.  
The bell has stopped because I smile.  
It means forget me for a while.  
A miracle, a miracle!  
Forget him for a little while.*

There are bells and lights and miracles, but clearly this is not the traditional Christmas carol. It is probably true, however, that without his upbringing in the church and in the midst of a family committed to the church, this unique carol could never have been composed.

Tennessee used the same hymn in two of his plays written in the 1960s. In *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, Rosemary, a member of Miss Alma's literacy club, complains, "I'm just as cold as Greenland's icy mountains," a quotation from the old missionary hymn of that name, the first stanza of which indicates its colonialist tone:

From Greenland's icy mountains, from India's coral strand,  
Where Afric's sunny fountains roll down their golden sand:  
From many an ancient river, from many a palmy plain,  
They call us to deliver their land from error's chain.

The hymn was still popular in the early 1900s, and one can imagine how its romantic allusions must have appealed to an imaginative young boy in small-town Mississippi. The hymn appears again in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, written a few years later. Flora Goforth asks Christopher Flanders, "Why don't we sing that old church hymn, 'From Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral Isle,'" and Christopher completes the quotation, no doubt in a sardonic tone, "Man alone is vile." (The words of the hymn are actually "only man is vile.") Flora reminds him that "Devils can be driven out of a heart by the touch of a hand on a hand, or a mouth on a mouth."



Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society Co-Founder **W. Kenneth Holditch**

Two lesser known late plays contain allusions or references to church music: In *Kingdom of Earth*, as they await the Mississippi River flood that is approaching, Chicken asks Myrtle to "sing something from the church, something out of the hymn-book." She replies that she knows "lots of church songs" and proceeds to sing:

*My feet took a walk in heavenly grass,  
All day while the sky shone clear as glass.  
My feet took a walk in heavenly grass,  
All night while the lonesome stars rolled past.  
Then my feet came down to walk on earth,  
And my mother cried when she give me birth.  
Now my feet walk and my feet walk fast,  
But they still get an itch for heavenly grass.  
But they still get an itch for heavenly grass.*

There is an interior, perhaps humorous, message in this exchange, for this lyric is not from any hymn-book but from the scripture according to Tennessee Williams, an early poem that was part of the "Blue Mountain Ballads." In *Small Craft Warnings*, Leona remembers with sorrow her brother playing the violin in church on Easter: "'Angels of Light' that was it, the number he played that Easter...." and she sings a phrase of the song, which Tennessee does not quote. The actual title of the hymn is "The Pilgrims of the Night," and the chorus contains the title Leona ascribes to it:

Angels of Jesus, angels of light,  
Singing to welcome the pilgrims of the night!

The words are appropriate to the play, for it is night in the bar where various waifs and outcasts, Tennessee's "fugitive kind," are gathered for some semblance of

mutual support.

In the movie script for *Baby Doll*, Archie complains about Aunt Rose Comfort's singing hymns and, according to Baby Doll, once poured water on the elderly lady when she did so. Finally, at the end of the script, Aunt Rose sings as she gathers roses, one of the best known and best loved of church songs—

Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in thee—

a prayerful request, particularly apt and emotional, given her situation, since she is once again more or less homeless, one of the relatives Amanda Wingfield describes in *The Glass Menagerie*: "I've seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife—little birdlike women without any nest—earning the crust of humility all their lives!" Tennessee kept a spot in his heart for such tragic people, perhaps because not only his grandmother but also his grandfather Dakin found themselves in a similar situation after the rector's retirement when they came to live for a while with their daughter Edwina's family and were brutalized by Cornelius, Tennessee's father.

What seems to me Tennessee's most powerful and poignant use of a hymn within the context of a play appears in **The Gnadiges Fraulein**, the second play he calls a "Slapstick Tragedy." The title character, a celebrated Viennese singer-celebrity who has fallen on hard times, and who, battered and blinded, survives in Key West by competing with a trained seal for the fish that are thrown to him. Her pathetic and frantic performance, I think, parallels the act of the artist, the poet, the playwright, who compete for the prize against all odds, unappreciated, living on past glory. As the Fraulein hurries out to the docks at the end of the play, she is singing *Whispering Hope*, composed by Septimus Winner in 1868. The first verse reads,

Soft as the voice of an angel,  
Breathing a lesson unheard,  
Hope with a gentle persuasion  
Whispers her comforting word:  
Wait till the darkness is over,  
Wait till the tempest is done,  
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow,  
After the shower is gone.

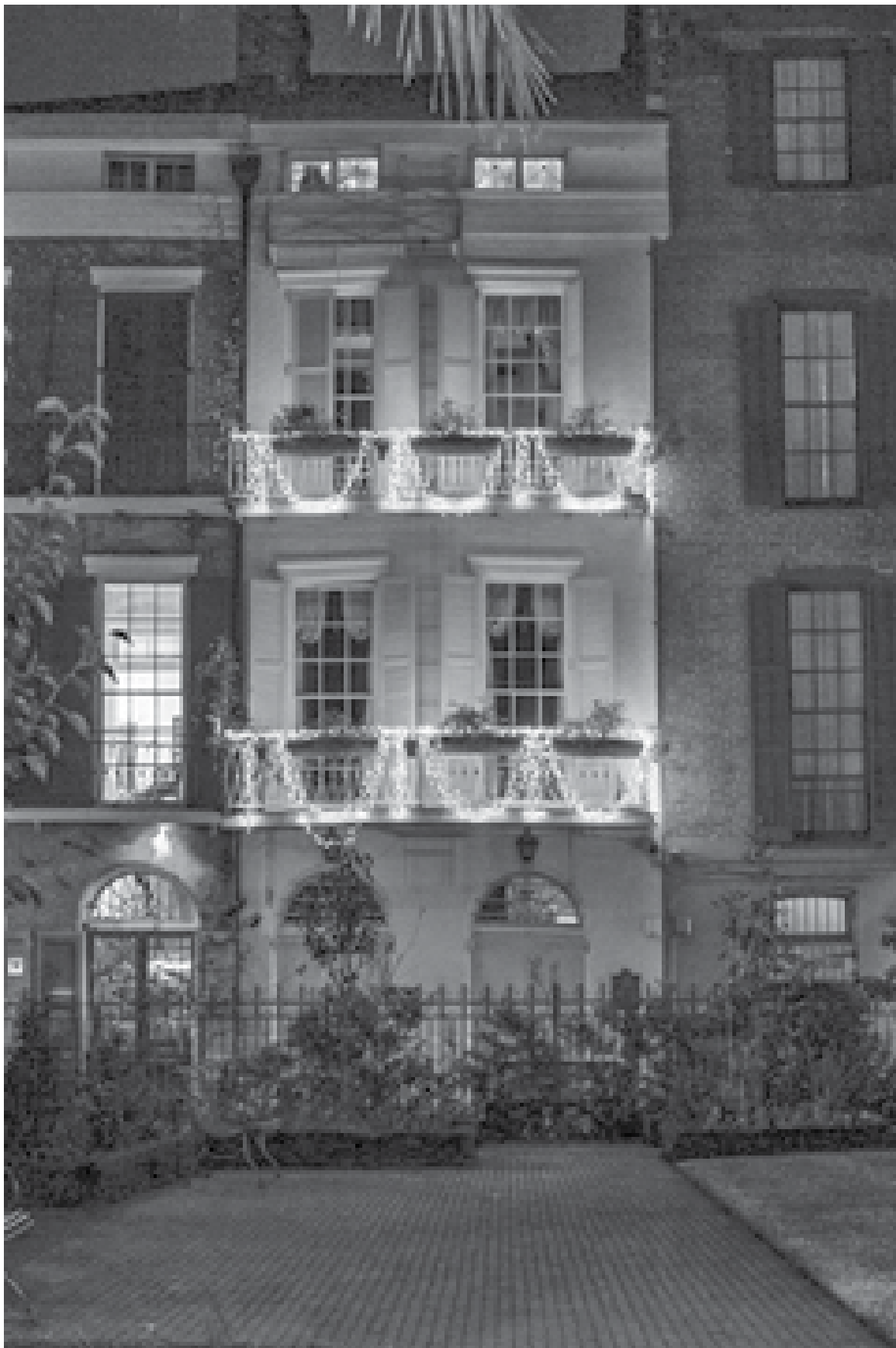
*Whispering hope, oh, how welcome thy voice,  
Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.*

When Hartford Stage produced this play, they spent a lot of time and effort trying to find out about *Whispering Hope*, and when I arrived there to give a lecture and was told about the problem, I told them they should have asked a Southern Protestant in the first place. The

hymn expresses exactly what I believe Tennessee to be portraying in **The Gnadiges Fraulein**, the abiding hope within our natures that keeps us going, particularly the artists among us. Through all the years of his late career, when the critics circled like hungry wolves—or like the strange Cocaloony bird that pecks out the Fraulein's eyes—Tennessee came to know just how difficult the writer's struggle is, but hope, "whispering hope," if you will, kept him going.

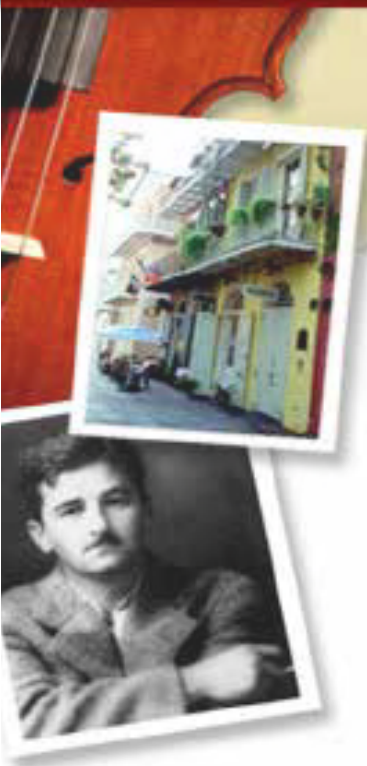
**W. Kenneth Holditch** is a Research Professor Emeritus from the University of New Orleans, where he taught for 32 years. He is the founding editor of *The Tennessee Williams Journal* and has published numerous short stories, poems, periodical articles, and critical essays on William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Lillian Hellman, Walker Percy, Richard Ford, Anne Rice, and many others. Holditch was a founder of the Tennessee Williams Festival in New Orleans, Tennessee Williams Festival in Clarksdale, Mississippi, the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, and the Words and Music Festival. In 1974 he created a French Quarter literary tour and still conducts the walks through the Vieux Carre. Long term plans include a biography of John Kennedy Toole as well as a novel about growing up in the Mississippi. His full-length play on Tennessee Williams has been given two staged readings at Lincoln Center in New York and is still a work in progress. In 2003 his recorded narration was used as a voice-over in an off-Broadway staging of *Derelicts and Dreamers*, produced and directed by Erma Duricko. In 1997 Holditch was keynote speaker at the Great Lakes Theatre Festival in Cleveland, OH. He has lectured extensively in the U.S. and Europe on Tennessee Williams and other Southern authors and has participated in symposia at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Tennessee Williams Symposium at the University of Alabama and the University of Minnesota. He is an annual speaker at the Hartford Stage for their Tennessee Williams Marathon. In 2001, he was awarded the Louisiana Endowment of the Humanities Lifetime Achievements Award. In recent years, he has concentrated much of his attention on Tennessee Williams and his works. Holditch's writings on the playwright include a monograph about Williams in New Orleans, *The Last Frontier of Bohemia*. He co-edited with critic Mel Gussow the two *Library of America* volumes (2000) that include 33 plays of Tennessee Williams. With Richard Freeman Leavitt, he co-authored *Tennessee Williams and the South*, published in March 2002 by the University Press of Mississippi. Holditch's latest book, co-authored with Marda Burton, is *Galatoire's: Biography of a Bistro*.





*Seasons Greetings from 624 Pirate's Alley!*

# Faulkner & Friends



*Transparent God, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

## Sally Wolff-King, William Faulkner, and a Mississippi Family Journal Which Inspired the Nobel Laureate

In **Ledgers of History: William Faulkner, an Almost Forgotten Friendship, and an Antebellum Plantation Diary: Memories of Dr. Edgar Wiggin Francisco III**, published by Louisiana State University Press, Dr. Sally Wolff-King reveals for readers a little-known friendship of William Faulkner's and the startling sources of inspiration for Faulkner's most famous works.

Dr. Wolff-King—who teaches southern literature at Emory University, who has been studying Faulkner for 30 years, and also is author of **Talking About William Faulkner**—attracted national attention three years ago when she announced discovery of the diary and was able to establish the ties between this antebellum plantation journal and the works of Nobel-prize winning author William Faulkner.

The book includes interviews with **Dr. Edgar Wiggin Francisco, III**, who as a child would sit and listen as his father and Faulkner—childhood friends—swapped stories. In the interviews, Dr. Francisco recalled that Faulkner also displayed an absorbing interest in a seven-volume diary kept by Dr. Francisco's great-great-grandfather John Ramsey McCarroll, a pre-Civil War era plantation owner in Mississippi.

In a letter to the Faulkner Society after the book was published, Dr. Francisco's wife, Anne Salyerds Francisco wrote:

*My husband, Edgar W. Francisco III, owns his childhood home and that of his ancestors, the McCarroll-Francisco family. John Ramsey McCarroll began construction in 1824 of this log home beside a spring in what would become Holly Springs, MS in 1836, when he moved the house up the hill to its current location. William Faulkner visited there often. Will and Ed's Father, Edgar Francisco, Jr. were friends from birth—their Mothers were friends before they were married. The boys played at the spring as children and Faulkner used the spring in one of his books. Much of their childhood and McCarroll history found its way into Faulkner's books, as is revealed in Sally Wolff-King's book about our family, which we wanted to call to your attention for that reason.*

"The McCarroll Place was where Dad was born and I grew up, and where Will Faulkner visited—later the scene of many of his — he knew every inch of the place," Ed Francisco explained to *The Double Dealer*. The Leak plantation was 10 or so miles from Holly Springs in Salem, a town totally razed and burned by union army in search of Leak, an ardent advocate of slavery and financier of the war. I do not know if Faulkner ever travelled through where the site of old Salem, but there was nothing left to see. McCarroll opposed the war and tried to persuade Leak to stop his financing of the build up for it. Failing in that, he never spoke to Leak after 1855. However, McCarroll's daughter, Amelia, married

Leak's son, John, in 1866, and moved to the ruins of the Leak plantation with intent to restore it. When John died in 1872 she returned to McCarroll Place with her daughter, Betsy, my grandmother, bringing with her the Leak diaries which had been kept by her father-in-law, Francis T. Leak. As Dad described the "internment" of the ledgers, they were wrapped in a shroud of woe and buried in her bottom drawer. They represented for her failure, tragedy and death. Till her death in 1909 she never touched them again, but she talked about them and her difficulties in Salem incessantly. Dad hated to touch them—really did not like bringing one out for Will to read, but Will had repeatedly heard the sad stories from Amelia, Dad's grandmother, and developed a great fascination for them. Interestingly, he never said he used or planned to use the prodigious notes he took from the ledgers. There are probably several reasons for that. including the McCarroll family's obvious conflict with Leak's attitudes, especially my dismay when I discovered that Leak, a slave owner, was my great-great grandfather. On one occasion I almost burned them on a bonfire, but that is another story. The incident probably persuaded Dad to exhume the volumes and get them to a safe place. The ledgers created family conflict, as did Faulkner himself. Dad and I hated the ledgers, and Dad was content to keep them buried, but in the end he did not want them burned," Francisco explained.

"In contrast," he said, "as protective as he was of his sources, Will Faulkner confided/identified for us about a dozen McCarroll-Francisco events/people that he transferred recognizably to his stories and characters."

With **Ledgers of History**, Wolff demonstrates how the diary became the source for some of the most important material in several of his greatest works, including **Absalom,**

**Absalom!**  
**and Go**  
**Down,**  
**Moses.** The book offers a compelling portrait of the future Nobel laureate near the midpoint of his legendary career and also charts a significant discovery that



*Sally Wolff-King, the Emory professor who discovered the journal that inspired some of William Faulkner's greatest works.*



*Edgar Francisco, III*





*The McCarroll house, where the McCarroll/Francisco family has lived continuously for more than 155 years.*

will inevitably lead to revisions in historical and critical scholarship on Faulkner and his writings. The book was announced first in a lecture to an audience of 15 people at Emory University. During her lecture, Wolff-King illustrated connections between Faulkner's works and Francis Terry Leak's diary. Leak was a mid-19th century plantation owner, who owned nearly 100 slaves. In the diary he recorded his personal life as well as business transactions. The Francisco family donated the original handwritten diary to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1946. UNC's Southern Historical Collection of the Wilson Library has preserved the manuscript.

In her lecture at Emory, as in her book, Wolff-King recounted her conversation with Dr. Francisco.

When she invited alumni to join her annual trip to Oxford, Miss., in what is some times called "Faulkner County," she got an e-mail from Francisco who told her, "I can't go on the trip, but I knew William Faulkner."

"I was pleased to hear that," said Wolff-King, who later video-taped 12 hours of interviews with Francisco. "I could tell right away that Dr. Francisco and his father had indeed known Faulkner very well."

Indeed they did know him very well.

After an introduction on her initial encounter with Francisco and her research of the journal since then, Wolff-King proceeded to draw various links between the journal and Faulkner's stories. Pointing to several names in the **Diary of Francis Terry Leak** — Sam, Moses and Issac — Wolff-King explained that she noticed the names appeared in Faulkner's fiction and that these names were actually names of the slaves who worked on the mid-19th century plantation. "As it turns out, the diary was in the hands of William Faulkner many times over many years. Not only did he sit there and look at it and read it, but also took notes," Wolff-King has noted.

Wolff-King also has shared several photographic

images of the McCarroll house, where the McCarroll/Francisco family has lived continuously for more than 155 years. She drew a parallel for her lecture audience between the actual house built by Francis Terry Leak in mid-19th century and the house built by a plantation owner in Faulkner's novel, **Absalom, Absalom!** The parallel is repeated in the book, as are other facets of her presentation. Wolff-King noted that the main character *Addie* in Faulkner's **As I Lay Dying** is the name of Francisco's great-grandmother who died without any visible symptoms just as *Addie Bundren* died in the novel.

According to Wolff-King and Francisco, however, Faulkner never said to the Francisco family that he was going to use materials he jotted down from Leak's diary. Faulkner, Wolff-King said, may have wanted to protect the family's name when he was asked where he got his inspiration for the book, as this quote implies:

*They are people that I have known all my life in the country I was born in ... it's difficult to say what part of any story comes specifically from imagination, what part from experience, what part from observation....*

Dr. Francisco was present at the book launch lecture and, immediately following Wolff-King's talk, he described his family history and recalled his observation of Faulkner in his house. After sharing his old time memories of his encounter with Faulkner, Francisco thanked Wolff-King for her research of Leak's journal and said, "Sally has brought our family memories of Faulkner back to life."

Today, Dr. Francisco hopes to see the home preserved and restored with a literary landmark designation as a place "where Faulkner visited and where he observed the people he used as models for his characters, particularly in **The Sound and the Fury.**"

**Editor's Note:** When **William Faulkner** first came to New Orleans he lived with Sherwood and Elizabeth Anderson in their residence in the Pontalba Apartments, which face Jackson Square. The apartment was small and, after a while, the Andersons got tired of having company and suggested that Faulkner go around the corner to 624 Pirate's Alley and ask William Spratling to sub-lease a room to him there, a building Spratling was renting from a Creole Family. Faulkner moved into the Spratling residence shortly thereafter and wrote his first novel, **Soldiers' Pay** there. He lived in the room now occupied by Faulkner House Books. It was Sherwood Anderson, then Faulkner's most important mentor, who got his publisher to look at the completed manuscript. Faulkner went to France on the proceeds from that first novel.

## Sherwood Anderson's Search for a New Faith

By Don De Grazia

*"You know, my dear, it is not only the hunger and destitution—it's something gone out of America—an old faith lost and no new one got. It's youth not given a break—youth licked before it starts."*

--Sherwood Anderson

Letter to Dorothy Dudley

When Sherwood Anderson was 36 and running a paint factory—and intent on devoting his life to building bigger and bigger factories—he would often sit down for long stretches of time to smoke and talk with his night watchman. Anderson was stunned and somewhat vexed to learn how much he had in common with this man. "The devil! He was a fellow like myself, having the same problems as myself," Anderson remembered thinking, after the watchman confessed to him, "I would really like to have been a learned monk, one of those fellows such as appeared in the Middle Ages, one of those fellows who went off and lived by himself and gave himself up wholly to learning, one who believed in learning, who spent his life humbly seeking new truths; but I got married and my wife had kids, and then, you see, my eyes went back on me."

This conversation occurred not long before Anderson famously went on a drunken bender and mingled with people in the streets and in their homes and talked and broke bread with them and realized that "(I) must quit buying and selling, the overwhelming feelings of uncleanness. I was in my whole nature a tale-teller." Soon after this revelation, on Thanksgiving Day, 1912, he went to his office to work but interrupted his startled secretary in mid-dictation, announced his plans to become a wandering scribe, and walked out the door as a delicious thought glowed and expanded in his brain:

"Oh, you little tricky words, you are my brothers. It is you, not myself, have lifted me over this threshold. It is you who have dared give me a hand. For the rest of my life I will be a servant to you."

There is plenty of debate over how conscious an act this exit actually was (with many asserting that an increasingly crippling state of tension had caused him to temporarily snap) but in this version, it was, in essence, a boldly dramatic act of faith in the writer's role as a sort of prophet, and a passionate expression of his belief that only art could save modern man from the individuality-killing advent of industrialization—a belief he would proselytize with a missionary zeal for the rest of his life, in his fiction, non-fiction, and personal correspondence. "We must in some way save ourselves and others through brotherhood," he wrote to the historical novelist, James Boyd. "You see, this terrible spiritual poverty comes back to men's breaking faith as it were with their own hands and bodies... Man must sometime come to realize again that he can only find God through his own body as expressed in work."

Anderson's efforts to convey these beliefs are articulated most poignantly in his letters to his teenage son John, who struggled with his own decision to become an artist (a painter) and sought his father's advice, sympathy, and, the reader strongly senses, his approval. Anderson's responses have the power and resonance of prose poetry:

*First of all I do think that this growing sensitiveness to the danger of cleverness and prettiness is a big achievement in itself.*

*Whatever you do in life you are going to find people all around you faking and getting away with it apparently...*

*Fake men being acclaimed everywhere, fake furniture in houses, fake house building, city building.*

*Vast sums being acquired by men from fakiness.*

*That doesn't matter.*

*You can't fake growing corn in a field.*

*Life comes back to the substance of the sod.*

*The reason for being an artist is that it is the finest challenge there is.*

*It's man's only possible approach to God.*

*I mean to humbleness, decency.*

\* \* \*

*You'll come however to realize the arts are old and old and old. There is a kind of underlying brotherhood. The signs of it are pretty faint sometimes...*

*You could use the word "God" or "Nature." Sometimes I just call the central thing "it."*

*That thing for which all men of all parts  
have always been willing to go any length.*

*To work and be modest and wait and work  
again.*

*Not too much talk in cafes, not too much  
association with second-rate men.*

*Not quitting while there is life left in the  
body.*

“Draw, draw, draw,” Anderson urges his son, in conclusion. “See if you can’t begin to find a bit of light on everything out through the end of your pencil. If you can, I know you won’t quit.”

Sherwood Anderson never quit, which is not to say that his own faith was never tested. He memorably conveyed that struggle in an exquisite piece of reportage (“In Washington”) documenting his attempt to interview Herbert Hoover. During their conversation, Hoover mentions his plans for redirecting the Mississippi River. Anderson is stunned by the sheer audacity of the idea, and it sparks memories of his old flirtation with a sort of self-styled paganism.

*‘It is uncontrollable,’ I said. ‘The Mississippi is a  
thing of nature.’ But did not Joshua make the sun stand still? I remembered a summer when I took the Mississippi as a God, became a river worshipper. I was in a boat fishing on the Mississippi when a flood came. I felt its power, it put the fear of God into my heart... I felt, looking at (Hoover), that he had never known failure. It is too bad never to have known miserable nights of remorse, feeling the world too big and strange and difficult for you.*

Anderson’s entire life seems to have been filled with such nights. He grew up under the dark cloud of his father’s financial failings, and his persistent efforts to help his family by finding temporary employment wherever he could earned him the nickname “Jobby.” As a businessman, he once wrote highly persuasive ad copy extolling a new kind of chicken incubator, but the machines were defective, his company lost thousands of dollars, and Anderson suffered a nervous breakdown. When his central goal was to become rich—and to keep buying larger and larger houses until he resided in a country estate—he was dogged by the compulsion to somehow reconcile this materialistic drive with his humanistic concerns. He published a magazine called *Commercial Democracy*, and traveled from town to town preaching to retail merchants about his vision of an altruistic manufacturing world. “I don’t mean to say my ideas were clean,” Anderson later allowed. “I kept thinking up little schemes and putting them in operation at the same time I was preaching to myself and others against such schemes.” Even in the mental collapse that followed his legendary departure from the manufacturing world, he found an angle. An article in the local newspaper, describing how he was eventually found four days later, some 30 miles away (after foraging

for food and sleeping in open fields, apparently) quotes Anderson saying his “fugue state” wanderings had been a fascinating experience and there was certainly a book in it, adding, “the money will always be welcome.” This inner war between prophet and hustler raged on, long after he made his vow to live in obedience to the transcendent power of story.

In *Sherwood Anderson’s Notebook*, he describes the period after he shut down the paint factory and moved to Chicago without his family to begin living seriously and openly as a writer:

*‘You can make it all right if you will only be satisfied to remain small,’ I told myself, I had to keep saying it over and over to myself. Be little. Don’t try to be big. Work under the guns. Be a little worm in the fair apple of life. I got all of these sayings at my tongue’s end, used to go through the streets of Chicago muttering them to myself.’*

But he did not remain small. Anderson became a bona fide mover and shaker in Chicago, New York, and Paris writing circles. When his first novel, *Winesburg, Ohio*, was released in 1916, famed Chicago journalist Ben Hecht hailed Anderson as a midwestern Homer, writing in *The Chicago Evening Post* that “the soul of man as he has found it in America is his theme.” And, in 1919, with the publication of *Winesburg, Ohio*, with its fictional *The Book of the Grotesque*, which examined the solitary desperations of small town Americans, he forever changed literature. Anderson scholar Ray Lewis White, like many, felt that the importance of *Winesburg* could not be overstated:

*In simple, untaught prose and with touching insight Anderson created... a fictional method in which not plot or cleverness but, instead and above all, psychological insight became the artistic goal. Thereby he transformed the American short story from a thing of formula, complete with set plot and surprise ending, into an object of vital, organic art—a literary demonstration that would... bring example to Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, William Saroyan, and all their fellows and followers: in short... Anderson invented the modern American short story, the one literary genre in which twentieth-century American writers have led the world.*

In short, he became a full-fledged literary superstar. For awhile, anyway. But fame, with its attendant distractions and absurdities, brought him no peace. Nor did watching his star sink slowly and steadily until his untimely death after swallowing a toothpick from a martini olive or hors d’oeuvre or some other token of the good life. Today, most critics agree with Malcolm Cowley’s assessment of Anderson’s body of work as “desperately uneven.”

It’s hard, when reading these thorned requiems for the creator of such short fiction masterpieces as “The Egg,” “I’m a Fool” and “Death in the Woods,” not to think of the remark once made that those who pride themselves in their brutal honesty are often more in love with the



brutality than the honesty.

"Why," Irving Howe asks in his critical biography, **Sherwood Anderson**, "does a writer continue to write once his gift has withered, once he has himself become infected with the fear that his best work is done and only failure can follow? The question is real enough for anyone trying to understand why the early achievement of American writers is so seldom enlarged in maturity; but for the writer himself, for the actual living man who prepares once more to test his talent as he wryly listens to the funeral orations read over it, the question is not real—how can it be? More than most writers of his generation, Anderson could estimate quite precisely the value of any of his works; in his genuinely serious moments he knew that with few exceptions his books had been diminishing in quality since the early 20s. Yet his last years are crowded with desperate and truncated efforts: plans drawn and unfulfilled, books begun and unfinished, books finished and unpublished. But still: why did he continue? Perhaps, it may be suggested, there was now very little else he could do."

If Howe was suggesting that Anderson should have broken his pencils and wandered off to pasture once he suspected that he would never top **Winesburg**, the author had already directly addressed such notions in his **Notebook**. "...the madness of the writer is the madness of the lover. As he writes he is making love. Surely all can understand that," he wrote, before earnestly asking, "Are we, who write stories... to go on forever hoarding our minor triumphs like frugal merchants who keep a secret bank account?"

All too often, those delivering the "funereal orations" over Anderson's work—while the man was still very much alive—were his former acolytes.

Anderson inspired an entire generation of American writers, but he directly mentored many of them, too, most notably Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Wolfe said that Anderson was "the only man in America who ever taught me anything," but soon after declared him all washed up. Anderson befriended future Nobel Laureates Hemingway and Faulkner when they were young and unknown, introduced them to the right people, and succeeded in getting his own publisher to bring each of their first books to print. Although Anderson insisted that he never helped either of the men directly with their writing, his influence on each of them is undeniable. It is as if Hemingway, with his trademark biblical simplicity, and Faulkner, with his flowing, meditative cadences, each took a facet of Anderson's style and made it the cornerstone of their own. Yet Faulkner and Hemingway both publicly parodied their old mentor—Hemingway, in **Torrents of Spring**, and Faulkner in **Mosquitos**, and **Sherwood Anderson & Other Famous Creoles**. Anderson was confused and deeply hurt by the attacks, and for these and no doubt countless other reasons his friendships with the men died. Thomas McHaney, in his illuminating essay, *Anderson, Hemingway, and Faulkner's The Wild Palms* describes Hemingway's mockery as particularly

petulant, "He wrote Anderson a series of high-handed letters to insure that his old benefactor understood that [**Torrents**]... was a sock in the jaw and a well deserved one at that." (As Hemingway's biographer Matthew Bruccoli said,

"He (Hemingway) was a despicable man.)

In his most famous photographs, Anderson appears handsome, but hangdog, his face a deeply lined map of sorrow and contained torment. His fame did not bring riches, but he liked to travel and live well and his financial situation was a perpetual crisis. Failed industrialist, disgraced family man, tortured writer, betrayed mentor, admitted dabbler in "flesh worship" and thrice-divorced betrayer of several wives, Anderson might well have been speaking directly through a character in **Winesburg** who said, "I have not lost faith. I proclaim that. I have only been brought to the place where I know my faith will not be realized."

The story is *Tandy* and the man who speaks those words is a hopeless drunk who one day wanders into town. But he is not the true "grotesque" in the story; that distinction belongs to a **Winesburg** native the drunk befriends—the inattentive father of a little girl who "gave her but little attention and her mother was dead. The father spent his time talking and thinking of religion. He proclaimed himself an agnostic and was so absorbed in destroying the ideas of God that had crept into the minds of his neighbors that he never saw God manifesting himself in the little child that, half forgotten, lived here and there on the bounty of her dead mother's relatives."

But the drunk does see divine potential in the little girl, and he ultimately chooses to explain himself to her, rather than the militantly agnostic father. "Drink is not the only thing to which I am addicted," he says. "There is something else. I am a lover and have not found my thing to love. That is a big point if you know enough to realize what I mean. It makes my destruction inevitable, you see. There are few who understand that."

He makes a prophecy to the girl of the coming of a new woman who will possess "the quality of being strong to be loved. It is something men need from women and that they do not get." He urges the little girl to be that person. "Be Tandy, little one. Dare to be strong and courageous. That is the road. Venture anything. Be brave enough to dare to be loved. Be something more than man or woman."

The drunkard leaves town and the father goes back to "the making of arguments by which he might destroy man's faith in God," but when he calls out to his little girl she reacts in violent opposition to her birth name and flies into an almost possessed state, sobbing over and over that she wants to be Tandy.

Here Anderson seems to dramatize his own relentless impulse to preach to the young his belief that the void left in America by "an old faith lost" could someday be filled—by them. The results of the energies he put into nurturing and advising young artists and writers were, of course, mixed.

In *They Came Bearing Gifts*, an essay published

in 1930, in *The American Mercury*, Anderson begins by reflecting on his early acquaintances with Hemingway and Faulkner, and makes vague reference to the quarrels that arose between them. He heaps high praise on both writers. "But what I am thinking about as I sit here writing on this Summer morning in my notebook," he reflects, "is of the relations of a writer to his fellows. I have just opened my mail."

He was living outside of Troutsdale, VA then, on a farm he named "Ripshin," in a house he built. He describes how a couple of aspiring writers hiked up to the house one day, wanting to meet him, and how he rather sarcastically and somewhat bitterly sent the two young men away (perhaps to nip a fresh round of Oedipal treachery in the bud?) Anderson gives the reader an overview of the type of correspondence he receives, and a sense of what his life has become:

- *Once a lady wrote me. I could not remember her but I had once been seated beside her at a dinner table. Then she read a story of mine. It shocked her. She wrote to say that, having read the story she hadn't recovered from the fact of having sat beside me, even after two years. "I still feel unclean," she said.*
- *A good many people think I am rich. They write and ask for money. They are mistaken... "How can you get mentioned in the newspapers without getting rich?" they think... I read in a newspaper of some young men in Chicago who had stayed up in the air, in an airplane I think it was, 21 days. At last they came down. They were surrounded by a howling mob, thrusting money at them. God knows I have come down out of the air often enough. I have stayed up there more than 21 days. I have stayed up for months, refueling from time to time. But no one ever thrust money at me.*
- *There is a judge who writes from the Far West. He wants me to write one of my poems on a piece of parchment. He sends me the sheet of parchment. He is getting many such sheets and will bind them into a book. Well, perhaps he is an old man. I do as he asks. Sometimes an author may be up before him for murder. Perhaps he will let him off.*

The central focus of the essay is on a letter he receives from a woman who says she wants to be a writer. She took a correspondence course in short story writing, but cannot get honest feedback from any of the editors who have rejected her latest works. She encloses her stories along with a check for 25 dollars, as advance

payment for his critique.

Anderson responds:

*The very fact that you have sent [the check] to me, an artist, proves, my dear, beyond the last shadow of a doubt, that you are not an artist. Alas, you do not know what an artist is.*

He goes on to tell her that the reason she cannot get honest feedback from editors is that they are reluctant to tell her the truth—that her work is "just plain bad":

*My dear, every sentence you write is writey. It fairly stinks of writing... you thought, I'm afraid—well, you thought, "Now watch me, watch me throw some words at the fog." So you threw the words and the fog disappeared. There wasn't a sign of it left. There were only the words. Words not laid against each other, not fitted together, meaningless words. But I won't scold you. I'll try to tell you something if I can. I'm going to keep your 25 and buy some shirts. Think of me as wearing them next Winter...*

He then attempts, in classic Andersonian terms, to give her her money's worth: *Begin again to try to be as you were before you fooled with the short story people... Try, my dear woman, to feel rain on you. Let the sun shine on you. If you are a real woman, love some man, if you can find one worth loving.*

*Try to let life flow through you a little. Above all, forget words for a long, long time. Keep silent a lot. Don't even say too many words. Remember that words are very tender little things and these goddamn people have tricked you into an almost unforgivable rudeness with them.*

*...the popular writers have no real feeling for words, any more than they have for the people they write about, but they are foxy. They know how to seem tender with words just as there must be thousands of women who know how to seem to love.*

*Skillful whores can do that and the popular writers are, some of them, very skillful whores.*

He lectures her in this vein a bit more before finally absolving her of guilt and writing her off as yet another victim of the age and society they lived in:

*You have been made to think you want success, fame, recognition when what you want is love of life, to come into you, to go out of you...*

*Fame is no good, my dear. Take it from me. I know.*

*Sincerely,  
Sherwood Anderson.*

"So that was that," Anderson wrote, but, of course, it was not. He soon received another letter from the woman, with the words "Pigskin Farm" replacing "Ripshin Farm" in the address line:

*...may your shirts be unbecoming, a bad bargain, and tight in the collar, with a button perennially lost...*

*Couldn't you read between the lines, son, that I'm no young flapper with literary aspirations but an old woman, old enough to be your mother, whatever your age...? I have known the love of a good man and given mine to him. The only comfort and inspiration of my senile years are his four children.*

*Meantime, since his death, I have spent years upon years living, working, playing with plain people in this Far West country.*

*...you men are inconsistent. Plead with me to be gentle, tender with words. Then hurl them around as if they were brick bats or bullets. I'm still dodging.*

"Well," Anderson thought, "at any rate, I had made her write something. She had written that letter. I thought it was pretty good."

Soon, yet another letter came from the woman, along with a one hundred dollar check and a draft of her novel-in-progress. Anderson decided to give the hundred dollars to a down-on-his-luck painter friend, and wrote the woman back, "If I agree, will you agree? Not to write any more letters? I know it won't be any good. I won't be helping you a bit."

But after reading the first half of her book, he sent her one final response, with a full refund:

*...I can not possibly help you. The whole section seemed to me hopelessly dull and commonplace....*

*I can't take your money just to tell you this and if I went on I couldn't tell you anything else.*

*I'm sorry.*

## **Sherwood Anderson**

Before Anderson concludes his essay, he returns one more time to the subject of his two star protégés: "So there it is. I spoke of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. I knew both of these men well before either of them had ever published a word. I walked about with them a lot. I quarreled with them. Of course, we spoke of writing."

There is a bemused tone to it all, as if Anderson is thinking that you can't win for trying in this life.

"One thing I know," he concedes, "is that I don't know much."

**I would not be surprised, if you would find—  
if you live long and become an artist— you'll be an  
artist in spirit whether you are in fact or not—you'll  
find a decided drift toward a kind of decadence.**

**Hatred, cruelty—taking the place of  
tenderness and the attempt at understanding. It's  
easier.**

**A good many things may make it so.  
Industrialism, city life.**

**The growth of advertising and publicity.  
Fake figures always being built up by  
publicity—in the arts—in government—**

**everywhere.**

**Everyone really knowing.**

**The answer being cynicism.**

**That's the easy way out.**

With context, much of the advice Anderson gave to his son (including the above) comes across as a warning to resist certain tendencies he wrestled with himself. "Your life is like a filled cup you have got to carry in the midst of crowds," he told young John. "Some men get their sensibilities hurt and hurt. They can't stand it any more... To heal hurt nerves—try again." But in some instances it seems that Anderson was the impediment to reconciliation. By all accounts, Faulkner tried again and again to patch things up, while Anderson remained aloof. Perhaps Anderson's final encounter with Hemingway had made him wary of what he saw as perfunctory overtures from careerist climbers. This meeting occurred in 1926, in Paris, when Hemingway was riding a towering wave of fame following the release of *The Sun Also Rises*, and Anderson was going through a period of depression.

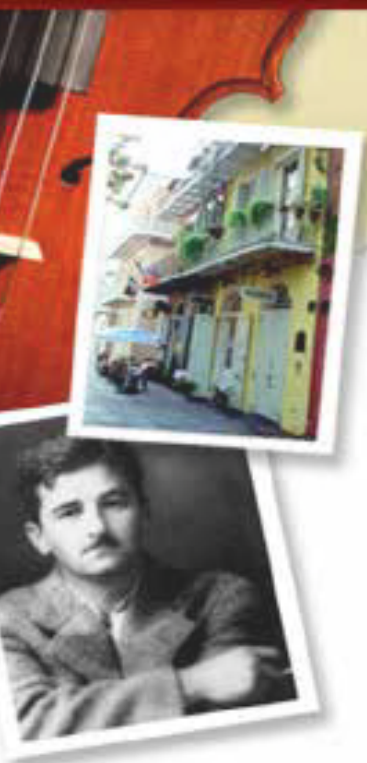
"(Hemingway) stood in the doorway," Anderson remembered. "'How about a drink,' he said, and I followed him down a stairway and across a street. We went into a small bar. 'What will you have?' 'Beer.' 'And you?' 'A beer.' 'Well, here's how.' 'Here's how.' He turned and walked rapidly away."

Years later, in a rambling, unpublished essay, Hemingway would express regrets over his mockery of Anderson, couched in claims that his heart had been in the right place. "I did it because I was righteous, which was the worst thing you can be..." he finally admits. "I'm sorry I threw it at Anderson. It was cruel, and I was a son of a bitch to do it." But these words were written long after Anderson's death, and only a couple of years before Hemingway shot himself.

As for Faulkner, despite his many attempts to communicate to his former mentor that he was not the same as Hemingway, tensions and estrangement lingered on for years. A crisis point was finally reached when Faulkner, battling his own considerable demons, was drunk and disoriented in the bathroom of his New York hotel room and tumbled up against a hot steam pipe, severely burning his back. In the hospital he struggled with alcohol withdrawal and the skin graft he received became painfully infected. In the midst of this personal hell, he requested one visitor: Sherwood Anderson. This must have had the undeniable brand of sincerity Anderson valued, for he honored Faulkner's request. One likes to imagine their meeting as a parable—the student teaching the teacher, hurt nerves healed by trying again, and a moment of mutual understanding achieved. No small feat in the American spiritual desert Anderson dreamt would someday bloom.



## On Writers & Writing



*The Gilded Circle* by **Joséphine Sacabo**

## **Editor's Note:**

Since *Words & Music, A Literary Feast in New Orleans* was founded in 1997 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Faulkner, the festival has included many advice resources for writers with work they want to improve and get published.

A critical facet of our programming for writers has been critiques of unpublished manuscripts by top notch literary agents and editors. Literary agent **Deborah Grosvenor**, who owns the Grosvenor Literary Agency and who participated in the inaugural year of *Words & Music* has participated every year and has signed numerous writers at the festival and secured publication for them. Jeff Kleinman, a partner in Folio Literary Management, has participated in most of the festivals since 1997. Both also have served as judges for the *William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition* for various categories. This year, Deborah judged the novel category and her winner already has had her manuscript acquired by Doubleday for release in 2015. Jeff judged the new narrative non-fiction category and has since signed the winner. Both are returning to Words & Music, 2013 to participate in manuscript critiques and writing advice sessions. We asked them to share some of their advice with *The Double Dealer* so that writers unable to attend Words & Music this year will have the benefit of their publishing wisdom. First, we have an interview with Deborah, which is followed by Jeff's Step-By-Step Plan for getting published.



## **A Conversation With Deborah Grosvenor**

### **Double Dealer:**

When you sit down with a new manuscript, what are you looking for? What makes you put it down?

### **Ms. Grosvenor:**

First, I'm looking for a great opening line, then I'm looking for the writer to create some form of dramatic tension early on in the story, something that must be resolved. I'm also looking for a compelling, believable voice and the kind of confidence that comes from a writer really knowing his or her characters and story. In other words, I look for pages that immediately draw me in and make the story real for me, and where I feel invested in the characters and outcome. What makes me put a

manuscript down is a lack of tension, when the characters and narrative are not strong enough to make me care, and I find myself wondering where the story is going and why I am reading it.

### **Double Dealer:**

Is there anything you wish that more writers would think about before approaching an agent?

### **Ms. Grosvenor:**

In terms of protocol, I find that most writers today are pretty well versed in how to submit to agents. Most agents' websites provide this information. But there are a few things writers should think about: one, if you can, try to make a personal connection to an agent before approaching him or her. The best way is to get a referral from a published author, a writing instructor or colleague, or a client of that agent. Someone whose name the agent will respect and recognize. Another way is to attend writing conferences such as this, where you can meet agents (as well as published writers and editors.) Finally, writers can always check for agents' names in the acknowledgments sections of related books and note in their cover letters that this is why they're approaching that agent: because they so admired the book the agent represented. Most agents will take note of this. Along these lines, it can also be helpful,

if possible, to get written endorsements of your project from published writers and/or clients of the agent.

### **Double Dealer:**

Genres that you're interested in are on your website, but is there anything specific in fiction or nonfiction that you'd be excited to discover right now (besides another Tom Clancy)?

### **Ms. Grosvenor:**

Yes, discovering **Tom Clancy** was one of the highlights of my career! It's difficult to be more specific than I'm always looking for great stories in both nonfiction and fiction: I look for books that move me, excite me, touch me, make me laugh, change the way I view the world, and that keep me up reading. I love narrative nonfiction, meaning a factually based narrative with a dramatic arc that illuminates a larger issue. What I really like is a great story set in the context of a larger issue, so that the reader gets both a good read and new knowledge. I'm looking for more submissions of this type in science and business. In fiction, I like big, high-concept books, where there can also be a mix of fact and fiction. As I say on my website, I

like books that illuminate another world and that use an historic event in a dramatic narrative. If I had to name my perfect novel, it would be big, set in another time and/or place, have a rich and intricate plot, and have characters so well defined and colorful that I would feel a real sense of loss when the book ended because I would have to leave their lives.

### **Double Dealer:**

A lot is happening in the publishing industry these days. Is a writer's relationship with their literary agent changing too? Furthermore, do writers still need literary agents?

### **Ms. Grosvenor:**

My impression is that today's agents play more of an editorial role than they did in the past as editors' time to edit gets squeezed by corporate pressures. Because of my editorial background, I tend to offer a fair amount of editorial support to my clients. I spend a lot of time helping them shape their nonfiction book proposals, but I also will edit novels, if I basically fall in love with them first.

Agents are also taking an increasingly active advisory role in marketing, in particular, in the arena of social media. At my agency, we are very involved in helping our clients reach their readers, whether by setting up events at local bookstores, arranging blog tours, or helping them publish smaller pieces in magazines and other periodicals. Now more than ever, we are thinking outside the box in order to help our clients expand their reach.

Finally, an agent's role as watchdog is more important than ever, as we all strive to stay abreast of trends in the electronic market and media that are changing the economics of book publishing and distribution and our clients' rights and contracts.

So, yes, today most writers who want to be published by a commercial trade house do still need a literary agent. And while a few years ago I would have said one didn't need a literary agent if one chose to self-publish, such writers should be aware that there are now a number of agents who provide services to help them self-publish electronically.

### **Double Dealer:**

Do you have any recent projects that you're excited about that have just been published or will be published soon?

### **Ms. Grosvenor:**

Yes:

**Pirate Alley**, A Novel (St. Martin's Press) by *NY Times* bestselling author Stephen Coonts, which received a Starred *Publishers Weekly* review

**Hedge Hogs: The Cowboy Traders Behind Wall Street's Largest Hedge Fund Disaster** by Barbara Dreyfuss (Random House) *Washington Post* bestseller; Named One of the Top 10 Business & Economics Books of the Season by *Publishers Weekly*

**Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game** (Gotham/Viking Penguin) by John Sexton, Tom Oliphant and Peter Schwartz—A *New York Times* Bestseller; Named One of the Top 10 Sports Books of the Season by *Publishers Weekly*

**The Coat Route: A Tale of Craft, Obsession, Luxury, and the World's Most Expensive Coat** (Spiegel & Grau/Random House Group) by Meg Lukens Noonan-- "A fabulous story, brilliantly told . . . I couldn't have enjoyed it more."—Bill Bryson

**Colorblind: The Forgotten Team that Broke Baseball's Color Line** by Tom Dunkel (Grove Atlantic) "A delightful read. This is a tale worth telling." —*The Washington Post*

**Mistrial: An Inside Look at How our Criminal Justice System Works...and Sometimes Doesn't** (Gotham/Viking Penguin Group) by Mark Geragos and Pat Harris—"A win: engaging, enlightening and entertaining" *The Wall Street Journal*

**Savage Will: The Daring Escape of Americans Trapped Behind Nazi Lines** by Timothy Gay (NAL/Viking Penguin Group)

*Deborah Grosvenor has more than 25 years' experience in the book publishing business as an agent and editor. During her career, she has edited or represented several hundred nonfiction books. As an editor, she acquired Tom Clancy's first novel, The Hunt for Red October. Her distinguished client list includes nationally prominent writers, New York Times bestselling authors, and prize-winning historians and journalists. Among them are Stephen Coonts, Eleanor Clift, Morton Kondracke, Thomas Oliphant, Charlie Engle, Harrison Scott Key, John Sexton, Henry Allen, Aaron Miller, Scott Wallace, Curtis Wilkie, Nina Burleigh, Thomas Fleming, Jonathan Green, Jay Rubenstein, Willard Randall, Mark Geragos, Peter Cozzens, Meg Noonan, Barbara Dreyfuss and Elizabeth Pryor.*

*Deborah is interested in narrative nonfiction in the categories of history, biography, politics, current and foreign affairs, memoir, food, the South, humor, Italy, the environment and travel. For fiction, she is simply interested in great storytelling, especially in an historical context.*

*Deborah is the recipient of the TWIN award (Tribute to Women in Industry), given by the YWCA and industry to "outstanding women who have made significant contributions to their companies in managerial and executive positions."*



## A Step-By-Step Guide To Getting Published

By Jeff Kleinman

### STEP #1: Write Project & Develop Credentials.

Seems like two steps, doesn't it? It's not – or at least it may not be. You need to write (or perhaps just develop) the project, and at the same time, you need to make it clear (first to yourself; and then to others) that you're the best person to be writing it in the first place. This means having the writing "muscles" to do the job, as well as having the expertise to prove it.

#### Step #1A: Write The Project

- **Fiction:** write the *entire* book (most novels are generally between 90K-120K words), rewrite as necessary.
- **Nonfiction:** Write a proposal (outline + a sample chapter or two), rewrite as necessary.

#### Step #1B: Develop Your Credentials

- **Fiction:** Publish! Win awards, grants. Try to give the appearance of a writer whose career is really taking off. Bottom line, though: the book, and the writing, must stand on its own. If the book's fabulous enough, you don't need any further credentials.
- **Nonfiction:** Become an expert. Earn an advanced degree (Ph.D., etc.), find speaking engagements, have personal experience in the matter, and so forth. Keep in mind that if your expertise is impressive enough, a publisher can always find you a ghostwriter to do the writing.

#### STEP #2: Assess Your Project.

Go to the bookstore. Figure out *exactly* where your book will fit on the shelf. Make sure it fits solidly on one shelf – of course your goal may be to cross "genre" lines, but if there's not an initial place to put your book, bookstores (and publishing professionals) may not know what to do with it.

**Fiction** comes in a variety of flavors.

- **Commercial:** more "plot-driven".

Genre fiction (mysteries, thrillers, romances, etc.) are often preferable to "mainstream commercial fiction," which tends to be harder to sell for first-time novelists.

- **Literary:** more "character-" or "writing-" driven. Can also have genres (literary mystery, literary thriller, etc.).
- **Experimental:** unique, different, genre-breaking works.

**Nonfiction** usually falls into two broad categories.

- **Prescriptive:** "How-to". You're providing information. Depending on the subject matter, academic books usually fall into this category, as well.
- **Narrative (Creative):** You're providing information, but in some kind of "story" format, using some kind of narrative arc. Essays, memoirs, biographies, and so forth fall into this category.

#### STEP #3: Decide on the Publishing Venue

All publishers are *not* created equal. Some are far better suited to certain types of projects than others. Review Steps #1 and #2 to assess both your project and yourself: determine where the project (and you) would be best suited.

Consider:

- **Regional v. National:** does your project have national appeal (will it appeal to people in Maine, Idaho, and Alaska)? Or is your project more regional, appealing to people in a certain region (state, city, county, etc.)?
- If regional, consider: Small Presses, Specialty Presses, Regional Presses, Academic Presses
- If national, consider Medium Presses, Large Presses
- **Trade v. Academic:** do you envision your project to be sold primarily through bookstores and other "trade" channels, or through educational and academic venues?
- If trade, consider Small Presses, Specialty Presses, Regional Presses, Medium Presses, Large Presses

- If academic, consider Academic Presses
- *Niche v. Broad Market*: does your project have the potential to reach a vast number of readers, or is it targeted towards a specific, smaller audience?
  - If niche, consider Small Presses, Specialty Presses, Regional Presses, Academic Presses
  - If broad, consider Academic Presses, Medium Presses, Large Presses
- *Local v. National Platform* (especially for nonfiction): do you have a national platform with speaking engagements and media across the country? Are you better known in a single region?
  - If local, consider Small Presses, Specialty Presses, Regional Presses, Academic Presses
  - If national, consider Specialty Presses, Medium Presses, Large Presses



Usually have regional distribution. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #4.*

- **Academic Press**: publish much more than scholarly monographs and academic tomes. Now do cookbooks, popular fiction, serious nonfiction, literature in translation, reference works, art books, textbooks, etc. Approximately 100 U Presses in the U.S. Often focus on region or strengths of affiliated university. See Association of American University Presses Directory. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #4 or #5.*

### **Literary Agency – Submission Publishers (Go To Step #5):**

- **Academic Press**: The more prestigious academic presses often prefer submissions from literary agents. Go to Step #5.
- **Medium Press**: Smaller than “large” Presses; may publish 10-100 titles per year. Other criteria are generally the same. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #5.*
- **Large (“Commercial”) Press**: Books published “for the trade” – not textbook, technical, or scholarly publishers. Books

sold to the general consumer through bookstores, chain stores, Amazon, etc. Have major national distribution, major media ties, often the best chance of being reviewed in prestigious papers, journals. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #5.*

### **Step # 4: Find A Direct-Submission Publisher**

Direct-Submission Publishers (my term) don’t require the intermediary of a literary agent to approach them, work with them, and negotiate contracts. These generally include Small Presses, Specialty Presses, Regional Presses, and most Academic Presses. In addition, some Medium and even Large Presses may accept direct submissions – it will depend on the publisher.

### **Research the Direct-Submission**

### **Some definitions:**

#### **Direct-Submission Publishers (Go To Step #4):**

- **Small Presses** (including “Micropresses”): Relative term, but generally means they publish 3 or fewer books per year; many are family-run. See International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #4*
- **Specialty Press**: focus on a specific subject (collectibles, etc.). May have national or regional distribution. *If this is the proper venue for your book, go to Step #4.*
- **Regional Press**: focus on a specific region (e.g., Southwestern America).

**Publishers:** Find reputable publishers through Literary Marketplace, Writer's Digest, and a variety of other hardcopy and electronic sources.

*Skip Step #5; proceed to Step #6.*

## **STEP #5: Find A Literary Agent**

Literary Agents are the link between the author and medium and large (and the more prestigious academic) presses. *If your book does not fit one of those categories, you may not need a literary agent.* Agents walk the author through the publishing process, helping with crafting the materials, positioning it for the marketplace, submitting it to the publisher, navigating through the often-labyrinthine world of publishing, and generally holding the author's hand and providing both a cheering section and a sounding board. They also sell the book to foreign markets, where appropriate, as well as dramatic (TV and film), audio, and other rights. They charge between 15%-20% for their services.

**Research the Agents:** Find reputable agents through Literary Marketplace, Writer's Digest, agentresearch.com, literaryagents.net, publisherslunch.com, and a variety of other hardcopy and electronic sources. Members of the "AAR" (Association of Authors' Representatives) are preferable.

## **Step #6: Learn Submission Guidelines**

Whether you're approaching a direct-submission publisher or a literary agent, the process remains the same.

1. Begin by learning what materials the publisher/agent wants to see. Generally, most publishers/agents don't want to see the entire book (or even proposal) if they haven't asked for it – that's called an "unsolicited submission," and is frowned upon in the industry.
2. You'll start by submitting a "query" – asking the publisher/agent if s/he wants to see your materials. When

you research the publishers and agents, the research guides you use will tell you their submission guidelines for these "queries".

3. Most queries consist of a cover letter +
  - Sample materials (especially if fiction);
  - Proposal (especially if nonfiction)
  - Clips of previous work.But do your research ahead of time – find out what the publisher / agent wants to see.

## **Step #7: Submit Your Materials**

Send the publisher / agent the materials listed in Step #6. ***Be sure to include a self-addressed stamped envelope ("SASE").***

## **Step #8: Wait**

How long is too long? For fiction, the wait can easily be up to 6 months, or more, to hear from both publishers and agents; but it's often much sooner than that. As a general rule, give the publishing professional two months to respond. If you don't hear from them, send a polite follow-up letter. It's always best to write with something (new, exciting, wonderful) to report – an award won, a prestigious speaking engagement confirmed, and so forth.

## **Step #9A: ACCEPTANCE!: Publisher/Agent Responds Positively**

If the Agent/Publisher is interested, s/he may ask to see the rest of the materials (either exclusively or nonexclusively). If s/he remains interested, find out:

1. ***Assess Publisher/Agent:*** is the publisher/agent reputable?
  - **Direct Submission Publishers:** Talk to other authors, see the quality of other books they've done, discuss distribution, how often the books are reviewed, and by whom, and what kind of publicity (if any) you can expect.
  - **Literary Agents:** Talk to other authors, check out agentresearch.com, find out if the agent is reputable, and if you feel that the agent's style is compatible with your own.



## 2. **Review Contract.**

- **Direct Submission Publishers:** be sure to have a qualified attorney review your contract. All publishing contracts are not created equal.
- **Literary Agents:** many literary agents offer “retainer agreements”, but not all do. If they do, have a qualified attorney review the agreement. If they don’t, draft one yourself.

## 3. **Publishing Process Begins.**

- **Direct Submission Publishers:** your project goes through the editing/production process.
- **Literary Agents:** you work with the agent, perhaps, to edit the project; the agent submits the project to medium, large, and academic presses. If accepted by the publisher, your agent negotiates the contract and your project goes through the editing/production process.

### **Step #9B: REJECTION!: Publisher/Agent Does Not Respond Positively**

Don’t take it personally – there are a lot of would-be authors, and fewer and fewer publishers to publish them. If you’re not having much luck, here are some suggestions:

1. If you’re receiving all “form” rejections, start over at Step #1 – be sure that the writing is strong, your platform is strong, and the book can be classified into a specific genre.
2. If you’re receiving personalized rejections, review Step #3 to be sure that your book is going to the right venue. If you continue to receive rejections, start over at Step #1.
3. Remember: the rejection shouldn’t be taken personally. Publishing’s a very subjective business.
4. **Be persistent.** Try to figure out what’s wrong with your presentation, and fix it.

**Copyright, 2008, by Jeff Kleinman, Literary Agent and Partner in Folio Literary Management**

**Jeff Kleinman** is a literary agent, intellectual property attorney, and founding partner of Folio Literary Management, LLC, a New York literary agency which works with all of the major U.S. publishers (and, through subagents, with most international publishers). He’s a graduate of Case Western Reserve University (J.D.), the University of Chicago (M.A., Italian), and the University of Virginia (B.A. with High Distinction in English). As an agent, Jeff feels privileged to have the chance to learn an incredible variety of new subjects, meet an extraordinary range of people, and feel, at the end of the day, that he’s helped to build something – a wonderful book, perhaps, or an author’s career. His authors include Garth Stein, Eowyn Ivey, Robert Hicks, Charles Shields, Bruce Watson, Neil White, Philip Gerard, and he was the agent for the late Dean Faulkner Wells, who sold her memoir **Every Day by the Sun**. Here is the kind work he prefers and the work he refuses:

**Nonfiction:** especially narrative nonfiction with a historical bent, but also memoir, health, parenting, aging, nature, pets, how-to, nature, science, politics, military, espionage, equestrian, biography.

**Fiction:** very well-written, character-driven novels; some suspense, thrillers; otherwise mainstream upmarket commercial (i.e. book club) and literary fiction.

**No:** children’s, romance, mysteries, westerns, poetry, or screenplays, novels about serial killers, suicide, or children in peril (kidnapped, killed, raped, etc.).

For more information about Jeff (including interviews, books sold, and so forth), please go to [www.foliolit.com/jeffkleinman/](http://www.foliolit.com/jeffkleinman/).

## Humor is the Hardest But It Often Is the Secret to Making Literature Work

### Editors' Note:

*Lisa Zeidner's most recent novel, **Love Bomb**, is an inventive, mordantly funny novel about love, marriage, stalkers, and the indignities of parenthood In quaint Haddonfield, NJ, Tess is about to marry Gabe in her childhood home. Her mother, Helen, is in a panic about the guests, who include warring exes, crying babies, jealous girlfriends, and too many psychiatrists. But the most difficult guest was never on the list at all: a woman in a wedding dress and a gas mask, armed with a rifle, a bomb trigger strapped to her arm. Ms. Zeidner's audacious novel begins as a hostage drama and blossoms into a far-reaching tale about the infinite varieties of passion and heartbreak. Who has offended this nutcase, and how? Does she seek revenge against the twice-divorced philanderer? Or is her agenda political—against the army general? Or the polygamous Muslim from Mali? While the warm, wise Helen attempts to bond with the masked woman and control the hysteria, the hostages begin to untangle what connects them to one another, and to their captor. But not until the SWAT team arrives does “the terrorist of love” unveil her real motives . . . Critics have praised Lisa Zeidner's prose for its “unforced edginess and power.” Her fiction, indeed, shines with wisdom and poignancy but it is humor that drives it. Zeidner gives us a tough yet tender social comedy, a romance with guts, a serious frolic written out of deep affection for all that it skewers. Ms. Zeidner judged the final round of the **William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**, Novella category, for 2013 and is a member of the faculty for **Words & Music, 2013**.*



### By Lisa Zeidner

It's easy to make people cry. Bald chemo kid in a hospital bed, mangy dog in the pound, soldier on the tarmac home from war greeting his family — who doesn't get teary-eyed? I routinely cry at phone commercials in which people call their mothers. But it's much more difficult to make people laugh, which is precisely why I so admire comedy. By comedy I don't mean the broadest slapstick, slips on banana peels and goofy hats. I mean comedy that is

challenging, potentially even offensive. We're more used to that kind of humor in TV and movies. People revel in political incorrectness from Larry David and Sacha Baron Cohen. Quentin Tarantino has made a career out of chuckling at death, the more grotesque the better. But literary fiction with comic overtones has a harder time finding its audience. Serious fiction still tends to be mostly... serious.

My favorite works of fiction are dark (as opposed to lite?) comedies that tiptoe a tonal tightrope. Vladimir Nabokov yucked it up about the grooming habits of sexual predators in *Lolita*. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is a laugh riot about, among other things, amputation due to medical malpractice and an ugly death by poison. Flannery O'Connor's **A Good Man Is Hard to Find** makes comedy from random violence — think National Lampoon's *Vacation* meets **The Road**.

These works by my literary idols are tonally complex, chimerical, outlandish, yet moving.

**Love Bomb**, my fifth novel, concerns a woman with an assault rifle and a bomb strapped to her arm who takes hostages at a suburban wedding and calls herself “the terrorist of love.”

Several of the novel's first readers forewarned me, alarmed, “You really shouldn't use the word ‘terrorist.’ It makes people really nervous.”

The book was published right around the time of the Aurora shootings — not a moment when assault rifles felt particularly droll. A couple of interviewers asked me if my novel made me worry about copycats. “Right,” I thought. Scores of love-crossed, heavily-armed women are going to be storming backyard weddings because of this novel.”

As people who had been inside the theater in Colorado said, again and again, that the event “felt like a movie,” I thought about the blurry line between life and art that the novel attempts to explore. How none of us can quite have authentic and original experiences anymore, even when we're facing death. How all of the props of (mostly male) aggression — the guns, the bombs, suicide by cop — have become such staples in our national narrative that we expect life itself to be as predictable as an episode of **Law and Order**.

So now the paperback of **Love Bomb** is coming out, and we have the Boston Marathon event, and once again bombs are off limits. Recently, a student from the MFA program where I teach was talking to his new agent about his first novel, which happened to have the word “bomb” in the title, and she informed him, “You can't really use the word ‘bomb’ anymore. Certainly not in a comedy.”

I thought about the exchange in **Meet the Parents** when a straight-faced flight attendant informs Ben Stiller, “You can't say ‘bomb’ on an airplane.” Stiller snaps back, “Why can't I say ‘bomb’ on an airplane? Bomb bomb bomb bomb bomb!”

**Meet the Parents** came out before 9/11, when

the absurdity of Kafkaesque airplane safety procedures was still a safe target. But I still think with admiration and gratitude about the first brave souls who dared to crack jokes while the flags were still rustling in the breeze on every lawn in America.

Their doing so got to a different kind of truth that wrenched us out of our raw, unreflective grief.

“U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever It Is We’re at War With”: that was in *The Onion* on September 27, 2001.

I love irony in fiction because it gets at a fuller vision of reality than flat tragedy or flat comedy. Irony is about mixed messages. The late great Donald Barthelme said it best:

*The confusing signals, the impurity of the signal, gives you verisimilitude, as when you attend a funeral and notice that it’s being poorly done.”*

Even at this late cultural date, there are readers who object to just such impurities. At one book club event — in the New Jersey town in which *Love Bomb* is set — one reader told me she felt uncomfortable with my portrayal of the charming borough. She said, “I feel very lucky to live here and raise my children here.”

Hard to believe, but after **Blue Velvet**, after **Weeds**, after so many busts of prostitution rings and kiddy porn and meth labs and kidnapper’s lairs, there are still readers who want to believe that their suburbs are pure and untainted. But that doesn’t mean I was asking her to move to Sierra Leone.

In the Truth Is Stranger than Fiction Department, in 2007, mere minutes from where I live, the FBI ran a sting that busted a plot against Fort Dix. Remember that? The terrorists were from a Muslim family sending their kids to the local public schools. One of the terrorists worked at Safeway. Another worked at his father’s pizza parlor. The neighbors all confirmed that this was a nice, hardworking family — although they didn’t entirely appreciate their slaughtering of goats in their backyard.

A jihadist who bags groceries after algebra class: now that’s a story I would want to read.

## A Conversation with Lisa Zeidner

*Lisa Zeidner, the author of **Love Bomb**, directs the MFA program in Creative Writing at Rutgers-Camden, where Jay McKeen is a student. Jay retired as Police Chief of Hamilton Township, NJ, after service as a detective and Detective Bureau Commander, Operations Commander, and member of Tactical Containment and Underwater Search and Rescue Teams. He provided technical advice to the author for *Love Bomb*. Later he interviewed her and Ms. Zeidner has given us permission to reprint the interview here.*

**McKeen:** First, thanks for putting up with a cop in your

classes over the years.

**Zeidner:** No, thank you. No student I’ve ever taught has seen more dead bodies. Plus it was useful to have you show up armed to workshops when things got testy.

**McKeen:** I’m looking forward to giving *you* the third degree for a change. You comfortable? Some water? Loosen the handcuffs? Here’s a softball, so you don’t invoke the 5th. The initial picture of the domestic terrorist in wedding gown, painted boots, clown socks and gas mask startles and sticks—was that image the genesis of **Love Bomb**?

**Zeidner:** Yes. I wanted a female hostage taker. I wanted her to be stagy, over-the-top. I was interested in how people in the room—and readers—would respond differently to a threat of violence from a woman. I also liked the tonal challenge: whether I could take that essentially comical set-up and slide into something deeper, unexpected.

**McKeen:** Did you know her motives from the beginning too?

**Zeidner:** I had no clue. That’s why I had you introducing me to the SWAT dudes, the forensic psychiatrist. I loved talking to the psychiatrist. Psychiatrists and novelists are a lot alike, in some ways. We both trade in empathy. We both must avoid oversimplifying. We both listen to stories—but the good ones *really* listen. At its heart, **Love Bomb** is about how we construct the stories of our lives, how we make sense of our own narratives.

**McKeen:** A lot of stories. There are some 60 people in Helen Burns’ great room for the wedding, and many get their turns at the podium. Why did you choose that structure?

**Zeidner:** Every time a bomb blows in the movies, most of the people are extras. Except they’re not extras to themselves. After 9/11, after the Aurora theater shootings, the press made a point of highlighting the victims. But what do you learn about people from their two minute bios? Not enough. This is why we need novels.

And of course no one knows when or how they’ll die although again, if you’re watching **Die Hard**, you can be pretty sure that Bruce Willis isn’t going to eat the bullet. It’s still only Hitchcock in **Psycho** who has killed off his protagonist in the first act. The phrase is “My life flashed before my eyes,” but what would you actually remember when the bomb’s about to blow? This novel suggests that you’d remember love. And, to get flirtily Freudian, Yo Momma. unfettered tenderness—which most of us, alas, don’t get enough of.



## George Bishop Grapples With The Old Verities and Truths of the Heart

*Equally sweet and sad, **The Night of the Comet** is a look back at an indelible time in one family's life together. George Bishop has crafted a fine novel of love and forgiveness.*

— Stewart O’Nan, author of **Snow Angels** and **The Odds**

### By Geoff Munsterman

George Bishop doesn’t pick the easy way.

His novels and short fictions are neither complex nor experimental and they change from one form to another. His first novel was an epistle; his second a fictional version of a personal memoir. In both cases, the forms don’t so much matter as the fact that they allowed him to tell the stories he needed to tell.

It is with this brand of practicality that Bishop manages to achieve something few novelists these days even dare attempt.

He writes about life, about what Faulkner called “the old verities and truths of the heart.”

Bishop, who holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, is author of the recently released novel, **Night of the Comet**, featured here. His previous novel was **A Letter to My Daughter**, which at its core is a story of the collateral damage of war. That first novel is narrated by a 50-year-old Baton Rouge housewife in a letter to her runaway daughter. The narrator recalls the letters she received from her young boyfriend, Tim, who signs up to fight during the Vietnam War because he’s poor and has no other options. Says Bishop, “Though I’d hesitate to say that **Letter to My Daughter** is about Vietnam, I certainly believe that it is the Vietnam episodes which give the book its moral center.”

Brimming with the kind of wistful longing that characterizes the coming-of-age novel, his latest, **The Night of the Comet**, brings stardust to domestic disillusionment in the bayous of Louisiana. While the coming-of-age tag has been liberally applied to **Comet**, Bishop emphasizes he doesn’t like it.

And why should he?

Though the book’s narrator, a grown Alan Broussard, Jr. looking back at his 14th year on earth, describes with as much distance as a few decades of life can crust the old wounds earned at that age, it isn’t the wounds Broussard (or Bishop, for that matter) concerns himself with when telling the story.

“I had just turned 14,” Junior thinks, shortly after



**George Bishop**, author of the new book **The Night of the Comet**, will appear as faculty at **Words & Music**, 2013.

blowing out the candles on his cake,” and nothing had changed.” This is a small precursor to larger events—events on the once-in-a-lifetime scale—that fail to dazzle. Junior isn’t coming of age, he’s becoming aware that age, when you really think about it, doesn’t matter. This isn’t Junior’s story alone, either.

Alan Sr. works as a high school science teacher (a bad one at that, and he knows it) always trying and failing to instill the same passion for science he has in his students. His son, now old enough to witness the bumbling

horror of his teacher-father first hand, yawns through his father’s first of many unsatisfying, bombastic lectures of the year and manages (here, the practicality of having an older version of Junior tell the story shows itself): “No one appreciated him, no one cared, no one knew the talent and ambition shimmering inside him.”

Not even Junior at the time, we imagine.

George Bishop holds the teaching profession in high regard. Working as an ESL teacher in Slovakia, Turkey, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, India, and Japan, Bishop discovered that having passion and having the ability to impart it were two totally different attributes. Talking about his time as an educator, you get the sense that while some part of George Bishop misses it he also understands that the classroom setting isn’t practical for the kind of knowledge he personally wants to impart at large.

And that it takes a behemoth amount of dedication and work to do both writing and teaching well. It’s why, Bishop admits, that some of the passages relating to Senior’s life in the classroom are hard for him to read in the presence of teachers.

For Broussard Senior, his jobs are a grind instead of a pleasant challenge. He is the geeky science teacher at a high school where the football arts trumps any need for beakers, an amateur astronomer who can’t even stoke the passion for the cosmos in his own son, and author of the newspaper’s weekly **Groovy Science** column, required to be so dumbed-down for the most uninformed readers in the audience, that it doesn’t do much to capture the wonder of science for young people.

Enter **Kohoutek**. For a pure scientist reduced to

middle high school science teacher, a millennial space event—a comet that puts Haley's to shame—promises great spectacle.

*Kohoutek* serves as a backdrop to the story of the Broussard family. "I love it for all the rich associations and symbolisms that come with it. Before it arrived, Comet Kohoutek was touted as 'the comet of the century.' There was a tremendous build-up in the media and in the public's expectations for the comet: astronomers and scientists everywhere were talking and writing about it, there were songs written about it, there were commemorative coins issued for it. Religious fanatics and counterculture leaders like Timothy Leary proclaimed that the comet portended cataclysmic events for the Earth. It became sort of an overnight pop sensation, if you can say that about a comet." More than that, it promised change, an important symbol for both Alans, who desire a change. For Alan Senior, it comes with *Kohoutek* bouncing into view on the other end of the telescope. Even if, as Bishop says, "it failed to live up to all the hype—and it really was a spectacular failure—it quickly became seen as the dud of the century."

For Alan Junior, it comes from another object caught by his telescope—Gabiella Martello.

What coming-of-age that does come in **The Night of the Comet** comes through Junior's loving Gabiella from a distance. She's the girl-next-door whose hand he can hold in the planetarium, yet that touch and the touch of other moments is merely fleeting—he's not "the one" for her even if, in that comet year, she's "the one" for him.

Bishop's debut novel, 2010's **Letter to My Daughter** dealt with similar themes of loss and reconciling unrealized hopes and dreams. **The Night of the Comet** widens the scope from one person's disappointments over the four years of high school to an entire family's disappointments in the span of a single year.

Lydia Broussard, the matriarch of the family, suffers her midlife crisis mid-novel. Like Junior, she sees the Martello's home through the window of her house and finds herself wondering how her youthful sense of importance and predestiny led her to mother and wife in a middle-class burb of Baton Rouge. Here is where the coming-of-age tag fails to describe the novel—Lydia isn't coming of age, she's snapping out of the coma of age-coming. Even the much-repeated tale of meeting her fails to rekindle her affections. Simply put, she's as bored by her husband and her life as are the students in her husband's science classes. In truth, this is the story of two families: the Broussards (Alan, Lydia, Megan, Junior) and the Martellos. We can see ourselves in their middle-class house looking out the window at the nicer house next door wishing, dreaming, aspiring just like Junior and Lydia do. Maybe it's youth or inexperience, but although Junior fails to act on his amorous feelings, Lydia does not, consequences be damned.

Megan Broussard, Junior's older sister, must have come of age in some other book. Dreams in the Broussard

## Bishop's Sense of Timing

George Bishop's sense of timing is superb.

Earlier this year, CNN declared 2013 "the year of the comet."

The *Night of the Comet* landed smack dab in the middle of growing excitement about **Comet Ison**, which CNN had predicted might prove to be "the comet of the century."

Ison, which made its pass around the sun on Thanksgiving Day was first believed by scientists to have evaporated. Then, they began to hope that Ison, may, after all, like a cat with nine tails, have survived. As *The Double Dealer* was about to go live, scientists had detected signs of life.

house are small. The comet acts as amplifier for all its members except Megan.

For all practical purposes, she has checked out of the aspiration race. Her dress is baggy, unimpressive. Her hair is worn for comfort and easiness, not to attract. Her lone dream, to be a folk singer like Bob Dylan or Joni Mitchell, is buried in the back of her closet before she's even gotten out of high school.

While Megan would best be described as a minor character in the book, the pages Bishop does dedicate to the more vivacious, longing, hopeful Megan of the past are among the book's most heartbreaking passages.

As an author, George Bishop values concision and precision. Each detail about *Kohoutek* and the rest of the cosmos was painstakingly researched, checked, and rechecked. Says Bishop:

"Constellations are seasonal. If the book says Libra was in the western skyline in the early October of 1973, then Libra really was in the western skyline in early October '73."

Why bother with such attention to detail? "Because," says Bishop, "everybody knows something about the stars and if one wrong detail could take a reader out of the story then I didn't do my job." That he did do his job both as a researcher and as a storyteller gives Bishop a well-earned sense of pride. "It was damned hard writing this book. I knew *Kohoutek* was the backdrop, but I didn't know much more than that when I started. I had to create the family, the story, even the way the story is told, from scratch. That Bishop's first novel didn't do as well as his publisher expected placed

enormous pressure for his follow-up to justify a sizeable advance, yet Bishop persisted. “In the first draft, Junior is grown up and working offshore on oil rigs. He’s a jerk—he’s got an ex-wife and a kid he never sees. Then his mother dies and he’s thrust back into the childhood that shaped him into the not good man he is. Yeah, my editor hated it. They hated him, but it forced me to go back and tell the story that I was trying to tell all along: **The Year of the Comet.**”

How does a teenage boy deal with the initial disappointment of loving a girl who won’t love him back? How does a father deal with the comet that can define his life—spoiler alert for those who don’t know *Kohoutek’s* trajectory—as being less than a blip in the sky? How does a mother try to rewrite her destiny without destroying her marriage and scarring her children? The same way an author deals with writing a book that fails to meet its expectations (no matter how good it truly is): keep chasing a more practical happiness.

Gather your pens, straighten your tie, get back to work. Try to have fun doing it. Bishop points to one particularly poetic chapter in which various comets throughout Earth’s history have impacts great and small as one of the chapters he most enjoyed writing.

“Try to remain humble in both the victories and defeats.”

When asked what significance birthdays have to Bishop since both novels begin on the occasion of a birthday, Bishop responded lightheartedly: “Maybe it’s a crutch.”

George Bishop doesn’t pick the easy way. Choosing “the dud of the century” as your novel’s backdrop could make for a hard sell, but Bishop’s



**Geoff Munsterman**, author of the new book of poetry “*Because the Stars Shine Through It*”, interviewed **George Bishop**, another local writer. Photo by Louis Maistros Photography.

approach to storytelling, more than even his mastery of style and character, allows him to tackle the truly hardest themes for any writer to write about—living through the losses, growing up, and going forward in spite of them, putting dreams as small as a guitar pick or larger than the Milky Way in your rearview once they’ve failed to live up to the hype.

Unlike *Kohoutek*, whatever hype placed on the literary talents of George Bishop finds an unassuming man of great talent and practicality ready to match hype with substance.

His rising star as an author is no dud—George Bishop dazzles the reader!

**Geoff Munsterman’s** poems have been featured in *Poets for Living Waters*, **The Southern Poetry Anthology**, *story|south*, *The New Laurel Review*, and *Margie* to name a few. His debut collection **Because the Stars Shine Through It** will come out Winter, 2013 from Lavender Ink and he is hard at work on the follow-up, the book-length poem *Where Scars Wake*. His shingle hangs in New Orleans.

## A Conversation With George Bishop

### Q. What was your inspiration for *The Night of the Comet*?

**A.** The seeds of the story were a peculiar set of images that got stuck in my head a couple of decades ago: a broken telescope leaning in a corner of a room, and a man in an overcoat leaping off a roof. Sometime later, while living in Indonesia in 1996, I made a note in my journal that I thought *Comet Kohoutek* could make a good backdrop for a story. I didn’t put those ideas together until a few years ago, though, when Ballantine accepted my first novel, *Letter to My Daughter*. I wanted to bring some ideas for a second novel to my editor, and so I began researching *Kohoutek*. I found so much fascinating material on the comet that the real challenge, when it came time to sit down and write the novel, was in winnowing down all of the science and history to shape it into a compelling, intimate story.

### Q. What attracted you to *Kouhtek* as a backdrop?

**A.** *Kohoutek* serves as a backdrop to the story of the Broussard family. I love it for all the rich associations and symbolisms that come with it. Before it arrived, *Comet Kohoutek* was touted as “the comet of the century.” There was a tremendous build-up in the media and in the public’s expectations for the comet: astronomers and scientists everywhere were talking and writing about it, there were songs written about it, there were commemorative coins issued for it. Religious fanatics and counterculture leaders like Timothy Leary proclaimed that the comet portended cataclysmic events for the



Earth. It became sort of an overnight pop sensation, if you can say that about a comet. But then when it failed to live up to all the hype—and it really was a spectacular failure—it quickly became seen as the dud of the century. Even today, *Kohoutek's* still thought of as the laughingstock of comets. Call me a sentimentalist, but I kind of pity the comet. I mean, who wouldn't?

I also was attracted to the time period surrounding *Kohoutek*. While writing the novel, I came to think of those years—the early 70s—as a transformational moment in America's history. They were the country's awkward adolescence, you could say, when it was transitioning from the boundless, youthful optimism of the post-war boom years to the more sober, complicated years that have followed, including the gradual falling-off of a fascination with space exploration and a belief in science as the great hope for the future. A decade later, the tragic Challenger Space Shuttle disaster pretty much marked an end to that era.

**Q. You grew up in small-town Louisiana. How did that experience inform the novel?**

**A.** My hometown, Jackson, LA, is more pine country than bayou. The fictitious “Terrebonne” of the novel is farther south, deep inside Cajun country—a part of the state which was completely foreign to me as a kid. I still find that part of Louisiana exotic, which is one reason I set the story there. But growing up in Jackson certainly gave me a feel for the small-town setting of the book. Like the fictional Terrebonne, Jackson had only a couple of gas stations, a handful of shops, two schools, and a water tower. For a boy, it provided a certain sense of containment and knowability; I could circumnavigate my whole world in a half hour on my bike. Those were the kind of things I borrowed for my novel.

**Q. Do you have a background in astronomy?**

I have an amateur's appreciation for the stars. I didn't know much about astronomy when I began writing this book, just the usual half-remembered facts from high school. So I enjoyed finally getting to know that part of our world a little better. After all, the sky's half of everything we can see, and so it seems natural that we should have at least a passing familiarity with it. I read Carl Sagan, and Stephan Hawking, and books like **The Amateur Astronomer's Handbook**. I kept a chart of the constellations on the wall above my desk, and I studied online historic star maps, trying to figure out constellations and moon phases for the year 1973. I read all about comets, too, of course, and found a couple of fun, sensationalistic books written about comets, one published in 1910 at the time of Halley's return called **Comet Lore**, and another that came out during the build-up to *Comet Kohoutek* called, appropriately enough, **Kohoutek!** I have to confess, though, that I'd still be hard pressed to identify more than a few constellations. And I still don't own a telescope, although since writing the book I think I'd like to get one now.



## The Night of the Comet

Excerpt from the novel  
By George Bishop

*We are stardust, we are golden,  
We are billion-year-old carbon,  
And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.*  
—Joni Mitchell, **Woodstock**

*Hey, look! It's right out there. I tell you, it's one of the most beautiful creations I've ever seen. It's so graceful."  
"It's yellow and orange, just like a flame."  
—Astronauts Edward Gibson and Gerald Carr, on spotting  
**Comet Kohoutek** from Skylab, December 1973*

Here in Baton Rouge you can still see the stars at night.

Our backyard abuts the last patch of pastureland in the neighborhood, a piece of the old Pike-Burden farm still hanging on at the edge of the city. On a clear night like tonight, when my wife and boy are busy inside, I like to leave my desk for a few minutes and walk down to the rear of our yard, down to where my quarter acre ends at a low ditch and a barb-wire fence, and take in the night air. Beyond the fence the land stretches out flat as calm water. Stands of pine and oak ring the field. Off in the far corner a cow pond gleams in the moonlight. From the east comes the swish of cars passing on Perkins Road; from the north, the distant rumble of trucks on I-10.

But a person can't stand for long on a night like this without looking up. Call it the lure of the ineffable: your eyes are drawn skyward, and there they are. The stars. The night is filled with them. They cluster, they scatter, they shine, they go on forever. They're beautiful, aren't they? I'm no expert; I can name only the brightest ones, pick out the most obvious constellations:

there's Polaris, Sirius, and Vega; Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, Cancer, and Gemini . . . But no matter how little I know them, I still love the stars. How could anyone not? Wherever you go, you know they'll always be there, shining. All you have to do is turn your eyes up.

Also up there, I know, somewhere behind the stars, is the comet. You don't hear much about Kohoutek these days—"C/1973 E1" as it's known by its modern designation. You can't see it now; not even the most powerful of telescopes can see it. It's billions of miles away, far beyond the edge of the solar system, a small lump of ice and rock spinning out into the black vacuum of space. In the planetary scale of things, Kohoutek barely registers as a speck of dust; really, it's nothing anyone needs to be afraid of anymore. And yet, lately, when the sky is clear and the neighborhood is quiet, I find myself thinking about it. In fact, more and more, I find I can hardly stop thinking about it.

I suppose it's because I'm turning 40 soon, the same age my father was when the comet came crashing through our lives, and I worry that heredity might catch up with me at last—that a genetically preprogrammed crisis is due for a generational reoccurrence right about now and I won't be able to dodge it.

Or perhaps it's because in not so many years my own son will be the age I was then, and I worry for him, worry that he'll finally have to step up to the world, the real world of hope and love and loss, and I don't want him to have to go through all that like I did. I believe if I could, I'd put a blindfold on Ben and pick him up and run with him through all the burning years of his adolescence and not set him down again until he's safe on the other side, when he's 30 or so and I know he'll be all right.

Because it's not true what they say, that you get over it—that with time, whatever happens to you, good or bad, drifts away into the harmless river of the past. You never get over it, not really. The past never leaves you. You carry it around with you for as long as you live, like a pale, stubborn worm lodged there in your gut, keeping you up at night.

My son's in the house behind me now, helping his mother clean up after dinner. The kitchen window's open. I can hear the soft rattle of dishes as they load the washer, their voices as they talk about beautifully inconsequential things. ("If you use too much soap, then what happens?" "I don't know. Maybe the dishwasher will explode." "No, it won't!")

The comet, I know, is long gone, not to return for millions of years. In another sense, though, it never left. It's still there; it'll always be there, hanging like a black star above my head

wherever I turn. And on an evening like this, all it takes is the sound of my boy's voice, and the bright stars above, and the cool air wafting around me, to stir the worm of memory. Then the past comes flooding back, and whether I want to go there or not, I'm instantly transported again to that night.

\* \* \*

"Dad? Dad, is that you?"

I sat up in bed to listen. The night was quiet; the Moon shone in at my window. I wasn't altogether sure if I was still dreaming or not. I heard a rattling noise outside at the garage shed, and I got up and went to the top of the stairs.

"Dad?"

But his bedroom door was ajar and the house was empty, as I knew it would be. There was the tilting Christmas tree in the corner, the TV set, the couch, the rug, the chairs, all looking abandoned. The broken telescope, what was left of it, sat in pieces on the floor near the back door. I paused just long enough to pick up the phone in the living room and dial a number.

"Something's wrong. Something terrible is happening . . . Hurry."

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**George Bishop** is author of the recently released novel, *Night of the Comet*, featured here. His previous novel is *A Letter to My Daughter*, which at its core is a story of the collateral damage of war. The novel is narrated by a 50-year-old Baton Rouge housewife in a letter to her runaway daughter. The narrator recalls the letters she received from her young boyfriend, Tim, who signs up to fight during the Vietnam War because he's poor and has no other options. Says Bishop, "Though I'd hesitate to say that *Letter to My Daughter* is about Vietnam, I certainly believe that it is the Vietnam episodes which give the book its moral center." Bishop holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. After eight years of acting in commercials, stage plays, and guest starring roles in TV sitcoms, he traveled overseas and spent most of the last decade living and teaching in Slovakia, Turkey, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, India, and Japan. His stories and essays have appeared in publications such as *The Oxford American*, *The Third Coast Press*, and *American Writing*. He now lives in New Orleans. Bishop has judged the Short Story by a High School Category of the William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition and has appeared as a member of the faculty for Words & Music. He is again a member of the faculty in 2013.

## Ode to a Red MG

By Alessandro Mario Powell

Walker Percy, the great American novelist who lived in Covington, LA, was less prolific in fiction than in non-fiction. When he wrote fiction, however, he made it count. His novel **The Moviegoer** won the National Book Award and **Love in the Ruins** is recognized as concurrently a classic of tongue-in-cheek speculative fiction about the future and a serious delineation of the sorry state in which humanity finds itself. His other novels likewise have been widely acclaimed by both the reading public and critics.

His work in fiction, in fact, did much to reaffirm the value of good prose, just for sake of the beauty on the page of interesting words well arranged to tell a story or make a point—even as contemporaries, toward the end of the 20th century, began to shift toward a more cinematic style, which is awful without any accompanying visual images. **The Moviegoer** likely will never be a movie because of the complexities of its internal dialogues but the word pictures Percy painted for us are unforgettable. but the word Percy pictures painted for us are unforgettable.

In Percy's *The Moviegoer*, every night at dusk, when breezes from the Gulf of Mexico stir and cool the hot, wet air hanging over New Orleans the city comes alive and a 29-year-old wanderer in search of himself, Binx Bolling, emerges from his apartment, carrying in his hand the Times-Picayune movie page, his telephone book, and a map of the city. With these documents, Binx proceeds to chart his course to the particular neighborhood cinema house in which he will spend his evening. The truth is that for Binx, the bewildered but amiable hero of Walker Percy's debut novel, these neighborhood movie houses are oases of reality in an unreal world. The gigantic figures that flicker across the screen seem much more real than any of the mundane folk who drift through his daily life. Binx's despondency is more than mere laziness but less than real sickness.

He is normal enough to go every day to his brokerage office and earn \$3,000 or so a month juggling stocks for his clients. And his love for the movies is not so strong that in good weather he does not very much prefer jumping into his little red MG with one of his beautiful secretaries and driving along the Gulf Coast in search of a deserted cove...and, concurrently, some good news from across the sea to guide him in life.

*The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure*



*"Writing novels today, as Mr. Percy intimated, is like putting a message in a bottle and sending it out to sea in the hopes that something will come back to you with good news from across the water."*

*memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in Stagecoach, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in The Third Man.*

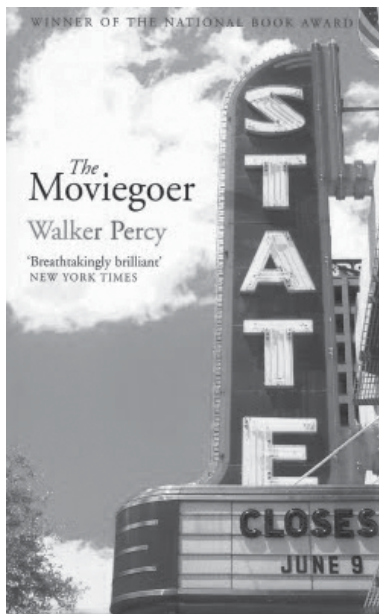
*My companion on these evening outings and weekend trips is usually my secretary. I have had three secretaries, girls named Marcia, Linda, and now Sharon.*

*Twenty years ago every other girl born in Gentilly must have been named Marcia. A year or so later it was Linda. Then Sharon. In recent years I have noticed the name Stephanie has come into fashion. Three of my acquaintances in Gentilly have daughters named Stephanie. Last night I saw a TV play about a nuclear test explosion. Keenan Wynn played a troubled physicist who had many a bad moment with his conscience. He took solitary walks in the desert. But you could tell that in his heart of hearts he was having a very good time with his soul-searching. "What right do we have to do what we are doing?" He would ask his colleagues in a bitter voice. "It's my four-year-old daughter I'm really thinking of," he told another colleague and took out a snapshot. "What kind of future are we building for her?" What is your daughter's name?" asked the colleague, looking at the picture. "Stephanie," said Keenan Wynn in a gruff voice. Hearing the name produced a sharp tingling sensation on the back of my neck. Twenty years from now I shall perhaps have a rosy young Stephanie perched at my typewriter.*

Mr. Percy's prose is so fine that we are compelled to ask why he wrote so few novels. Is it, perhaps, because he got off to a late start? After all, he only became a writer after his long bout with tuberculosis forced him out of medical school. More likely, it's because his creative energies, while concentrated in his fiction masterpieces, of course, also found outlets in his non-fiction—including some anthologized postmortem in **Sign Posts in a Strange Land**, a great primer for beginners at reading Walker Percy. Edited by the Rev. Patrick Samway, S. J., his biographer, these pieces are the frequently witty, always intelligent musings of one of America's great modern minds, whose insight into the problems are modern society are as fresh and meaningful today as they were when they were written.

Towards the center of the anthology Percy's search for meaning is revealed. He reminds us of the dire straits in which we find ourselves today. Yet he is





*The Moviegoer*,  
Walker Percy's debut novel

no prophet of doom. He emphasizes the benefits of soul-probing thoughtfulness, a pastime most Americans simply avoid today. Kind of hard to think at the mall with all of that commercial noise, after all. He makes the point that soul probing is important not only for purposes of arriving at faith in salvation and rebirth, but to be able to write anything worth reading.

The modern writer has a lot to overcome, Mr. Percy emphasizes. His thoughts are must reading for developing

writers.

Today, of course, a serious writer will find less of a market for literary novels, especially, but, really even for pulp fiction, as the television industry has annexed reading time of former audiences for good fiction with hours and hours of anything at all as long as it is *not* thought provoking. The novelist

The cinematic arts and American addiction to film or video as their primary means of ingesting thoughts, knowledge, entertainment have produced a void of thoughtful immersion in fiction. The novel—once a bridge drawn between minds—no longer works with masses of Americans who demand to be spoon fed, less like adorable babies, however, more like mental patients or, as in **Love in the Ruins**, zombies. They demand that they not be required to think or puzzle out the meaning of fiction passages for themselves. They demand that it all be explained for them by celebrities they admire within one-hour or two-hour film capsules.

Best case scenario for a novelist to sell his work today is that a producer buys the novel, hires a screenwriter to free your novel from the closet of prose it masquerades in and adapts your novel into the film that it was born to be, or rather needs to be if the novelist is going to make any money doing his/her job.

Ironically, in the early days of the silver screen, directors had images and some music with a few explanatory lines, like photo I.D. lines and were looking for the missing link of voices telling stories in the right words to match the images. Today, the novelist has the story and the right words and is hoping his art will be made whole by the camera. As individuals of this society reliant on spoon-fed pap, we are losing our comprehension and communication skills, Mr. Percy has warned. We no longer know how to tell someone what we mean.

It's as if at your favorite bar, you, were to point at your empty glass. Meanwhile your bartender goes on cleaning glass after glass, unaware of your implied thirst. (Likely, he should not be tipped.) So, you sit and hope a stream of Bourbon may cascade from the antique ceiling lamp and into your glass. Faith and hope go unrewarded and nobody ever gets any sort of buzz at this bar.

Mr. Percy equates our loss of comprehension and communication skills with loss of faith and writing with the search to find it again.

The serious writer, driven to write in order figure out life, must write regardless of whether he has an audience or not, Mr. Percy would say, and if he/she manages to get it right, who will there be to read it? Writing novels today, as Mr. Percy intimated, is like putting a message in a bottle and sending it out to sea in the hopes that something will come back to you with good news from across the water.

We are not there yet, not at the end of our drama of life on this planet, Percy might say, but we sure can see the end from where we are standing, or at least the beginning if the end. Whether or not anything akin to the fine literature as we have known it will manifest itself in the next acts of the drama, remains to be seen.

Mr. Percy's musings, the proverbial handwriting on the wall, were written well before the advent of sophisticated personal computers, iPhones, iPads, and the social media, which are teaching us to unlearn everything we ever knew about the beauty of language as a means of communicating the contents of our minds and souls to another.

One cannot help but wonder what he would have to say today about this lapse of faith and the current religious recession of Biblical proportions, this dumpster diving into nothingness.

We can imagine, however.

The stakes may be higher, he would say, than the life or death of our literary tradition. This loss of faith, this loss of our intentional understanding of the world, is the first step in a sequence that will fundamentally alter human behavior. If not very careful, we could devolve, back into whence we came, Neanderthal society, and begin making our conversational points with grunts and swinging clubs.

A look at today's tweets indicates we are far closer than is comfortable to contemplate.

**Alessandro Powell** is a Senior at Tulane University, where he studies English. He is originally from Hamden, Connecticut. His fiction can be found in the *New Haven Review*. He is an intern for 2013 and 2014 in the *Faulkner Society's* program for students, who learn writing, editing, and small press publication, and receive class credits.

## Essays & Papers Presented



*Radiance, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

## Literature Out of Time: Margaret Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara: Fluffy Fictional Character or a Prototype for Surviving the Shift to a New Normal?

by Laura Pavlides

Tough people survive tough times. My daddy always said that whenever I complained about something hard or unfair in my little life. But he also said, there will *always* be tough times. Every generation and every individual gets their cross to bear, their defining moments. Our past five years from 2007-2012 definitely qualify.

When times get tough, the tough...go looking for a self-help book or a business bestseller. Survival stories, self-help manuals, and self-improvement guides have always been popular. In light of our most recent financial, housing, and employment worries, an avalanche of books is out and all are attempting to explain what's going on and how to live through it.

One insightful title, **Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why** by Laurence Gonzales, examines the life-saving traits of heroes and heroines who survive accidents or being lost in the wild. But it's not clear how to transfer those life and death decision-making skills to our day-to-day, routine lives.

So, with financial survival and global economic crises in mind, I too headed to the bookstore, looking for guidance. I had a quite an array of Recession Recovery cheerleaders to choose from:

Donald Trump's **Time to Get Tough: Making America Number 1 Again**; **The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future**; **The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine**; Jersey Shore Snookie's **Confessions of a Guidette**; Colin Powell's **It Worked For Me**; and Glenn Beck's **Cowards**.

That broad and overwhelming experience had me backing up into the fiction section and there, a copy of Pulitzer Prize-winning **Gone With The Wind** caught my eye.

Could a book detailing a lone woman's survival through a real civil war and the Reconstruction from 1861 to 1877 have something to say about survival in 2012? It did win the Pulitzer Prize in 1937 over Faulkner; James Michener wished he'd written it; it's been called the American War and Peace; and according to a 2008 Harris poll, it is second only to the Bible as the favorite book of all time.

But when someone brings up Scarlett and **Gone With The Wind** is mentioned, everyone hums the sweeping orchestral theme song,



*Laura Mortenson Pavlides*

pretends to faint and either yells that the Yankees are a coming, they don't know nuthin' about birthin' no babies or frankly, they don't give a Damn.

However, maybe we should.

Although it was published back in 1936 about a fictional woman weathering a real-life national crisis 150 years ago, author Margaret Mitchell may have written the most enduring and entertaining *survival manual* of all time.

**Gone With the Wind**, the book, is not the powder puff, Southern belle soap opera portrayed onscreen by Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable. The novel is a savvy, detailed account of people either moving on with or getting mowed down by a financial, housing, and labor market Perfect Storm flip-flop; a push of the economic reset button.

In about five years, from 1861 to 1865, Scarlett notes, page 414: "... (that) security and position had vanished overnight..." Flash forward to our 2012: Housing, retirement savings, stock and bond market values, job skills, a college degree: all worth less than just five years prior.

There's an old saying: Shift happens. All throughout history, the world's economic machinery has changed, usually at a pace slower than a human lifetime or at most, once a generation. We've had an agricultural revolution, farm kids mobbing the cities for jobs in the industrial revolution, steel and fabric mill industry shut downs, tech hard and software revolutions. Now, that cycle is further complicated by the awakening of third world countries and the connections of relatively cheap, "that's so 10 seconds ago," twitter-fast tools. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are experiencing tipping point shifts as often as every 5 to 10 years.

In **Gone With The Wind**, I believe Margaret Mitchell left us a handbook on how to ride the tide of a shift. Not only was it written during the Great Depression that started in 1929, but it was written from the Confederate or losing side's point of view and stars



a single mother. It's a Survivor board game plan starring different characters taking paths with varying degrees of success through a reconstruction of a society and a country.

In looking for a Literature Out of Time heroine, a real American Idol prototype, Scarlett O'Hara illustrates one successful formula for what to do when you find yourself in a severe reversal of fortune and ill-prepared for a new world.

She shakes off the ashes of her obsolete Camelot and rebuilds to even greater fortune in a completely new economic stratum. She modernizes her man-catching skills into merger and acquisition targeting that would make Goldman Sachs' Lloyd Blankfein drool.

**Gone With The Wind** is eerily identical and instructive for us in 2012. A 959 page book seems daunting now to people used to text messages, LOL, and 140 character limit Tweets. But there are quotes and lessons for everything from marketing and sales, picking mates, raising kids with altered expectations, to top down investing and spotting business opportunities. Rhett Butler alone is as quotable as Warren Buffett.

Scarlett was just 17 years old when she and her family began their fall from the elite 1% to the 99%. But this unflappable fusion of real, historical women goes through the Civil War and Reconstruction meat grinder, an era far more treacherous and restraining for women than for many in our new millennium, and comes out an exceptional filet mignon. How?

I've identified five main "hoops" she had to jump through alone that we couldn't fathom today.

**One: Scarlett and many of the remaining educated, white Confederate males were restricted from voting.** Although over a fourth of Southern white men had died during the war, the Radical Republican-led government was fearful of how now counting a black man as one vote instead of 3/5s of a vote, would increase the power of the South.

In 1865, slaves were freed immediately and all black men got the vote five years later. Northerners and former slaves had more rights in the southern half of the Union for much of the ten year Reconstruction of their own economy. Women didn't get the right to vote passed federally for 50 more years until 1920, when the needed 36 states had ratified it.

**Two: Scarlett had no protection, savings or means of support.** She had few possibilities for re-marriage: mostly grandfathers, boys, and a few wounded soldiers. Many Confederate widows were pregnant or had very young children conceived in the uncertainties of their husband's survival. Social customs dictated that just the event of a pregnancy began a year of confinement at home. Widowhood meant a three-year mourning period, wearing black and shunning company.

Those two conventions alone could have put Scarlett off the re-marriage and security market for a total of eight years when belles were considered old maids at

the age of 22.

Almost all Southerners' worldly goods, houses, businesses, and possessions were destroyed, bankrupted, looted, or sold for food. Confederate money and bonds were instantly worthless. Taxes were raised immediately to finance rebuilding. Government welfare programs for unemployment or retraining did not begin for another 65 years, in the 1930's. Most unnerving to women and children on their own, the return of law and order was concentrated in the cities and roving bands of the unemployed, hungry and homeless prowled the countryside.

**Three: Scarlett had little education, no obvious job skills and deep societal pressure not to work.** Scarlett had two years at the Fayetteville Female Academy, where she noted liking her math and accounting class, but it was scarcely more than a finishing school.

Being the oldest, by default, she became the only potential breadwinner of her family overnight but it wasn't considered proper to lower oneself by working outside the home or in public. It was scandalous to ask for a job, start anything for profit but charities and little home diversions, manage money, sell things or work among men. Confederate Diarist and US Senator's wife during the Civil War era, Mary Boykin Chesnut writes bitterly how her egg selling business that was derided as bringing her "pin money," actually fed her family through many dark times after the war.

The threat of starvation and illness for a long list of ten dependents including ailing relatives and children to feed, clothe and soothe tormented Scarlett. There was absolutely nowhere to turn that was approved of except methods that kept her dependent: charity sent by relatives or to move into group homes for war widows and orphans.

Women like Scarlett were not trained for jobs but as socialites. Their only goal was to land a suitable husband. The fact that she became Scarlett O'Hara Hamilton Kennedy Butler is actually a testament to her eye for advantageous mergers in an environment with few options.

**Four: Scarlett had to live in the aftermath of a war zone.** After four years of battles and Lincoln's Union Generals' shock and awe tactics, the economy and infrastructure no longer existed in about half of the United States. Americans today have never really experienced a true "war" fought on their home turf. After Sherman's "March to the Sea," there were few intact bridges, railroads, or boats; very little stored food, laborers, businesses, shelter, communications, or producing farms. Salvaging whatever food, animals, or building materials you could find was key. There was nothing available that we expect in our 2012 world: roads, stores, markets or eateries, electricity, schools, or credit.

**Five: Scarlett had no emotional or social support.** She lost her husbands, her beaux, her parents, many neighbors, and all of her former life and possessions. There was no post-traumatic stress disorder

therapy, counseling, health care, Prozac, Xanax, or even time for empathy or grief.

Scarlett's revolutionary struggle through financial, economic, political, and divisive civil conflicts seems very much like *our* 2008 financial and housing crisis. Also, *our* Occupy Wall Street simmerings, *our* labor inequities, *our* tipping point in our government and in our world's wars and economies.

So, with all these constraints to work within, how did Scarlett turn into the family hero? In my book, I go over seven behaviors, but for now let's just distill them down into three that characterize all survivors...of disasters, heartbreak, or even disease.

**Lesson One: Crisis forces focus... and focus leads to action.** Scarlett suffers many losses before she finally cracks. But this very cracking open of her old shell, like certain plants that need the intense heat of a forest fire to germinate, causes Scarlett to wake up. She bursts through the rubble of the 1860's and defiantly blooms in Georgia's war-scorched countryside. She comes out lean, mean, and swinging for the fences. Think about how perfect the following lines, written in the 1930's, apply to our current times:

Page 590: Scarlett explaining to Rhett why she wants to borrow money to buy the lumber mill: "I'm going to have money again some day, lots of it, so I can have anything I want to eat. And then there'll never be any hominy or dried peas on my table. And I'm going to have pretty clothes and all of them are going to be silk...and (my son) Wade isn't ever going to know what it means to do without the things he needs! Never!"

Page 430: An old neighbor woman to Scarlett: "Child, it's a very bad thing for a woman to face the worst that can happen to her, because after she's faced the worst she can't ever really fear anything again."

Page 572: Scarlett in a light bulb moment regarding pessimism about being able to make a living in 1866: "... (suddenly she remembered the) words Rhett had spoken in the early years (as the war started)... "There's just as much money to be made in the wreck of a civilization as in the upbuilding of one."

Page 496: Ashley, musing on what the loss of the War really means to the South: "In the end what will happen will be what has happened whenever a civilization breaks up. The people who have brains and courage come through and the ones who haven't are winnowed out. At least, it has been interesting, if not comfortable, to witness a Gotterdammerung... a dusk of the gods."

**Lesson Two: Survivors keep moving and keep adjusting their plans.** They are not always any stronger, faster or smarter. They just accept new circumstances, adapt and move on. They not only expect setbacks, they anticipate and plan for them.

Best of all, Scarlett didn't *apologize to anyone* for what she wanted or for *how* she had to go about *getting it*. She just got on with it.

In the novel, Scarlett spends no more than three

minutes bemoaning her catastrophic situation: that little breakdown while eating the organic radish in Tara's ruined fields:

Page 408: "... (they) aren't going to lick me. I'm going to live through this, and when it's over, I'm never going to be hungry again. No, nor any of my folks."

Page 491: After learning she needed even more money for Tara's taxes: "Scarlett did not (yet) realize that all the rules of the game had been changed and that honest labor could no longer earn its just reward."

Page 580: Scarlett, investigating her new husband Frank's store and accounting books, when Frank was sick and couldn't work: "Why, I could run this store better than he does! And I could run a mill better than he could, even if I don't know anything about the lumber business!" .... With the idea that she was as capable as a man came a sudden rush of pride and a violent longing to prove it, to make money for herself as men made money. Money which would be her own, which she would neither have to ask for nor account for to any man."

Page 564: At a party of the Old Guard, Scarlett sees that: "The days when money could be thrown away carelessly had passed. Why did these people persist in making gestures of the old days when the old days were gone?"

Page 570-1: "... these proud fools weren't looking forward as she was doing... to get back what they had lost... But she wasn't going to be poor all her life. She wasn't going to sit down and patiently wait for a miracle to help her. She was going to rush into life and wrest from it what she could."

Page 509: Scarlett deciding her game plan, in her new dress made of curtains: "Just borrowing three hundred dollars for the taxes will only be a stopgap. What I want is to get out of this fix, for good-so I can go to sleep at night without worrying over what's going to happen to me tomorrow, and the next month, and next year."

Page 525: Listening to the local Southern ladies gossiping: "Mrs. Merriwether and Miss Maybelle had made ends meet by baking pies and selling them to the Yankee soldiers. Imagine that!" and Page 526: "Mrs. Elsing is running a boarding house! Isn't that dreadful?" "... "I think it's wonderful," Scarlett said shortly.

Page 517: Scarlett seeing her old friends trying to have the same social lives after the War: "They haven't an idea what is really happening to me or themselves.... They still think that nothing dreadful can happen to any of them because they are who they are.... Oh, they're all fools! They don't change to meet changed conditions because they think it'll all be over soon."

Page 621: "It's a poor person and a poor nation that sits down and cries because life isn't precisely what they expected it to be."

**Lesson Three: The greatest motivator is...love.** The novel ends, too early, with Scarlett just realizing who she loves and how it means everything. She did not have the time or depth to figure out that it was love that fueled her actions, although others around her gave her multiple

glimpses.

Page 503: Ashley trying to work in Tara's ruined fields, to Scarlett: "Yes, there is something left... Something you love better than me, though you may not know it. You've still got Tara." At first the words meant nothing....But unbidden came the thought of the sea of red dirt which surrounded Tara and how very dear it was and how hard she had fought to keep it-how hard she was going to have to fight if she wished to keep it hereafter."

Page 509: Scarlett thinking of Rhett and his pre-planning: "Oh, blessed thought, sweeter than hope of Heaven, never to worry about money again, to know that Tara was safe, that the family was fed and clothed..."

Page 55: Gerald O'Hara, Scarlett's father, lecturing Scarlett on his love of land: "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything... for tis the only thing in this world that lasts and don't you be forgetting it! 'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for-worth dying for."

Page 954:Rhett to Scarlett, broken over the death of his daughter: "But then, there was Bonnie and I saw everything wasn't over, after all...and I could pet her and spoil her-just as I wanted to pet you. But she wasn't like you-she loved me. It was a blessing that I could take the love you didn't want and give it to her....When she went (died), she took everything."

Although published over 75 years ago, this enduring book, meant to be a historical romance, offers a Literature Out of Time look at the years of 1861-1877. The growth of the main character, Scarlett O'Hara is heavily influenced by the events of her time, as the author was probably influenced by the events of the Great Depression while writing it.

In times of trouble, we can reach for a current business bestseller or a self-help title and be inspired by the latest guru. But we risk losing the lessons and camaraderie of the human condition that is the connection to our ancestors if we don't re-read our classics with a fresh eye. To date, between thirty and fifty million copies have been printed and sold of Margaret Mitchell's blockbuster for a very good reason.

Did Margaret Mitchell ever realize her novel could be looked at as a timeless survival manual and her character Scarlett O'Hara as a Shift heroine for generations to come?

Did we "get" her real message and her gift to us all?

**Laura Mortenson Pavlides** is a writer, blogger, and speaker who straddles the Mason-Dixon line between the New South and the Old Thinking, trying to reconcile both sides. Her mama taught her creativity and perseverance and her daddy taught her to be a tomboy and how to sell! This Southern wanderer finally settled in a coastal Carolina home, enjoying a wide front porch with her hot husband and two Renaissance Man sons. Read more at [laurapavlides.com](http://laurapavlides.com).

## Recommended Reading: About Faulkner

### Above the Treetops By Jack Sacco



In **Above the Treetops**, award-winning author **Jack Sacco** provides readers with a rare glimpse into the personal life of internationally acclaimed novelist William Faulkner. The book tells the true story of the endearing relationship between Faulkner and a young neighbor named Bobby Little. In the young Bobby, Faulkner found not only a kindred spirit

longing for adventure, but the son he never had. He taught Bobby how to ride a horse, how to sail a boat, and how to fly a plane...all before the boy was 15 years old. Set in Oxford, MS, *Above the Treetops* reveals never-before-told stories of the Nobel Laureate's wit, charm, frailties, and humanity. As such, it is sure to appeal not only to fans of William Faulkner the novelist, but to those who, until now, have never known the endearing magic of William Faulkner the man.

Jack Sacco also is the bestselling author of ***Where the Birds Never Sing***. He was born and raised in Birmingham, AL, and graduated from the University of Notre Dame with a Bachelor of Science degree in Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering. Sacco has produced and directed several documentaries and has composed the rich soundtrack scores for such works as *Beyond the Fields* and *Once Upon a Starlit Night*. He is in demand as an accomplished public speaker who lectures widely throughout the United States and abroad. He has appeared at conferences and universities across the nation, including Yale University, the University of Notre Dame, UCLA, and USC. In addition, he has spoken before members of the Royal Families of Europe at Maissau Castle in Vienna, Austria.



## Is Something Mything in Your Villain?

By Jennifer Stewart and Daniel Wallace

Some of literature's most memorable characters are some of its most disturbing. It's the Heathcliffs, the Humberts, the Gatsbys – the villains, the mystery men, the insane lovers: the bad guys and girls of the fiction realm who titillate us the most. But what about these characters make them vile? More importantly—what makes them so interesting? We'd like to share a few ideas with you about myths, villains, and literature, and then open the discussion to the floor.



In Hollywood big budget action movies, the role of the “villain” is pretty straightforward. He's the guy trying to blow stuff up. In classic novels, however, such simple villains are relatively rare. Often the villainous or self-destructive character is not trying to hurt the protagonist—Captain Ahab, for instance, is not out to kill Ishmael (at least, no more than he's trying to anyone

else on board his ship)—and so, as a result, a villainous character must play a different kind of role. Often, the villain instead seems to be offering that protagonist not a threat, but a choice. The creepy, disturbing character is acting as a role model, one possible path, a specifically dark way of experiencing life, if a seductive one.

We see this idea of villain-as-choice especially clearly in stories where a woman must choose between two men: Darcy or Wickham, Heathcliff or Edgar Linton, Jonathan Harker or Count Dracula. Now, on a pure plot level, part of the narrative will inevitably involve the revelation that the villain is really bad news, that, say, signing up for a whaling mission with Captain Ahab is not, perhaps, a good career decision for anyone. But I don't think that's why novels such as *Moby Dick* are famous, why we respect the book more than we respect one of the James Bond novels. It's because on a bigger level, in a metaphorical, allegorical sense, what we are seeing are two ways of life playing out in contrast to each other.

If we like this idea—that a villainous character, in classic literature, offers the protagonist a choice—then that leaves us with a problem, both as writers and readers. How to indicate, in our own writing, what that choice is? And how to make that choice seem interesting and powerful?

When I look back at many of the novels I love, I start to see something more in those stories than simply

the plot, than simply the choice between someone bad and something good. I start to see certain mythic similarities between certain characters who, on the surface, might appear quite different to each other, but who, structurally speaking, play a similar sort of role. For instance, when I read a classic novel in which a woman struggles to choose between two men, I notice that one of the men often seems little bit like Heathcliff. Or like Jay Gatsby. Or like the Count of Monte Cristo. And while each of these men are, of course, very distinct, there are ways in which they are similar, mythically, archetypally similar.



In *Wuthering Heights*, what are some of Heathcliff's characteristics? As everyone knows, he is very romantic, much more so than Catherine's actual husband, Edgar Linton. He is also connected, via his dark skin and the speculations of Nelly Dean, with the east, with gypsies and India. He becomes, by mysterious methods, extremely wealthy. And he is throughout the novel intimately connected with death. *Wuthering Heights* ends with the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine wandering the moors together.

Of the east. Wealthy. Death-hued.

On a plot level, the only requirement is that Heathcliff be a romantic, impractical character, who returns to the story after Catherine has married. All this other stuff, about India and death is surely just excessive, sensational colour. However, such a character sounds a lot like the supposed hero of a novel almost exactly contemporary with *Wuthering Heights*: *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The Count is pale and never eats: he reminds many characters in the book of a vampire from a Byronic poem. He is stupendously wealthy, and he has spent years in Eastern countries, picking up a slave girl and a drug habit. He, then, is also connected with the east, wealthy, and death-hued.

Then, in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald depicts a woman dealing with the re-appearance of a lover she assumed dead, a man suddenly become stupendously wealthy, whose past is associated with foreigners and Jews. And it has always seemed to me that Fitzgerald knew that he was imitating the Count of Monte Cristo, and felt embarrassed about it. As if there was something appearing in his novel that he didn't quite know what to do with. At one point, he has Gatsby tell Nick: “After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago.”

Gatsby, in other words, has an imaginary past that

sounds a lot like a latter day Count of Monte Cristo.

Finally, in one of my favourite novels, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez presents his female protagonist with the return of her long lost lover, Florentino Ariza, a man who enters the novel during a funeral, who always wears black, and who, in a comic parody of the *Count of Monte Cristo*, once attempted to retrieve sunken jewels from the deep, only to learn he had been duped, and that the jewels he has been seeking are only painted glass.

Now, there's a simple explanation here. It's possible that Dumas and Bronte were influenced by Byron, and they simply made similar anti-heroes because they both liked Byron's poetry. Then later writers semi-consciously repeated elements of their work. But I think the more interesting question is why this collection of character traits has been so popular with writers. And I think the answer is that it allows a writer to signal to the reader that a real choice faces the protagonist. That choosing a man like Heathcliff is not a casual decision, but one that signals the kind of values the character chooses to have loyalty to.

By associating a male love interest with the traits of the Count, or with Heathcliff, a writer begins to build a moral universe in which foreignness, undeath, and ancient wealth are all attributes of romance. Because these values—foreignness, undeath, and ancient wealth—are all incompatible with the everyday world, they bring into clear focus the heroine's choice. Does Daisy choose Tom Buchanan or Jay Gatsby? The real, practical lover or the impossible romance? The traits that linger in Gatsby's shadow help us readers understand the wider meaning of the plot.

Where does this story, these archetypes, originate? I'm not sure, but when I ask myself what woman has a lover who is of the East, mysteriously wealthy, and from the land of the dead, I can't help thinking of Persephone. Perhaps this is the myth that adds power to these tropes: these novels take up Persephone's story at the end of another summer, another year spent living on the Earth. She has married, she has become again accustomed to the sun, but as the days shorten, and winter approaches, her other, half-forgotten husband, Hades, once again rises out of the ground, once again coming to draw her back to the land of the dead.

I think this literary archetype, this narrative structure with mythic overtones, keeps being reused because it is useful to writers. When a writer wants to make a contrast between everyday, practical, humdrum reality and dangerous, big Capital Letter romance, these associations offer readers a familiar, easily recognized pattern. The choice between two men, which, after all, might not necessarily be that interesting, quickly becomes very interesting, because we see what kind of competing visions of life these men represent.

Great stories offer us more than just a plot: they offer a vision of radically different ways of living life, a vision of the incompatible goals we struggle with. I've

just looked at one re-curring archetype. I'm sure there are many more. But their presence may help explain, when you're reading a novel, and the character's conflict is clear, and the dialogue is funny, and the details compelling—it's all there but, yet, something isn't quite wowing you. Perhaps the writer hasn't quite worked out what myth he or she is telling. And if you're the writer, and this story is your own story, perhaps you would do well to put a little more myth in your villain.

If Hades is a common archetype for male villains then perhaps Medea is an equally common one for female villains. If the standard sense of female justice is based on the somewhat motherly instinct to protect and revenge in a relatively singular manner, then Medea utterly defines the antithesis of that, as she was guilty of murdering her own children, among others. Indeed, to quote from Euripides, "'Let no one think of me that I am humble or weak or passive; let them understand I am of a different kind: dangerous to my enemies, loyal to my friends. To such a life glory belongs.'"

Gillian Flynn recently created some of the most compelling villains of any gender I've read. Flynn blatantly states that she is ready for a new type of villain: "I've grown quite weary of the spunky heroines, brave rape victims, soul-searching fashionistas that stock so many books. I particularly mourn the lack of female villains — good, potent female villains. Not ill-tempered women who scheme about landing good men and better shoes (as if we had nothing more interesting to war over), not chilly WASP mothers (emotionally distant isn't necessarily evil), not soapy vixens (merely bitchy doesn't qualify either). I'm talking violent, wicked women. Scary women. Don't tell me you don't know some. The point is, women have spent so many years girl-powering ourselves — to the point of almost parodic encouragement — we've left no room to acknowledge our dark side. Dark sides are important. They should be nurtured like nasty black orchids."

I think we'd argue that this isn't a new type of villain at all, but a very old one. Flynn is very much trying to reinvent Medea, and, in my opinion, is quite successful. The female villain, and part time narrator, of *Gone Girl*, Flynn's latest novel, is recognized as a sociopath, who, (spoiler alert here) secretly manifests a pregnancy through modern scientific means, and therefore unbeknownst to her husband, to keep him by her side. Flynn actually concludes with this bit of knowledge and the reader is left wondering how a woman who is clearly mad will manage to care for a child, and the chilling answer is that she probably won't — her fate is probably much closer to Medea's than Demeter's.

Ultimately, in both male and female terms we're discussing power - villains have power that they wield in negative ways over other characters in the pursuit of their passions. However, there should also be room made in the scope of a discussion of female villains for the Cassandras

# ESSAY: *Is Something Mythical in Your Villain*

of literature and culture- women who are vilified, and brutally punished - by the men surrounding them. While I think Daniel's discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo* does indeed show how writers present female protagonists with choices, it's at the same time true that these female protagonists lack some of the power necessary to truly make a choice. The male characters are the ones dictating the terms. Often, female characters more resemble Cassandra, the victim of a God, the speaker of truths that no one hears.

Her power, and perhaps her beauty as a power, thus, made her both a villain and a victim, one who even foresees her own death and yet is powerless to do anything about it. As with many female characters, she is given a power, and then the male forces surrounding her cripple that power. A similar case may be made for *Lolita* - who is both victim and sometimes villain in the novel when she turns the tables on Humbert, though since she is mainly trying to survive and/or escape, she also is a kind of accidental villain, or one forced to assume power. This way women, and female villains, are portrayed as powerful only in a defensive sense - women defending their "cubs," their bodies, or their very lives pepper more than one story. Yet the depiction of *Lolita's* wiles and manipulations by Humbert actually works to make the reader feel a bit of sympathy for the man who is in fact a rapist and reviled on principle. It must also be said that the case of *Lolita* and Humbert very closely resembles that of Persephone and Hades - a young girl abducted from her mother, forced to live in darkness for a time, released, and then recaptured.

The characters of Bone and Anney in *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison also have strong mythic overtones. Bone's mother is as much a villain in the story as her rapist stepfather, Glenn, is. Anney, however, comes across as weak, and her villainy is the product of her being unable to stand up to Glen. Just as Demeter (though a Goddess in her own right) is unable to prevent the rape and abduction of Persephone so is Anney unable to prevent the rape and molestation of her daughter. Bone is unable to have any power in her own life even though she has blatantly stated to her mother what Glen has done to her, much like Cassandra. Both Allison and Nabokov, though, pattern these stories around threads of myths that makes them at once familiar and foreboding, and, to my mind at least, these represent some of the most psychologically disturbing characters and books of the last century.

I imagine the characters of Glenn and Anney were difficult for Dorothy Allison to contend with on a regular basis. Tying them, even in a loose sense, to tales that stretch back to the beginning of tales is perhaps a critical way for authors to be able to funnel that darkness on to the page. After all, darkness, and violence, from either gender, is not a new thing. That is at the crux of what makes it so chilling - there's nothing new under the blood moon, so to speak. I think the darkest characters

and the vilest villains of either sex acknowledge this by invoking a long-standing tradition of villainy.

We've looked at a few ways to use archetypes and myth in stories. We've said that archetypes allow a writer to clarify the different choices facing a protagonist. They help raise the stakes, and help readers understand those stakes. And we've argued that they allow a writer to get free of contemporary clichés, and to, perhaps, make a character more inhumane and terrible than would normally be possible. A guiding hand on the journey down to hell.

What do you think? Do mythical archetypes help you, as reader or writer, or hinder you? What do you think they add to a story; what do they obscure?

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## WORLD WAR C (Trust: how we lost the war with China)

(**Editor's Note:** following are the first two chapters of the new non-fiction novel by Gregory Friedlander on the economic and political relationships between the United States and China. Excerpts from his new treatise were the basis of the oral presentation he made during *Words & Music, 2012.*)

*War is a mere continuation of policy by other means.*

—Clausewitz, **On the Nature of War**

### Chapter I

Aarlin Aariz took the podium and looked out before congress. More than half of the men in their cushioned chairs were over the age of 65, having been re-elected numerous times. The promises they had made to get elected originally were far in the past. There was no limit to the number of terms to which they were elected and their terms were so short that they no sooner finished wining one election before they were running for another one. He looked up into the audience and saw a couple of Cabal members he knew. Between them was his protégé, Hollis Wallace. He smiled, not sure whether she could see him clearly from the balcony.

At the top of his notes, Hollis had jotted a few lines. *Great love mutes the voice and must be told in poetry so the soul may speak. Great horror blinds the mind and must be hidden in prose so the future may be warned.*

He had just been introduced as a presidential candidate whose primary platform was to extend, but limit their terms and remove their prerogatives. They did not want him to speak. There was no use worrying about that now, nor how much his audience of congressmen wanted to defeat him. There was Bennie Sykes, one of his few supporters in Congress, smiling benevolently.

This was his second speech in front of this organization. It was too late to give this speech. Much of the horror of which he spoke, was history and not prediction. But it was better to try something than to sit and do nothing. He took a deep breath.

“In the near future, if we do not change our policies, we will become a third world power as a result of the export of all of our manufacturing and consequently our manufacturing technology overseas. This is the result of our government's failure to recognize we are at war with China which in turn is because our flawed political system corrupted those in power.

“The goal of war, according to the detailed study by Clausewitz in his masterpiece *On the Nature of War*, is to disarm your enemy so you can bend them to your will. Do we have the manufacturing base to build an army? Where is it? If modern warfare is based on technology, do we build our own computers or cell phones? Who builds them? Do we have the money to rebuild our army? Who is our creditor? If you are honest, you will see that we are at war, and we are not winning. We have almost no time left, because we already lost the war. Our enemy has disarmed us without ever firing a shot and all that after giving us the playbook by which it would be done.

“The Chinese destroyed our factories without dropping bombs, but the factories are closed; the employees are refugees. Our government stood by and watched this and, to some extent, encouraged it.

“This colossal failure of leadership is only possible because of the corruption in our government...”

He felt very confident and was happy to be finally delivering this speech. It would have made a tremendous impact, may have saved the country, but it would be eclipsed when, as he walked out, he was assassinated.

### Chapter 2

#### The Great Scott

*If the Chinese bombed the closed factories, if they forced the middle class families from their homes at gun point, if they seized the assets that give value to your currency, if they stole the technology by force to make cell phones and computers while your government sat and watched, would you then take another look at the way your government is run? Would you take up arms to protect yourself?*

—Excerpt from Aarlin Aariz's Speech in Support of the Congressional Reform Act.)

Twilight is the ephemeral time between light and darkness. It is the transition between the greatest country in the world and ruin. It happens in the twinkling of a star. It is the time when exhausted lovers finally sleep and when writers pick up their pens or put them down. It is also the time when Robert Scott had to die.

He sped through the twilight. Wet wind whipped his long, black hair. He looked green in the lights of the rusting instruments. He was uneasy in the night, rising and falling over the swells, weeping. His twilight moment had come with the discovery that there were two Marcs. One Lonnie Marc was locked away, of course, but there was the other Lana Marc. The imprisoned Lonnie Marc had

apparently given the free Lana Marc evidence and that, in turn, was given to Robert.

The ship cabin was a white fiberglass box spinning in three dimensions. Water sprayed against the glass windshield and washed over the integral fiberglass roof washing to the open cockpit continuous with the open cabin. Above the roof towered an aluminum frame observation tower. Everything was held together with stainless screws circled with rings of rust and green algae. Robert Scott thought of Grease Scott's wife, Hollis Wallace Scott. She was Grease Scott's second wife, only a few years older than Grease's daughter, Hailey. Robert wished he could forget her, particularly now.

Why Grease had married someone in the reserves was still a mystery. Perhaps he felt he needed a wife but did not want one around. Grease had lost interest, if he had ever had any, after her return from her tour of duty.

Grease had always been a problem to the family. Grease bragged that he was a member of the Cabal, an organization that was supposed to be secret. It wasn't true, but once he had said it, he would never admit he was wrong. Grease would sacrifice anything to deny he lied; he would even deny the truth.

While many people considered the Cabal essential to the future of the country, certain members had corrupted the organization for their own purposes, much like congressmen had corrupted congress to maintain their positions.

Tonight his suspicions of wrong doing in the deaths of Jack Scott and Dick Brown had become concrete. He was somewhat sickened by the implications.

Robert Scott was stunned by what he had learned. Dick Brown, Hailey's first husband, had been Robert's friend. He had liked Dick in life and remembered hunting with him, joking with him, and drinking with him. Jack Scott too, his first cousin, had been Dick's partner and he had been a friend as well as a cousin. They were both dead and he had too much information to keep it secret. Too many innocent people who were still alive were affected, including Robert Scott.

Robert Scott was normally a loud and obnoxious man. He laughed loud, drank, womanized, and talked too

much. Tonight in particular, he recognized he had talked too much.

The boat jumped as the irregular waves broke under and around the boat. Scott lost his balance and banged hard against the aluminum bracing of the windscreen. He bit his tongue, and it started bleeding; his back was twisted and ached.

No other ships, no pursuit, no lights. He let the power off slightly, causing the boat to toss in the irregular seas. He stumbled, ending against one of the two antennas. The bulwarks painfully caught his weight at his knees and prevented him from tearing the antenna off and falling overboard. Recovering his balance, he shuddered. If he fell overboard, he would be nothing but shark crap by the time he reached shore.

He slowly applied more throttle and put the boat back into the waves, easing the rolling of the boat.

The warm Gulf waters fluoresced in his wake as he adjusted the throttle, trying to judge the waves to minimize the pounding shock. The sky portended the darkness and there were flashes of lightning in the distance. The Gulf of Mexico teemed with life, with fish from all over the world that came to kill and eat each other and the rich plankton that thrived in the heated waters that fed fierce weather. In places, the gulf was 14,000 feet deep. Here, however, even several miles out from the battered barrier islands, it was typically less than

one hundred feet deep. "Seven feet would be enough to drown in," a voice said in the back of his mind. Scattered artificial structures and wrecks sunk accidentally or on purpose provided life spaces for fish, as did the functioning rigs receding in the distance.

In its heyday, the gulf had produced 400,000 barrels per day of crude oil. Now, it produced less than that each month, and each barrel was subject to a tariff for the national debt.

He glanced at the gas gauge. It would not do, to run out of gas. He spit blood; the blood mixed with the water and drained into the bilge. In the bilge, it drained through holes in the spars, then under the tanks holding fuel, wetting a plastic bag taped there with a small black square covered in plastic before activating a small pump that sent the water through a half-inch tube and through a through hole mounted in the side of the boat.



*Gregory Friedlander will present at  
Words & Music 2013*

A flat mobile phone, Chinese electronics reacting to Chinese software, buzzed. "Robert Scott where have you been?" a familiar voice shouted from the other end. The tone was that of someone used to giving orders and having them followed.

"Were you afraid something would happen to me?"

"What are you talking about? Whatever you think you found out is wrong." The voice on the phone sounded angry.

Robert Scott said, "I spoke with someone you know. Lana Marc."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I cannot answer that."

"You wanted me to find her for you, to tie up more loose ends. Is that it?" The metal wheel felt cool and wet.

"You don't know anything," the sound on the phone distant, hard to hear over the engine. "Come in and talk to me. Now!"

"Don't count on it," Robert said.

"Does this mean you are not coming here tonight? You promised you would."

"I think it's gone too far to go back now."

"What did you hear?"

Robert Scott bluffed, he still only had suspicions. "I suppose you will find out when you read the paper."

There was a muffled argument, or so it seemed, through the phone. Then the voice was talking to him again. "We need to talk." The voice was harder, but worried about something.

"Who are you arguing with?" Robert asked. It was getting cooler, but Robert Scott did not want to leave the boat pitching while he went below for a coat. Robert Scott watched the compass swing around, answering his movement of the helm. A porpoise was blowing water in the distance. Lights on the horizon were the coastline.

"That is not important to you. I cannot wait." The voice on the phone was more insistent now.

The argument was getting louder; he could almost make out the other voice.

"Are you sure you won't come and talk?" Now the voice was pleading.

"It would not do any good."

"Damn you, Robert! Did you check your bilge before starting your motor?" A warning painfully extracted.

What did the warning mean? Was that a gauge beeping? He glanced down at the control panel; there were no warning lights. It sounded like a phone; the ringtone was strangely familiar, "Poker face."

The explosion could be seen from miles away. The school of porpoises, which had been swimming close by, darted away. They had time; they would come back to investigate later. The fireball rose from the fuel tanks and then slowly disappeared as it rose higher. The explosion blew out the buoyancy tanks. The boat started to sink.

The explosion wedged Robert Scott, a metal briefcase, and the steering column together with the captain's chair. The water around his legs was warmer than the air. There was a seat cushion floating nearby. He reached for it, but it was out of his reach.

Water ran toward Robert Scott's head, slowly moving up his mangled body. He remembered those who were already dead. "I am coming, Dick, your partner is coming," he made one last joke to himself.

He felt a bump against his side. The cushion had washed next to him.

He saw Dick Brown, a surveyor, his in-law, with his cousin Jack Scott. They were both dead. "Who will avenge you now?" he whispered. He thought of his wife Elle, but he could not picture her or their children. After a moment, he saw clearly his first wife standing before him. She was a little angry and disgusted as she had always been in life, but she seemed surprisingly animated for someone who had committed suicide. The Gulf absorbed the wreck, its cargo, and passenger, leaving only flotsam, as it had absorbed wrecks for thousands of years.

At a bunker on a barrier island, a yeoman nervously noted the direction and approximate location of an explosion and an unnecessary alarm was transmitted.

**"I have great faith in fools -  
self-confidence my friends  
will call it."**

**— Edgar Allan Poe,  
Marginalia**



## Recommended Reading: Love and Lament

*John Milliken Thompson* is the author of **Love and Lament** (2013) and *The Reservoir* (2011). His articles have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *Washington Post*, *Islands*, and other publications, and his short stories have been published in *Louisiana Literature*, *South Dakota Review*, and other literary journals. He holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Arkansas and lives in Charlottesville, VA.

In *Love and Lament*, a dauntless heroine coming of age at the turn of the twentieth century confronts the hazards of patriarchy and prejudice, and discovers the unexpected opportunities of World War I.

Set in rural North Carolina between the Civil War and the Great War, *Love and Lament* chronicles the hardships and misfortunes of the Hartsoe family.

Mary Bet, the youngest of nine children, was born the same year that the first railroad arrived in their county. As she matures, against the backdrop of Reconstruction and rapid industrialization, she must learn to deal with the deaths of her mother and siblings, a deaf and damaged older brother, and her father's growing insanity and rejection of God.

### Excerpt from **Love and Lament**

"You horse's ass," her grandfather was saying, "you surely don't expect me to fall for that." He was holding some cards, as were the other five men, and there was money in the middle of the table. They were drinking whiskey from glasses that sparkled like gold in the lantern light, and sometimes they'd pour more from a brown bottle. "The Devil's own medicine," her grandmother called it, though Mary Bet did not know why. She watched with fascination, not paying much attention to the talk. Then Captain Granddaddy roared, "Goddamn if I ain't the luckiest son of a bitch since Jesus met General Lee," and drew all the money toward himself with two big hands.

Mary Bet sat there feeling her face flame, waiting for the Devil to come take her grandfather away. Surely he would hear the cussing and come for his medicine—how foolish her grandfather had been. She thought it possible she herself would be turned to stone for hearing such a thing. She wanted to leave, but now she was afraid to move and sat there like a block of ice, hoping that no one, not even the Devil, would know where she was. Her head burned so, it must be close to the furnace of hell already.



"God," she prayed, a tear rolling down her cheek, "I promise never to leave my room at night."

The card dealing and wagering went on, with the piles of money growing in front of some of the men and disappearing in front of others with an unseen logic. They kept drinking and getting louder and cussing more freely, and Mary Bet grew so used to the words that they no longer bothered her. She thought the men were like big goats with their beards and something always in their mouths, whether it was cigars or chewing tobacco or whiskey, their heads up and bleating when they wanted something they didn't get. She almost laughed. Suddenly the room got very quiet.

### Reviews

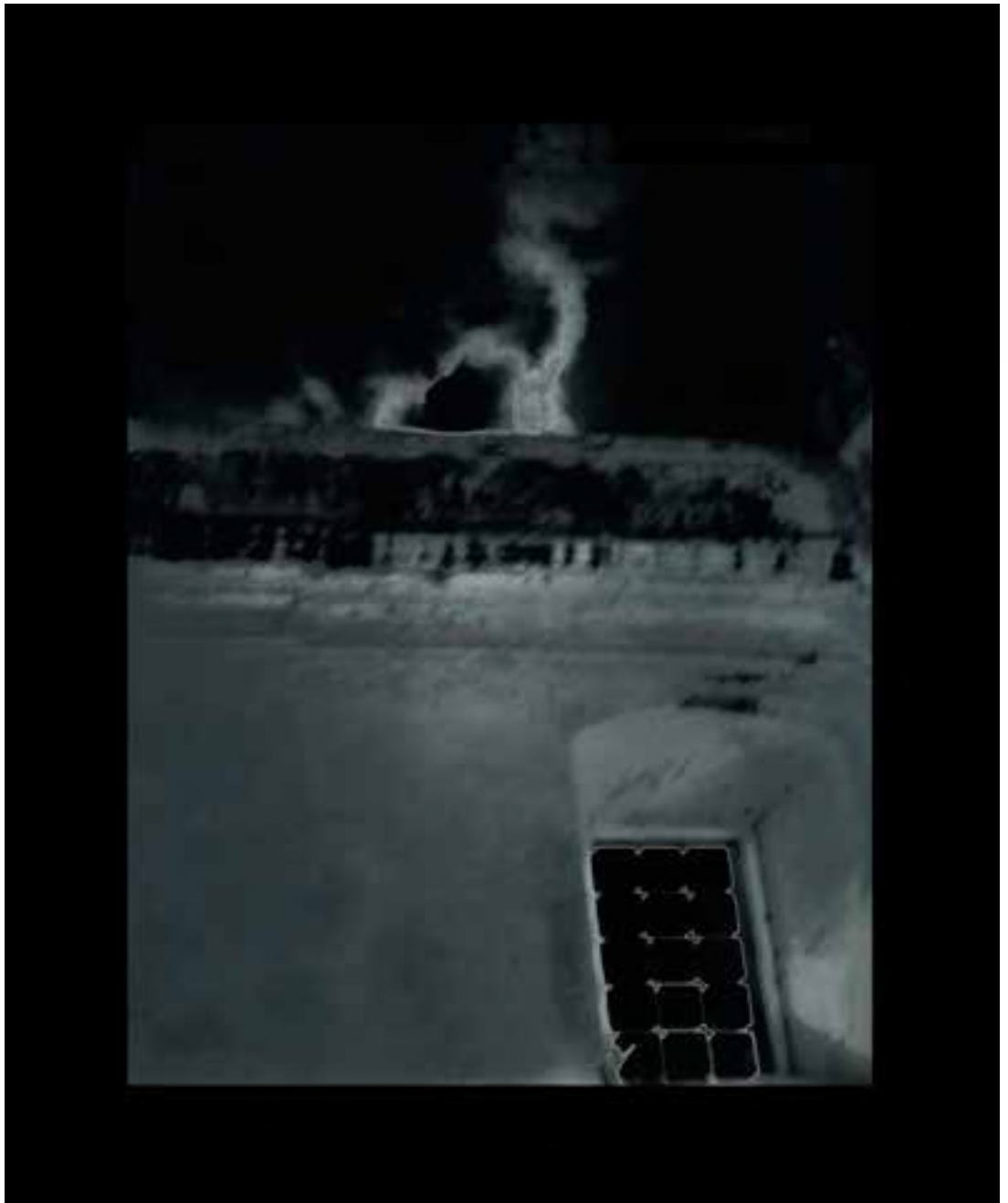
"A seamlessly told and scrupulously detailed history of the Hartsoe clan of Haw County, North Carolina, *Love and Lament* is that rare novel that brings the gritty, rural past to vivid life. I could very nearly smell the moonshine (the moonshiners too!). Pass a few hours with Mary Bet Hartsoe and family. You won't regret it." —T. R. Pearson, author of *Jerusalem Gap* and *A Short History of a Small Place*

"An appealing historical novel that blends gothic and plainly romantic themes." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Thompson perfectly captures the Carolina Piedmont's sights, sounds, and flavors and convincingly depicts the turn-of-the-century South—haunted by the Civil War, and embracing old-time religion and new-fangled machinery and ideas. Underlying and uplifting his narrative is Mary Bet's vivid point of view." —*Publishers Weekly*

# Visual Art & Drama

200 Years of Visionary Visuals  
Inspired by Louisiana, Created by  
Louisianians



*Luna Antigua, photograph by Joséphine Sacabo*

## A Unique Slant of Light (Excerpt)

by Michael Sartisky, Ph.D.

Arguably the most tangible, durable, and important artifact produced as part of the celebration of the bicentennial of Louisiana statehood in 2012 will be this history of the art of the state, from its founding as a colony in 1699 to the present day. As in so many respects in the evolution of history, the art of a period endures when the transient events, passionate issues, and mutable values and verities of the past have not. The title of this history, **A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Art in Louisiana**, is chosen to express the idiosyncratic identity of this state and its forms of artistic expression. It is commissioned by the Louisiana Bicentennial Commission chaired by General Russel Honoré.

This handsome commemorative hardcover book, featuring nearly three hundred artists, is the leading edge of a three-part project that innovatively weds a traditional print artifact to the newly emerging digital technologies in order to extend its depth and impact. The book itself, with its beautiful reproductions and catalogue of the art and artists, has been converted into a digital version to both enhance its accessibility and searchability, and is also in turn linked to fully articulated entries on each artist and genre in KnowLA: the Digital Encyclopedia of Louisiana History and Culture ([www.knowla.org](http://www.knowla.org)), the most recent project of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH). The KnowLA entries include a full biography of each selected artist and a much more elaborated image gallery of their work, bibliography, and educational resources than this book can accommodate. As a digital artifact, the book will be searchable on the Web and the KnowLA entries will further be linked to scores of feature articles on the artists published in Louisiana Cultural Vistas magazine ([www.leh.org/html/lcv.html](http://www.leh.org/html/lcv.html)), the quarterly arts and culture publication of the LEH, which itself also is digitized and accessible on the Web. A truly collective and collaborative effort, these entries are authored by dozens of notable scholars, and the images have been contributed by private collections along with major museums and archives, including, among others, The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, The Historic New Orleans Collection, the Louisiana State Museum, the LSU Museum

of Art, the Meadows Museum at Centenary College of Louisiana, The Norton Gallery of Art, and the New Orleans Museum of Art.

The ambition and underlying concept of **A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Art in Louisiana** is first and foremost to document, feature, and validate the broadest conceivable range of art and artists whose work merited notice—both renowned and obscure—across the span of Louisiana history. But in order to fully appreciate the art, the scholars and editors have made every effort to contextualize it in the framework of historical events, the artists' own lives, and the evolving styles and principles of art itself. These are catalogued across four major historical periods and six genres we felt deserved special elaboration.

### On the Edge

The often ephemeral and exotic quality of the art of Louisiana may best be grasped by an appreciation of the unique and also tenuous nature of the state's very being, both in geologic and human time. Louisiana literally rests on land inherited from the rest of the American continent and deposited in sediment layers where open water once lay by the riparian cycles of the Mississippi River. And yet, Louisiana's hold on this land is tenuous, with a mass equivalent to thirty square miles being washed away with every passing year. The land loss is accelerated by the inexorable collaboration of man and nature: the containment of the Mississippi River and its tributaries by man-made levees, dams, and other erosion-control measures upstream, channeling what sediment remains over the continental shelf. These are coupled with and exacerbated by the gradual settling and subsidence of the coastal soil; pollution and channel-cutting through the marshlands; and then, too, the rising sea levels and increasingly larger and more devastating hurricanes. It is a landscape that clings to and circles back on itself both in reality and in the imagination.

It is a unique terrain and an equally unique culture that has evolved and adapted to it. Artists both native-born and immigrant to the state have been captivated by the compelling, fragile, and elusive quality of the state and its culture. This is especially true in Southeast Louisiana and the environs of New Orleans where the inherent plainness of a deltaic terrain yields



**Michael Sartisky** is Editor in Chief of *A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Art in Louisiana*, published in 2012



a landscape that lacks vast vistas and perspectives, but rather emphasizes the shortened sightlines cut off by bends of a meandering river or bayou and the interiority enforced by the dark canopies of live oaks and their encircling limbs. Thus, it is easy to imagine the fascination by artists across several centuries with the bayous and the aqueous quality of the light suffused through the humid air. The landscape and its indigenous wildlife were literally captured and evocatively preserved for posterity by numerous artists, but few immortalized it more beautifully than the early and monumental work of John James Audubon.

From its founding as a French territory in 1699, and the formal establishment of New Orleans in 1718, through its long Spanish ownership and administration and the eventual acquisition by the Americans, Louisiana has experienced a very different political origin and range of cultural influences than the rest of the United States. Louisiana further defined itself in contradistinction to the rest of the country with the rise of *les gens de couleur libres*, or free people of color, amidst the surrounding economy supported by slavery, and the continuing cultural linkages to Haiti and France, and later by succeeding layers of immigration of Acadians, Canary Island *Isleños*, Germans, Croatians, Irish, and eventually Americans.

The earliest works of art, in the colonial period, tended to document as their subjects the ethnographic encounter with the Native Americans and the gradual exploration and establishment of the Louisiana colony. Once the colony was firmly established, the art in the antebellum period evolved toward the documentation of families and their possessions, and also the accumulation of wealth and development of the civic sphere, not to mention major historic events such as the Battle of New Orleans and its heroes, namely General Andrew Jackson. President Jackson was rendered in the powerful and idiosyncratic portrait by Jacques Guillaume Lucien Amans, painted during sittings on the occasion of the former president's visit to New Orleans in 1840.

In contrast to the largely English and classical architectural styles of colonial New England and the Atlantic coast states, the exoticism of New Orleans and many of South Louisiana's towns was derived from French and Spanish influences, and the insistent retentions of African styles vividly expressed in worked iron and pyramid roof lines. In this human-built environment, the architecture reiterates and reinforces this interiority and sense of closure, by the enclosed courtyards and narrow streets of New Orleans' Vieux Carré and the similarly constricted roads of the many towns that cling to the banks along the winding waterways of rivers and bayous.

## ***Carpe diem and laissez les bon temps roulez***

Mortality is a human reality, but never more insistent and imbedded in a culture than in Louisiana where in the early years of the eighteenth-century

colony the annual death rate approached eighty percent, begging even the terrible New England winters that halved the Pilgrim settlements. Prisoners incarcerated in the awful and notorious Bastille rioted in protest at the prospect of being released in exchange for servitude in the struggling Louisiana colony, the poorest in the French empire. Even today, the annual harvest of mostly young black men murdered in New Orleans—at a rate more than ten times the national average for homicide—casts a tangible pall over the spirit and consciousness of the city. Small wonder then that such a landscape and culture would nurture vodun and be home to Anne Rice's myths of vampires. *A carpe diem* or seize-the-day mentality underlies and informs the *laissez roulez* devotion to the present moment and all the sensual, libidinous, alcoholic, and frantic gaiety that is naturally inherent in such a place. The tenuousness of life itself can help explain the tender and lavish attention artists paid to the beauty of young women and to their own and others' families, as is evident in Jose Francisco Xavier de Salazar y Mendoza's late eighteenth-century *The Family of Dr. Joseph Montegut* and Francois Jacques Fleischbein's *Portrait of Betsy*, or Jacques Guillaume Lucien Amans' *Creole in Red Headdress*, or the endearing portraits by George David Coulon.

Among the pivotal issues addressed in our contextualization of the art of Louisiana is the advent of the daguerreotype and photography prior to the Civil War, a medium that reached its maturation in the decades following. This new genre played a significant role in not only providing a technology capable of inexpensively documenting subjects and scenes previously the private province of painters, but in turn photography compelled painters to pursue new styles and eventually an entirely new aesthetic.

Following the Civil War and the defeat of the South, the "natural order" of things and the economic system founded on slavery was overturned and all the attendant economic, political, social, and even psychological disturbances that ensue from such a transformational event were in evidence nowhere more clearly than in the art of the period. Thus was generated a remarkable body of work, especially in the rendering of the Louisiana landscape, that evaded the trauma of the historical moment in glorious idealizations of Louisiana's unique and exotic landscape. Richard Clague, Jr., and his disciples in the Bayou School, such as William Henry Buck, and Joseph Rusling Meeker, among others, left a legacy of exceptional and distinctive beauty.

## **Modernity Approaches**

As the twentieth-century beckoned, the art of Louisiana was already beginning to evolve toward modernity under the dual influence of international styles of art and an increasing involvement of the United States in the affairs of the world, in eventually what was dubbed the American Century. The signal and transformational role of the Woodward brothers, William and Ellsworth,

at the turn of the century and well into it, would have been remarkable for any artistic community in the world. Similarly, the increasing cultural magnet of the bohemian French Quarter would inform the quality and aesthetic not only of the art its denizens produced, but of the character of the city of New Orleans as the world would conceive of it for the next century. Perhaps the most unlikely source of artistic transformation was occasioned by the relentless chauvinism and artistic patronage of Governor Huey Pierce Long, whose new State Capitol building became the embodiment of the aesthetic power of the moment, demonstrating in literally monumental ways the power of art to embody a culture, a people, and a place. In an enduring counterpoint to the power and glory assembled in Baton Rouge, itself in the shadow of the burgeoning petro-chemical corridor, such artists as Clementine Hunter created her own body of monumental work in such locales as the gentler and more rural environs of Cane River.

For all the accomplishment of the previous periods, the last half-century has seen a burgeoning of the number of artists in unprecedented numbers. The catalogue of artists for this period dramatically overshadows in sheer numbers the others combined. No doubt the future will sort out their ultimate influence and importance, as we ourselves have those of preceding centuries, but for now their work is vital and expressive of the times. Our idiosyncratic Louisiana culture is powerfully expressed in the work of native-born sons as diverse as Francis Pavy, who imbeds his works with iconic images and symbols from the French parishes, and John Scott, known for his churning woodcuts of street scenes and whose work also thrums to the rhythmic plucked tones of the African diddly-bow, a visual referent in so many of his kinetic sculptures. The graceful and soaring sculptures of Lin Emery have transcended Louisiana itself and now populate and influence the art of the world. There is so much more to Louisiana culture and geography and the forms of its expression, but one cannot close without mentioning that in the open grassy plains and *cheniers* of Southwest Louisiana, a different dimension of Louisiana is to be found; no artist captures this landscape more eloquently than Elemore Morgan, Jr., with his wide *plein air* paintings that compel the eye off into the peripheries. In truth, the times have indeed changed. In contrast to the late nineteenth century, contemporary artists look to the tragedies of the moment to inform their work, much as Australian transplant Simon Gunning has accomplished with his rendering of the iconic blue bridge reaching into the Lower Ninth Ward following the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

Louisiana is barely part of the continent to which it adheres, but its art—spanning the two centuries of its admission into the Union, and the preceding century of colonization—both captures and transcends its moment. The full panoply of this work is an unprecedented wonder to behold, and seen in a truly unique slant of light.

**Michael Sartisky, PhD**, has been President and Executive Director of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities for the past thirty years. During this period the LEH has raised its annual operating budget from \$400,000 to \$4.5 million and awarded funds for more than 3,500 grants and projects totaling in excess of \$65 million to organizations and institutions that foster the humanities in Louisiana. Sartisky has served as a Trustee for Sarah Lawrence College, a member of Louisiana's Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee, and as Acting-Executive Director of the California Council for the Humanities. He has been a grant panelist for the NEH and the U.S. Department of Education and currently serves on the Louisiana Folklife Commission and the Planning Committee of the \$900 million Louisiana Educational Quality Trust Fund. Sartisky three times has won the Ashton Phelps Memorial Award for Editorial Writing as well as six first and second place awards for editorial writing from the New Orleans Press Club. He is the founding editor of the award-winning quarterly magazine Louisiana Cultural Vistas and Editor in Chief of KnowLA, The Digital Encyclopedia of Louisiana. He is Editor in Chief of *A Unique Slant of Light: The Bicentennial History of Art in Louisiana*, published in 2012. His interviews with major writers such as Ernest Gaines, Robert Olen Butler, Richard Ford, and Rick Bragg have been included in collections published by Oxford University Press and the University Press of Mississippi. His critical afterword to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's novel *Doctor Zay* was published by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and raised in New York City, Michael Sartisky attended public schools, graduating from the Bronx High School of Science and from Sarah Lawrence College. His MA and PhD in English were awarded by the State University of New York at Buffalo.

“Each one prays to God according to his own light.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

## Words & Art: The Other Side of the Painting By Wendy Rodrigue

By Caroline Rash



Wendy Rodrigue in the Blue Dog Gallery

**The Other Side of the Painting** is a collection of essays by writer **Wendy Rodrigue**, wife and muse of internationally famous artist **George Rodrigue** and former gallery manager for the New Orleans- and California-based artist. In the collection, born of her popular blog dating back to 2009, Wendy Rodrigue lovingly and intelligently illuminates her husband's artwork, from his highly collectible paintings of South Louisiana scenes and the Acadian lifestyle to his Blue Dog phenomenon body of work, including *Jolie Blonde* with, of course, Blue Dog.

Wendy Rodrigue studied Art History at Tulane University before moving to New Orleans and going to work in George Rodrigue's galleries.

Wendy grew up in Ft. Walton Beach, FL, where her father was stationed at Eglin Air Force Base. She was graduated from Trinity University in San Antonio with degrees in Art History and English, followed by graduate studies at Tulane University and one year at the American University in Vienna, Austria. In 1991, Rodrigue joined the staff of the Rodrigue Gallery in New Orleans and moved later that year to Carmel, California, where she managed George Rodrigue's gallery there for six years.

Along the way, George and Wendy fell in love.

They were married in 1997  
Today, between her formal education, art and personal connections, she guides the reader through museums and galleries like an old friend. Her reflections on art—works of both her husbands and others—are expert, witty and deeply personal.

"Throughout this book she makes dead-on allusions to Robert Motherwell, de Koonig, Warhol and Donald Judd as if she were naming Baskin Robbins flavors. Her citations of such writers as Alexander Pope and Virginia Woolf (and even John Kennedy Toole) blend seamlessly with her own words, reflecting a scholar's quiet storehouse of sharp ideas," says New Orleans author Patty Friedmann, who wrote the introduction o the book.

A terrific blend of criticism and memoir, **The Other Side of the Painting** is a rare and earnest exploration of an artist by the woman who knows him best.

### "What's With The Blue Dog?"

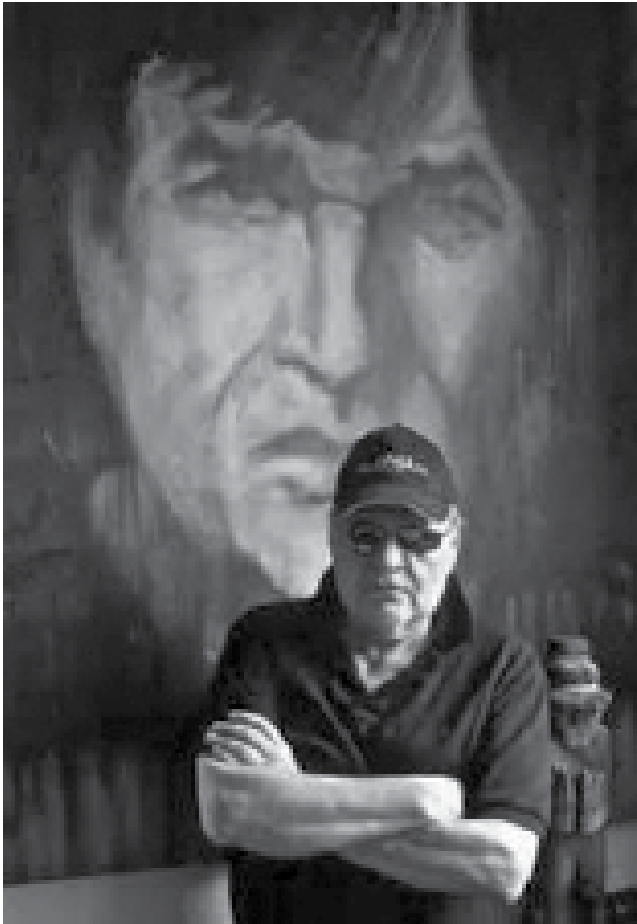
"Imagine if you each had a piece of paper and a crayon, and I asked you to draw the bogeyman. What would you draw?"



Jolie Blonde, Wendy Rodrigue,  
the muse.

This is how Wendy Rodrigue begins explaining George Rodrigue's ubiquitous **Blue Dog** character. At first look, of course, the Pop art dog does not suggest anything dark, but its eager face peering out from the





*Portrait of an Artist, George Rodrigue*

gallery window at French Quarter visitors belies its beginnings.

Blue Dog (not identified as such at the time) was “born” in the 1984 collection of ghost stories **Bayou** (Inkwell Press). In 1980 a Baton Rouge investment group approached George Rodrigue for help in creating the book of Louisiana ghost stories to be sold at the 1984 World’s Fair in New Orleans. One story, *Slaughter House*, featured an evil dog.

The evil dog sparked memories of Louisiana-born Rodrigue’s mother telling him a childhood story about the *loup-garou*, a crazy wolf or ghost dog that lurked in cemeteries or sugar cane fields.

When Rodrigue sat down to paint the *loup-garou*, he painted its eyes red, though they evolved to present-day yellow, and tinted the dog’s fur blue in the painting’s moonlight.

While Rodrigue continued his Acadian paintings, he was haunted by the strong figure of the dog and began incorporating it into more paintings. Finally, at a Los Angeles gallery opening in 1988, Rodrigue first heard the *loup-garou* referred to as “The Blue Dog.” He had not realized people saw the character that way.

The Blue Dog began the “most exciting” period of George Rodrigue’s career, according to his wife. It freed

him from the tight brushstrokes and long explanations of his Acadiana paintings.

Despite the fact that he used a photo of his deceased dog Tiffany to inform the Blue Dog’s posture, the Blue Dog is not about Tiffany or dogs. “According to Wendy and George, “It is an exploration of “shapes, colors, designs and texture.” The deeper meaning remains ambiguous and evolving.

And, meantime, Blue Dog reigns!

Even his Acadiana paintings today are most often graced with a Tiffany-inspired image in blue.

## What Others Are Saying:

*Wendy Rodrigue has the soul of an artist and the pen of a writer. She writes with honesty, humor, emotion and love of life and art. Her book is a meditation on both.*

—Debra Shriver, author, **Stealing Magnolias: Tales from a New Orleans Courtyard** and Vice President of Hearst Corporation.

*Rodrigue’s aim for the heartstrings and the funny bone is what makes this book so engaging. An unpretentious book about art—who’d have ever thought?*

—Tabitha Soren, journalist and photographer

“In chapters like “Rodrigue on Monet,” in which Wendy captures her husband’s ability to reach deeper into works like Monet’s *Water Lilies* using his artist’s eye to grasp the full extent of the artist’s achievement and interpret it for his wife, *The Other Side of the Painting* becomes as much an art history textbook as a memoir. Wendy learns from George; we learn from Wendy: The circle is complete.”

—Country Roads magazine

“Wendy Rodrigue’s *The Other Side of the Painting* is a tell-all book—but not of the salacious tabloid-by-the-grocery-store-checkout variety of tell-all books. She does share intimate facts about her famous husband—but what she reveals are his, and her own, thoughts and feelings about art and life.

—Inside Northside magazine

**For more information, Wendy’s blog *Musings of an Artist’s Wife* can be found at [wendyrodrigue.com](http://wendyrodrigue.com).**

**For more on George Rodrigue and his work, visit: [GeorgeRodrigue.com](http://GeorgeRodrigue.com).**

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## Recommended Reading

### **An Artful Feast:**

### **An Elegant Lifestyle for Dining**

This lovely new coffee table book features the the recipes and art collection of Dr. Nia Terisakis.

## **DRAMA: Fishers of Men Walking the Streets of The Big Easy, Keeping the Peace**

*(Editor's Note: Hal Clark has been a member of the Faulkner Society's Advisory Council for some years now and has been several times a finalist in the Faulker – Wisdom Competition with his novels. Recently, he has turned his writing to drama and his most recent play, Fishers of Men, is a highlight of the Words & Music, 2013 program of special events. Fishers of Men has had several highly successful runs, with nightly sell-outs in New Orleans and Baton Rouge.*

### **By Harold Ellis Clark**

As host and producer of a long-running public affairs radio show, **WYLD-FM's Sunday Journal with Hal Clark**, I often interview individuals and groups who perform outstanding yet unknown work as it relates to reducing some of the social ills that contribute to violence on the streets of metro New Orleans. One particular group, the *New Orleans Peacekeepers*, personally invited me to join them for their weekly "hour of power".

During these strolls through some of the most extreme of the violence-plagued areas of the city, members of the organization provide information to total strangers about job opportunities, getting criminal records expunged, and counseling services. The group also operates a telephone hotline for individuals to call if they are interested in peacefully settling a dispute with someone else instead of reacting violently. I accepted the invitation.

The Peacekeepers, comprised of African-American men from various religious and educational backgrounds, impressed me with the manner in which they peacefully approached these total strangers. Initially, the men listened to the individuals they were attempting to serve in an effort to learn of a given person's needs instead of saying what they believed would help solve or alleviate a person's challenge.

To my surprise, the persons being served appeared to appreciate the fact that these men took the time to just simply listen to them, and none of the men used the opportunity to espouse any kind of religious doctrine to these individuals. My one-time trial session turned into nearly six months of walking through these neighborhoods with the Peacekeepers. In addition to talking about their troubles, the people we served expressed their dreams and hopes for a better future.

Some murders committed in New Orleans, and, I imagine, most other big cities, are retaliatory in nature. That aspect of violent crime, the work of the Peacekeepers and other similar groups, and my daily



*Harold Ellis "Hal" Clark*

recitation of two verses from the **Amplified Bible**, namely *Philippians 4: 4-7* and *Hebrews 13: 5-6*, all inspired my play, **Fishers of Men**.

The main character, *Bishop James Perriloux*, pastors a mega-church. As an ex-con and former pimp, he knows first hand about redemption and what happens on the mean streets of New Orleans. He's a charismatic preacher who never really "preaches." My father pastors a small church in rural Louisiana, and over the years I had heard interesting stories about some of his fellow ministers. Despite some of these men's personal failings, they never wavered in their desire to use their faith and influence to better the human condition. I developed Perriloux based on some of these role models.

Similarly, his chief deacon, *Job Jackson*, knows about redemption as well. He's been out of prison for six years after having served several decades for murdering two men. *Deacon Job* mainly leads other men from the church during late night excursions to rescue lost souls.

The characters *Vic* and *Dabarrow* represent the two individuals *Bishop Perriloux* and *Deacon Job* attempt to rescue. Playing on the earlier mentioned fact that several of the murders committed each year are retaliatory in nature, I purposely crafted an act of violence which ties *Vic* and *Dabarrow* together, giving them an opportunity to decide if this situation will end violently or peacefully.

My principal desire with this play is that it will showcase the truth that most people simply want to improve their lives and those of the persons they love, regardless of their backgrounds, and the unfortunate

# HAL CLARK: *Fishers of Men*

circumstances they get caught up in, which sometimes lead to criminal activity, deep down, most are just seeking a better life and when they seek redemption, regardless of who we are, we must give them a helping hand out of troubled waters and into salvation.

We must remember the admonition of Christ, *let he who is without sin cast the first stone.*

At some point, most of us will need redemption, too.

**Harold Ellis Clark**, author of the award-winning 2012 play, *Fishers of Men*, is a finalist in Playhouse on the Square's (Memphis, TN's resident, professional theatre) New Works@The Works Playwriting Competition for his latest play, *We Live Here*. A staged reading is scheduled for December 1, 2013 in Memphis, TN. He was honored for his play, *Tour Detour*, on March 18, 2013 as one of two finalists for the 56<sup>th</sup>

Annual Stanley Drama Award at *The Players in Manhattan, NY*. He was a finalist for *Tour Detour* in Stage West's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual (2013) Southwest Playwriting Competition, and a semi-finalist (*Tour Detour*) for the 2013 Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. Clark's screenplay, ***Chummy's Spirit*** (adapted from his 2006 novel of the same name), was named an official selection for the 2013 International Family Film Festival in Hollywood, CA. Clark wrote numerous unpublished novels and unproduced screenplays for more than 18 years before turning to playwriting in 2010 at the suggestion of veteran actor Lance E. Nichols ("*Larry Williams*" in HBO's *Treme*). His first play, ***Marrero Action***, debuted March 2011 in New Orleans at the Anthony Bean Community Theater. He adapted it from his novel for which he was named a finalist for the 2007 ***William Faulkner-William Wisdom Prize***.



**Fishers of Men group photo. The play will be one of the highlights of Words & Music, 2013.**



*William Faulkner – William Wisdom Creative  
Writing Competition, 2013*

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The photographic art image, **The Offering**, was donated by Joséphine Sacabo for auction at **Juleps in June, 2013** to benefit literacy and literary projects of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society.

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*Judith “Jude” Swenson  
Chair, Competition Fundraising*

It's people who make our competition a success, starting with **Jude Swenson**, who for several years has helped ensure the competition by sponsoring the big ticket Novel Prize and then button-holing others to support the prize fund. It's other sponsors like **Bertie Deming Smith**, **Theodosia Nolan**, **Rosemary James & Joe DeSalvo**, the **Mary Freeman Wisdom Foundation**, **David Speights**, **Nancy & Hartwig Moss, III**. And, then, it's you, you writers who entered the competition.

## Meet the Judges



**Deborah Grosvenor** has worked in book publishing for more than 20 years as an editor and literary agent. Her best-known acquisition as an editor was a first novel, **The Hunt for Red October** by Tom Clancy. Deborah also signed up the debut work of bestselling author Homer Hickham, **Torpedo Junction**, and helped launch bestselling author Stephen Coonts's first novel, **Flight of the Intruder**. In January, 2011, Deborah re-established her own firm, the Grosvenor Literary Agency.



**Lisa Zeidner** is the author of five novels, most recently **Love Bomb** (Farrar Straus Giroux). Her other novels are **Customs**, **Alexander Freed**, **Limited Partnerships** and **Layover**, which is in development in a film and has been translated into six languages. Her fiction, poetry, essays, and reviews have appeared in *GQ*, *Mademoiselle*, *The New York Times*, *Boulevard*, *Poetry*, & *The Washington Post*. She founded the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Rutgers University.



**Jeff Kleinman** is a literary agent, intellectual property attorney, and founding partner of Folio Literary Management, LLC, a New York literary agency which works with all of the major U.S. publishers (and, through subagents) with most international publishers. He's a graduate of Case Western Reserve University (J.D.), the University of Chicago (M.A., Italian), and the University of Virginia (B.A. with High Distinction in English).



**April Eberhardt**, after 25 years as a corporate strategist and consultant, joined the literary world as head reader for *Zoetrope: All-Story*, a literary magazine, followed by five years as an agent with two San Francisco-based literary agencies. She holds an MBA from Boston University in Marketing and Finance, a BA from Hamilton (Kirkland) College in Anthropology and French, and a CPLF degree from the University of Paris.



**Ron Rash** is the author of **THE COVE** and of the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Finalist and New York Times bestselling novel, **SERENA**, in addition to three other prizewinning novels, **ONE FOOT IN EDEN**, **SAINTS AT THE RIVER**, and **THE WORLD MADE STRAIGHT**; three collections of poems; and four collections of stories, among them **BURNING BRIGHT**, which won the 2010 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. He teaches at Western Carolina University.



**Roy Blount Jr.**, whose latest book is **Alphabet Juice**, has had 22 other books published, including **Alphabet Juice**, **If Only You Knew How Much I Smell You: True Portraits of Dogs** and **Be Sweet**, a memoir. His other recent books include two collections of essays, **Feet on the Street: Rambles Around New Orleans** and **Long Time Leaving: Dispatches from Up South** and an especially inspired biography of Confederate general, **Robert E. Lee**.



**Beth Ann Fennelly** directs the MFA Program at Ole Miss where she was named the 2011 Outstanding Liberal Arts Teacher of the Year. Her work has three times been included in **The Best American Poetry**. Her first book, **Open House**, won The 2001 *Kenyon Review* Prize, the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award, and was a Book Sense Top Ten Poetry Pick. Her second book, **Tender Hooks**, and her third, **Unmentionables**, were published by W. W. Norton in 2004 and 2008.



**Tom Carson**, author of the new novel **Daisy Buchanan's Daughter**, also is the author of **Gilligan's Wake**, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year for 2003. Currently *GQ*'s "The Critic," he won two National Magazine Awards for criticism as *Esquire* magazine's "Screen" columnist and has been nominated two more times since then. He also won the CRMA criticism award for his book reviews in Los Angeles magazine. *Village Voice*.



July 4, 2010

Miranda

Live Extraction

Miranda was dressed for the firing range an hour before Tucker was scheduled to pick her up. He was always early. He has taken her with his team several times now, teaching her to fire a series of increasingly powerful arms. She began with a pistol and an AK-47, and worked her way up to an M16 and another massive rifle with a recoil so powerful she had to fire it lying on her belly. Miranda was not a gun enthusiast, nor did she get any kind of macho kick from wielding deadly machinery. She went to the range at first because Tucker had asked her and she was grateful. In the first year, so few people from the Embassy had asked her to do so much as have a cup of tea. They were polite when she was with Finn, but when she wasn't they looked straight through her. Whether this was because she was American, bisexual, an artist, or simply an outsider she had no way of knowing.

Tucker was different. True, it was his job to protect her and Finn. But it wasn't his job to befriend and entertain her. This was something he did of his own free will, and Miranda loved him for it. She would have loved him anyway, for the simple fact that he kept Finn safe from harm. Both he and his wife Paige had spent their entire careers in the armed forces, only managing to spend about half of their time in the same country. At the moment, Paige was in Iraq, and Tucker worked tirelessly so as not to feel her absence so acutely. In his rare off hours, he worked just as tirelessly keeping up morale. He was always the first on the dance floor at a party, usually in a wig and mini-skirt. Men in the armed forces, it hadn't taken long for Miranda to learn, were the most likely to cross-dress.

Today's visit to the range was not optional. The CP team was going to try a "live extraction," a series of maneuvers they would perform in the event of an attack on Finn or Miranda, in order to extract them from danger and get them to safety.

"You might want knee pads," Tucker said when she opened the door. "I'm afraid we're going to rough you up a bit."

When she climbed down from the car an hour



*Jennifer Steil*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Novel



## The Ambassador's Wife

pictures were stapled onto sheets of plywood propped up in front of a vast sand bank, which absorbed the bullets after they passed through the targets.

Tucker put his men through a pistol drill with their Sig Sauers, blowing a whistle and shouting out, "Shemal!" or "Yemeen!" (Left! Or Right!) or "Khowl!" (Behind!) In response the men cried out, "Ado Shemal!" (Enemy Left!) or "Ado Yemeen!" (Enemy Right!) and fired.

After each drill, the men sprinted to the targets to watch Tucker count and chalk the number of bullet holes that would have killed the enemy—those that hit either

later, she gazed around her feeling—as always—like a visitor to another planet. Planet Men. Planet Guns. Bruise-colored mountains curved around them like a theatrical backdrop. The skies were the postcard-blue of the dry season, the sun having slurped up the last of the clouds. In front of her stretched an empty expanse of sand and dirt, heat rising from it in waves. No life in sight; no plants, no trees, no animals, no humans. This was the range. "You could close your eyes here, and open them in Kabul, and it would look exactly the same," said Tucker. It sometimes seemed to Miranda that she was the only person in the country who hadn't been to Afghanistan or Iraq. Even Finn had been posted to both places, though he wouldn't say much about his work there. The way the men talked about the dangers, the wild parties, and their cramped pods all in the same breath made Miranda feel she had missed out on something life-altering. She envied the bond among those who had survived. And there was something else, something Finn hadn't yet told her. Something had happened in Afghanistan. Something he believed had the power to change things between them. All of her reassurances, her insistence, and even her downright begging had failed to convince him to share this mysterious burden.

While they waited for Finn to arrive from the Embassy, the team scurried around setting up a long row of targets, black-and-white prints of a generic enemy with a dramatic 5 o'clock shadow and a more than passing resemblance to Richard Nixon, crouched over his gun and glaring from under his helmet. The

*This topical novel tells the story of a kidnapping of an American woman, wife of the British Ambassador, in a fictional Middle Eastern country. The author clearly knows her setting and characters well, skillfully interweaving the story of her protagonist's captivity with the story of her marriage, at the same time illuminating the shadowy world of terrorism. The Ambassador's Wife succeeds in combining a character-driven, richly textured story with the elements of a thriller, a rare feat indeed. —Deborah Grosvenor*

the center of his body or his head. Most of the team could kill the enemy 23 out of 26 times. Mukhtar and Yusef were the best, but even tubby little Bashir was a pretty good shot. It gave Miranda confidence that they might actually be able to nail a terrorist targeting Finn—if they saw him first.

When it was her turn, Mukhtar helped her to load the magazine and handed her a Sig. It felt light in her hands; a machine capable of a baker's dozen murders in the space of a few seconds should have more heft. She fired six rounds, her heartbeat swooshings in her ears, hitting the target with about every third shot. Her aim was worse with the AK-47. Her first shot not only missed the target entirely *and* the board it was stapled to, but also missed the entire sandbank, sailing up into the sky behind it.

"What's behind there?" worried Miranda.

"I don't know, but whatever it was is dead."

Mukhtar grinned at her.

"Want to try it on automatic?" asked Tucker.

No, thought Miranda. *I really don't*. But she nodded and allowed Tucker to shift the appropriate lever. It took nearly all of her strength to hold the gun steady as it sprayed bullets; it was like trying to hold a jumping rabbit. A hot, homicidal, steel rabbit. The movies made it look way too easy, she thought. The targets remained unscathed.

"*Ana mish tammam!*" (I'm not good!), she cried.

The men rushed to reassure her. "*La! Antee tammam,*" said Mukhtar. "You could kill someone!"

"Wouldn't want to meet you in a dark alley."

Finn's car had pulled up while she was firing, and he was standing in his pinstriped suit at the back of the range. Her earphones had muffled the sound of his arrival.

"You'd be fine in a dark alley," said Miranda, lowering her weapon. "I couldn't sight for shit in the dark." Damn. She'd managed to swear in front of the team again. She wasn't sure how much of it they understood, but she had been trying to avoid shocking them more than she already did on a daily basis. Thankfully, the men were all busy loading their weapons or rolling old tires onto the

range to create an obstacle course. Miranda handed her gun to Mukhtar and took Finn behind the car to give him a pair of his jeans and a work shirt.

The new guys and Bashir (who had arrived with Finn looking awfully smart in one of the new suits and ties Tucker bought for the men. They had to blend at diplomatic events, after all) clambered up a rocky mountainside for a better view.

It worked like this: Finn began striding through the obstacle course the men had erected—his bodyguard glued to him—as if he were heading to a meeting. One man was always assigned to be immediately beside him (putting the "close" into "close protection,") while the rest positioned themselves strategically ahead and behind. The tires represented bushes, stumps or trash bins behind which Finn could hide. Probably bushes would be too porous. But anyway. Six of the guys were spread out, three on either side, alert for threats. Their elbows jutted stiffly out at their sides as they swung their heads left and right. They reminded Miranda of a cluck of wary chickens prowling a farmyard. Bashir beckoned to her and Miranda clambered up the rocks to the ridge overlooking the range. "Nice suit," she said to Bashir. He smiled, turning toward her so she could see her face reflected in his mirrored sunglasses.

A whistle blew, signifying enemy fire. Yusef, operating as Finn's bodyguard, grabbed Finn around his waist, arresting him mid-stride, and shoved him down into the dirt behind one of the tires. Then, yanking Finn up by his belt, he propelled him forward, running him through the gunfire to the next hiding place. Finn's legs cycled through the air at the end of Yusef's arm like a marionette pantomiming a sprint. All the while, Tucker's team was shooting live bullets at the "enemy," covering Finn and Yusef, while backing away. Their goal was to allow Finn to be safely extracted, rather than to chase the enemy. Miranda could see Yusef shouting in Finn's ear, but the gunfire made it impossible to hear anything. Even from the ridge it made her ears ring.

Miranda watched as Yusef shoved Finn into the dirt again. She worried about his glasses. Her eyesight blurred for a moment and she realized her knees were trembling. Yusef yelled at Finn as he hauled him up again. Was it the manhandling of the person she cared most about in the world that brought up the waves of nausea? The fact that live bullets were flying around him out here in the desert? Or the reminder that this wasn't just playacting, that Finn could actually face such an attack? *I will not cry in front of the men*, she willed herself. *I will not cry in front of the men*.

"The guys have to get used to being rough with him if the situation calls for it," Tucker said when the exercise was over. "Being too respectful in a situation like this could get him killed."

Miranda nodded and tried to smile. Finn strolled toward her, flushed and smiling, his forehead slick with sweat and his trousers streaked with dirt. "You survived," said Miranda weakly.

"Sorry!" Finn squeezed her sweating hand.

# 2013 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

“Okay Madame Ambassador, your turn.” Tucker tucked a hand under her elbow and steered her down the slope. “Let’s show the guys how to treat a woman.”

Miranda walked with him down to the course, where he turned her over to Mukhtar. Her legs felt strong again and she wasn’t afraid. Only things utterly beyond her influence terrified her. Keeping Finn safe, for example. She never feared for her own safety; her own safety felt more within her control.

A wave of euphoria struck as she walked alongside Mukhtar into the imminent ambush. She felt a temptation to laugh. “Walk faster,” said Mukhtar. “More purposefully. You’re strolling.” She quickened her pace. Where might she be rushing? To a meeting of the Heads of Mission Spouses Association? The thought of any of the designer-suited ambassadors’ wives waddling at speed made her want to laugh again. No one except Finn ever walked quickly and purposefully in this country.

The whistle shocked her from her reverie. Explosions erupted in every direction, the men opening fire. Miranda suddenly forgot everything she was supposed to do. “Get DOWN!” shouted Mukhtar, pushing her into the dirt behind the first tire. He held her to the ground with a hand on the middle of her back while she breathed iron-tasting dirt into her mouth. While watching Finn, she had imagined how she would do it when it was her turn, how fast she would run, how she would throw herself into the dirt. But now there was no time for her slow responses. All she could do—and all she was intended to do—was to blindly submit. Not something with which she had much practice.

A few seconds later she was dragged up by the waistband of her trousers and shoved in the direction of the next tire. Mukhtar’s mouth was next to her ear, shouting “MOVE, MOVE, MOVE!” But she couldn’t make her legs pedal forward fast enough to keep pace. It was like running in a dream, where her legs became heavy or diffuse, unable to propel the body forward. The next time she hit the dirt her knee struck a sharp rock. She felt the indent it made in her skin but couldn’t register the pain. As they sprinted for the last tire, a muscle in the back of her right thigh gave a twang of protest. Yoga and swimming were apparently poor preparation for the rigors of dodging terrorist fire.

By the time she and Mukhtar reached the end of the course Miranda was suffused with adrenaline. She smiled at Finn as he trotted toward her, holding his camera aloft. “I got photos!” he said. “You were fantastic.” Miranda limped beside him to the car. “Nothing but glamour, the life of an ambassador’s wife.”

An hour later as they rode back to the residence in their armored car, Miranda’s mood tumbled down around her like a house of cards. Like coming off of a drug. Discreetly squeezing Finn’s hand on the seat beside her, she found herself fighting back tears again.

“You were good with that Sig Sauer,” said Finn. “I’m thinking about putting you on the team.”

Miranda smiled, not at him but out the window at the endless beige horizon, so he couldn’t see her eyes.

“Well at least if you’re attacked and someone drops a pistol, I know what to do with it,” she said at last.

“Let’s hope I have a clumsy abductor.”

“And that he has a Sig. Otherwise, we’re fucked.”

**Jennifer Steil** is author of *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, An American Woman’s Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth*. Published by Broadway Books/Random House), it is a memoir of the year she spent as editor of the Yemen Observer newspaper in Sana’a. The book received accolades in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* chose it as one of their best travel books of 2010, and *Elle* magazine awarded it their Readers’ Prize. It has been published in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, and Poland. Jennifer is now completing her first novel. While she currently works as a writer and freelance journalist, theatre was her first love. She completed a bachelor’s degree in theatre at Oberlin College before working for four years as a professional actor in Seattle. During this time, she became increasingly frustrated with the limited roles available to women and the dearth of female voices in the theatre world at large. Without abandoning theatre, she began dedicating more time to her writing, eventually completing an MFA in fiction at Sarah Lawrence College and a second master’s degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Since 1997, she has worked as a reporter, writer, and editor for newspapers and magazines in the US and abroad. Recent work includes a long piece on Yemen in the *World Policy Journal*, a Yemen piece for the German paper *Die Welt*, and several London stories for the *Washington Times*. After spending four years in Yemen and two years in London, she has relocated to La Paz, Bolivia, where she is living with her husband and young daughter.



The novel prize is sponsored by Judith “Jude” Swenson, in memory of her husband Jim Swenson.





## Elizabeth Sanders 2013 Novel Runner-Up



### Feux de Joie

Someone is singing Silent Night.

Same damn thing every year.

This is the last year, Walter promises himself. The last damn year he comes to this place. He's been saying this for the past twenty. He saws a wedge in a willow log, fits a smaller piece into its cut groove. He pauses to zip his fleece, pull down his camouflage hat. In the distance, passing somewhere north of them, a rusty freight train fumbles towards the smoke-billowing chimneys of petrochemical plants.

When Walter Doucet was young, six or seven, he remembers asking Dad, "What's the point of spending so much time building something, just to burn it down?"

"You just," Dad replied. The grinding saw said the rest.

Forty-seven years later, Dad a year gone, and Walter is still hammering together a wooden teepee on the levee across from his grandparents' empty house in Vacherie, Louisiana.

All along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, fires are lit. Feux de Joie, it's called. The fires guide the ghosts of midnight travelers down the river to mass. They light the way for Papa Noel and his gators in this swampy pit of Earth, Gaston, Tiboy, Pierre, Alcee--

Walter is handed another cut log to fit in the pyre.

"You heard from him," a cousin asks.

"Not yet," Walter says.

Cousins, nephews, friends of the family, mostly men, work to gather good wood, find the best fillers.

Officially, the wood is found from the first day after Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve morning, when the men go out just after dawn and begin to build their pyre.

Unofficially, Walter gathers one item a little earlier than that. Palm Sunday. Dried palm fronds make excellent fire fuel, better than newspaper. He attends three services that day, filling his trunk each time. They are his symbol of victory and triumph. Preemptive? Usually.

"What's he doing?" another cousin asks.

"Not sure," Walter says. He watches the road for his brother's sports car.

Yesterday afternoon was the last time he heard from Collins. Walter hadn't picked up the call. Collins hadn't left a message.

"Maybe this year it's just one," says Tut, his second cousin with a round face and a confidently-shaped beard. He pats Walter on the shoulder.

When Walter was seventeen and Collins twenty-one, the bonfire torch was passed down from Dad and Uncle Wilvin. A fight broke out and one fire became two competing fires. Dad sided with Collins; Uncle Wilvin with Walter.

The rules are simple. The wood has to be found. Nothing in the ground can be uprooted for the sole purpose of burning it. Money is arbitrary. Man-made material, forbidden.

"Get me a beer, will ya?" Walter says.

He checks his phone. No messages. He starts in on another willow log. Slowly his pyre is taking shape.

Building a bonfire seems easy. Good fire wood, solid pyre.

The wood needs to be dry. It should burn evenly without any sparks and little smoke. Ideally it will burn for a long time, what's known as strong "coaling qualities" or oxidation rates.

But as with any element, control is not the word for what is obtained.

Large boys in hunting fleece and scruffy faces haul loads from the back of pickup trucks. A small group of men gather on the levee, camping out on orange coolers. Collins' crew.

One of them mouths to Walter, "Where is he?" and points to his watch.

Walter shrugs. Collins is late. No surprise there.

When the men aren't looking, Walter checks his phone again, no messages. He goes to dial Collins' number but stops. He puts the phone back in his pocket.

As Grandpaw used to say, "You can't put out water with fire."

In Western medicine, the kidney is the key to homeostatic function. The body's reabsorption. It's secretion. Selective retention. Elimination.

As a nephrologist at Touro Hospital, Walter is needed when the body, for some reason, is unable to adjust its physiological process to maintain internal

equilibrium.

Electrolytes. Solutes. Sodium, glucose, glutamate.

Water.

He knows these things.

But by Friday, December 2nd, any attempts of personal homeostasis have failed.

His wife, Phoebe, is directing another one of her misguided silent treatments at him. And Collins keeps calling him about random stuff, like did Walter remember the name of Dad's old war buddy. Or what was the name of the movie with such-in-such actor. Or if Walter needed any bulk from the Sam's Club.

"No, thanks, nothing for me," Walter says, not putting up a fight, or "I've never actually seen that movie," or "Dad never had that conversation with me."

Walter pushes the needle-like nephroscope through a small incision in an orange, antiseptic circle on the patient's flank for a fairly routine percutaneous nephrostolithotomy. He instructs a resident on how to guide the scope, adjusts the lens and watches the camera make its way toward the kidney.

"Continue along this path?" A resident asks as she guides the nephroscope. She's a short woman whose face seems stuck on the verge of smiling.

"About fifteen degrees to the left," Walter says.

The team huddles around the metal table, watching the small screen as the camera burrows into layers of bumpy yellow and foam-like pink, pulsing red and raw meat gray. This isn't the patient's first kidney stone, but it's the first to be so aggressive against less invasive treatments.

Walter glances through the objective lens. Each kidney is surrounded by a thick layer of adipose tissue called perirenal fat, which helps protect it. A tough, fibrous connective tissue, the renal capsule, envelopes each kidney, providing support for the soft tissue inside. "Now about four degrees to the right," he says.

The stone, easily 2.2, 2.4 centimeters appears. Walter studies the crystal formations: calcium oxalate with surface folds like fool's gold or a forest fungi. Stalactites or stalagmites, the difference? This always finds its way into Walter's head when he enters the cave of the kidney.

"Looks good," he says and instructs the new resident on how to thread the ultrasonic probe through the nephroscope. "Kalman, how many degrees and in what direction?"

"Ten degrees south, sir."

"Ding, a year's supply of Kibbles for you," Walter says. No one laughs.

The glass O.R. doors slide open again, "Dr. Doucet." It's the same nurse from before. "Your brother wanted me to tell you that it wasn't urgent, no emergency. Just call him back when you get the chance."

"Thank you," Walter says, having figured as much.

A beep alerts them to the machine's readiness, Walter orders an ultrasonic pulse released into the kidney.

*Set in New Orleans and Vacherie, LA, this assured novel uses a story about the Cajun tradition of bonfire building, sibling rivalry, and a misguided search for redemption to explore the fragility of human relationships. A strong engaging voice, well-developed characters, and a well-paced plot transform the story of a man's need to build the best bonfire ever into a rich and poignant story about love and loss.*

—Deborah Grosvenor

When Walter was still in med school, he remembers eating fried oysters with Dad and Collins at a dive shack in Cut Off during a fishing trip. A man sat next to their table trying to chew fried catfish with a toothless mouth. He smelled of something sweet and sour like milk left in the sun too long. His kidneys were failing. That's what they were smelling. The yellowing of the skin. The permanent dampness on the neck and cheeks.

"--Fragmentation failed," says a resident with a moon-shaped, cratered face.

"Move ten point six degrees north of the stone," Walter orders. They increase the machine's frequency fourteen hertz, release two pulses.

"A piss doctor?" he can still hear Dad say. "Why the hell would you want to be a piss doctor?"

"Fragmentation failed," a resident says.

Walter regains focus and takes over. He moves four degrees northwest, ups the machine ten hertz, and releases a long pulse.

An adult human kidney is only about 12 cm long, 6 cm wide, 3 cm thick, and yet 300 milliliters of blood flow through them each minute. Four hundred gallons a day. Four hundred. The internal plumbing of the kidney stretches five hundred miles. Almost a quarter of the river's length.

"--Dr. Doucet, Dr. Doucet," a resident's hand is on his shoulder. Walter quickly lets go of the machine. "We have fragmentation."

"Correct," Walter says. He can feel his neck flush. "Thread the nephrostomy tube and watch that it drains. I have to make a call."

The hall smells of false pine and ammonia. Walter leans against the vending machine, his forehead vibrating against the cold plastic. He digs in his pocket for change and is a quarter short. He stays there, pressing the buttons.

"Walter?"

"Dr. Erickson," he says to the new urologist. He's the young, fresh blood the hospital is trying to

recruit. Before Touro, he'd done a stint in El Salvador and published a study from it. He wears his hair long and hip dress shirts with bow ties from the Salvation Army.

"Did you have a chance to look at that chart?" Walter asks.

"Ah, I'm moving a little slow this morning. My wife's book club ran late last night," he says with a wink. Walter knows he's not married and has no clue what this is code for. This is my competition, Walter thinks, *this kid*.

"The chart, Dr. Erickson," Walter says and walks back down the corridor.

In his office, Walter calls his brother.

"Guess what I'm doin' right now?" Collins says.

"I don't know, what?" Walter feels unusually spent.

"Guess."

"I'm in surgery. What?"

"Why'd you call if you were in surgery? Jesus, Walt, you coulda called me back later."

"Just what, I'm on the phone now, so, what?"

"I'm in front of a machine that's cleanin' my balls and fillin' my mug." Collins is a golfer.

"You couldn't wait to say that, could you?"

"Well, I could've waited 'til you were out of surgery."

"Bye, Collins."

"Wait. I need you to go out to the house with me this weekend. We've got to start cleaning it out."

"I can't."

"You owe me, Walt."

"For what?"

"To not make me do it alone."

"Fine."

"Yeah?"

"Ok," Walter finds himself saying, too weak to

argue.

Before rounds, Walter checks on the patient in the O.R., a Mr. J. R. Marny. Two attending nurses watch the tube drain and adjust his oxygen mask.

Walter picks up the plastic bag hanging from the tube; it's filled with cloudy urine, traces of blood, and stone fragments. He turns on the objective lens.

"Should I page a resident?" A nurse asks.

"No, I'm just going to finish up here." Walter likes when the room is near empty and quiet, except for the hum and whir and beep of the machines, a sterile symphony. Through the microscope, he scans the kidney for any remaining stone fragments.

He can still hear the sounds of black and white westerns leak in from the den. Walter is a boy sitting next to Grandmaw at the kitchen table as she cross-stitches the same pattern into a small square of rough cloth, over and over. A wide-eyed rabbit in brown thread. She clamps the square onto a jar of something pickled, lines them up to be gifted for a couple's marriage, the birth of a child, a new job, the loss of someone.

If pluses are brown and circles are light brown, it starts, a row of pluses, then a row of circles, circle, plus, plus, plus. Then circle, circle, plus, plus. He knows the pattern, sometimes recites it in his head when he's doing double-back sutures on a patient's flank.

"Should we get you an apron?" Dad used to say to him on his way to the refrigerator

*Should we get you an apron?* Something still tightens in Walter. He injects the hemostatic sealant down the nephrostomy tract to the kidney. *Should we get you an apron?* How about a doctor's coat. Walter removes the guidewires, the tube. He begins the double back of two small sutures.

He pulls the thread tight while a nurse cuts. "Let's move him to a room."

When the nurses begin to remove him from the machines, Walter feels a suffocating sensation that cuts into his breath much lower than the lungs.



**Elizabeth Sanders**, who lives in New York, is a New Orleans native. **Feux de Joie**, her first novel, a runner-up in the Faulkner-Wisdom competition this year, is forthcoming from Chin Music Press. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*, *The International Feminist Journal of Politics*, and *Portal Press'* anthology *Something in the Water*. She has a B.A. in English and creative writing from Fordham University and an M.F.A. in fiction from *The New School*. She has received grant-funded residencies from *The Vermont Studio Center* and *CAMAC, Centre d'Art, Marnay, France*. Currently, she is working on a novel about women in combat. The photo here of Elizabeth is by Kyle Encar.

The novel category was judged by **Deborah Grosvenor**, of the Grosvenor Agency





*Patricia Benton*  
*2013*  
*Novel Runner-Up*



## Traveling Shoes

The smell of old urine grabbed a breeze passing through tall magnolias and rode it out from the thick woods, over the dirt road, and across the front yard where a black Chevy with rolled up windows waited under shady sycamores, and up to the porch swing where Sybil sat fanning herself with a movie magazine and watching the mailbox. On the other side of the screened window, a record player in the living room spun the last notes of *Madame Butterfly*. The record circled in scratches. Sybil inhaled deeply, and gagged.

The screen door swung open with its usual creak and slammed shut as Valerie stepped across the front porch, slipping her dark glasses down from her blonde hair as she reached a patch of already burning sun on the top step. She looked toward the swing, saw Sybil and stopped.

"Oh, there you are, Hon. Didn't you hear me calling you?"

Sybil looked at her mother blankly. "No, Mam."

"How long have you been sitting here?"

Sybil stopped fanning and laid the magazine beside her on the swing, heard it slip through the white painted slats and hit the porch. Looking at her mother's face, watching it wait for an answer, Sybil shrugged her shoulders. "A while, I guess."

Valerie shook her head, as if she were amazed. "Listen, Hon. I've got to get gone. I don't have any idea how long the sheds are going to run tonight, so how about fixing some tuna fish and we'll have sandwiches and potato chips for supper. We'll just eat whenever I get here. Corly said it might be late."

"Yes, Mam."

"Look, if it gets too late and you get hungry, just go ahead and eat without me. That'll be fine." Valerie smiled and turned, her gold sandals clicking down the steps. "I'll see if I can get ole Corly to give us some nice cukes and tomatoes to have with our sandwiches."

"Sounds good. See you later, Mama."

"Bye."

Valerie lifted her sunglasses so that her blue eyes made direct contact. "You be good now."

"Yes, Mam."

"And remember to get my Camels, please. I hate

the lecture I get when I do it myself."

"Yes, Mam. I'll get them."

Sybil leaned over and picked up her magazine, looked at Elizabeth Taylor on the cover, and then pushed off hard from the white post, setting the swing in motion. She watched Valerie walk hurriedly across the yard, causing her ponytail, tied with a yellow ribbon, to bounce behind her. Why, Sybil wondered, couldn't she look like her mother instead of whoever it was she looked like with a Jimmy Durante nose and Clara Bell feet and skinny, skinny, skinny. Valerie was five feet five and slim and wore yellow short shorts and a yellow shirt and gold sandals that showed off her tan. Valerie looked too young. She was too young.

Ever since Sybil had had her growth spurt, people who didn't have good sense talked about how they looked just like sisters. Now they were the same height and once, when they were standing eye to eye, Sybil found herself staring her mother down just to see if she could, and she did, and that was another unsettling feeling that left her nervous inside.

Sybil watched as Valerie rolled down the car windows, which had been rolled up to keep flies out. She heard country music from the radio and knew beyond a doubt that her mother was already tapping out a rhythm with her fingers on the steering wheel. Valerie could have walked to the tomato packing shed if she had wanted to, but she never did. As the Chevy backed out of the driveway, Valerie waved. When she was out of sight, past trees and across the railroad tracks, Sybil heard her toot the horn. She looked back at the mailbox, fanned herself, and kicked off on the white post with her red shoes, keeping the swing moving quickly back and forth, back and forth. She could not read, she could not even look at the pictures. She had to watch the mailbox. Mexicans and coloreds were taking over the town.

She kept twisting her hair and thinking about the mailman and wondering whether or not he was going to bring the package and if he did, what would she do, and if he didn't, what would she do? And if a Mexican was hiding in the bushes and jumped out and beat her to the mailbox and said, give it to me, what would she do?

Always, it seemed to her, things had been as

obvious as dirt, but now nothing was predictable. It was like when she was seven and had gotten sick to her stomach and had to sit down when she all of a sudden realized that 1948 was a year, a year of measured days. Never before had she thought about there being boundaries to time. And suddenly there it was, something that had been going on forever and ever, counting off her life, without her being aware of it. That same unsettled feeling stayed in her stomach now, causing her to bite her nails and chew her hair, and when she cussed it was no longer an act, but because she meant it.

Sybil looked around her, at the sunlight reflecting through the sycamores, at the woods that could be concealing anything, at the dusty road, at the empty mailbox, at the blue hazed sky. It was as though any minute the air could go whoosh, and she'd be sitting there looking at something she'd never seen before. Something beyond her imaginings. That's the feeling she had. Nervous and suspicious is what her mother said she was, and told her to get over it.

Sybil had ordered every cereal box top free offer she could find, she had written to every relative she could think of who was anywhere besides where she was. She had even written to the Japanese pen pal she had stopped writing to because the girl was so dumb she had never heard of *Madame Butterfly*, which was the only reason Sybil had written to her in the first place. Sybil's Granny had a brother who had been killed in the war; she felt guilty writing to a Japanese. Every day that Valerie didn't mail something, Sybil put a letter into the box and raised the flag. She needed the signal that the mailman had come, in case she had to go to the bathroom or do something else, and missed him. Sometimes she clipped coupons and articles and mailed them to people in town who might like them, but she had run out of clippings, and she was tired of writing. Today she had stuck the flag up with nothing in the box at all.

A pain shot through her big toe. Suddenly Sybil stopped pumping the swing. She propped her feet up on the post where the white paint had smudged black and would no longer scrub clean. She took off her shoes, placed them on the swing beside her, and then with her hands studied the grooves they had cut in her feet. They were her most favorite pair of shoes she'd ever owned. Red marks followed the curve of her toes. Maybe her feet would stop growing if she kept wearing them, like the Chinese women who bound their feet. She could stand the pain if it worked.

At the sound of a car, Sybil glanced through the shade trees. It was Mr. Henry. Driving with his left arm extended toward the steering wheel, Mr. Henry sat to the right side of the front seat as his faded Plymouth pulled up to the mailbox. His right arm reached out. She acted as if she were reading her magazine and didn't realize he was there. He tooted the horn and when she looked up, he shook a pointer finger at her, like the teachers did, and then put the flag down. He had asked her sixteen times not to do that, make him stop when he didn't have anything to deliver. Sybil acted surprised to see him, and

*This is the story of a 12-year old girl, Sybil, who wants to escape the small-town existence of a farm produce community in the South, run away on the train that runs through the middle of town, and get to New York to become an opera singer. Sybil is a strong, well-defined character, and her voice is confident and true throughout, conveying all the angst and embarrassment that comes with being 12 and yearning to be older. Other characters in the story feel authentic as well, and the author's evocation of place feels just right. This is a book that manages to elicit our tenderness for Sybil without ever being corny.*

—Deborah Grosvenor

did an encore performance of her oh, my, how could I have possibly forgotten to put the letter in the mailbox routine. Mr. Henry drove off shaking his head and laughing.

"Damn," she said. "Damn, damn and, damn."

Sybil watched three colored women disappear into the woods where the drainage ditch wasn't too wide to jump. Behind them, a straggling line of laughing, chattering women followed. It was break time at the potato packing shed and there was no colored bathroom. It didn't make any sense that they had to pee in the woods, and nobody seemed to want to do anything about it. Somebody ought to. Maybe she could. But what?

Sybil worked her feet back into the red shoes, winced, got up, tugged at the seat of her shorts, and then walked down the driveway and checked the box anyway. She examined the azalea bushes to see if it were possible for anyone to hide there. Maybe. She walked on down the road and looked toward the railroad depot. Jessie Ruth was still not there. Two weeks ago they had gotten kicked out of the church choir and Jessie Ruth had been acting peculiar ever since. They had considered the church choir, the Easter and Christmas pageants, the Girl's Auxiliary coronations, and an occasional Testimony Night to be the first major performances in preparing them for their careers. Now that stage was gone out from under them. All they had was the Secret Theater of the Woods, and that wasn't feeling too safe anymore.

"Dammit, dammit. Double dammit. Where is she?"

Sybil rammed her hands into her pockets, felt the dime from Sunday School and remembered she was supposed to get her mother some cigarettes. She turned toward Mr. Glover's store. Cars. There were too many cars. Junky cars full of trashy people. The summer was getting shot to hell fast. She had been living for the day school was out. Teachers were mostly fools without any imagination. And now the Mexicans and coloreds and the

people from Florida were taking over.

Sybil pulled open the heavy barred screen doors to Mr. Glover's store and let them slam loudly behind her. It was so loud in there probably nobody even heard. The store was another old, familiar thing that was becoming strange. Several hot, sweating bodies were crowded around the front door talking. She weaved through them and made her way to the red Coke box, behind the counter where Mr. Glover let her go. Sybil flipped open the lid and fished around in the freezing water on the bottom for a Royal Crown Cola with ice in it. Carefully, she placed the dime from Sunday school on the cash register where Mr. Glover would see it. She pried the cap off the RC and took a swig. It burned. Good.

"Hey, Sybil! Come here a minute!"

It was George. George was calling her. Sybil dried her hands on her shorts. George was twenty-five and had been around the world in the Air Force. His wavy black hair usually broke into a curl over his eyes like a movie star's. George stood around a lot with his hands on his hips and his feet wide apart. When he wasn't lazy, he worked in his dad's used car business or over at the packing sheds. He smoked little Hav-a-Tampa cigars and he'd come home from the Air Force with a dumb habit of wearing sunglasses all the time and saying things like "this is true" when he was trying to be cool. Once when she was in Mr. Glover's store, he'd gotten into a yelling argument with a woman about which one of them looked better in a shirt, and then without a shirt. Soon as they started pulling their clothes off, Mr. Glover kicked them out and told them not to come back until they had good sense.

"Hey, Sybil. Come here and sit down with me a while."

Sybil plopped down beside George on one of the hundred-pound feed sacks that formed a row of seats along the refrigerated meat counter in the back of the store. The smell of dried corn and croaker sack filled the air around them as Sybil settled in.

George took off his sunglasses and hooked them over a pocket of his khaki shirt and grinned. He held his can of beer toward her for a sip. She shook her head and smiled. He winked at her. She loved his black eyes; they looked at her when he talked. But they weren't serious eyes and she couldn't tell by them when she was being taken in by his words, which had happened more than once.

"Sybil, what's your mama been doing? She said anything about me?"

Sybil shook her head. "She quit Woolworth's. Said the traffic into Charleston was too bad already. She's been grading cucumbers, and sometimes tomatoes over at the Number 2 shed."

One of the men in the sweaty crowd at the front counter motioned to George with his hand. "Hey, George. Come here. Come here right now and tell 'em about scaring the hell out of them Mexicans last night. Every damn one 'em cleared the ditch this high. I swear to God,

didn't they, George? Tell 'em."

George laughed and swigged the last of his beer, crushed the stiff can with one hand, and tossed it into the big steel trash drum. "This truth needs telling," he said, patting her on the leg. "I'll be right back. Keep my seat for me?"

"Sure."

Sybil took a swig of her RC, held it in her mouth until her cheeks felt pickled. She tried to look perfectly content, as if she didn't care in the least whether George came back or not.

Her eyes followed bare beams across the ceiling to the wall in front of her, where shelves were stacked with cans of red salmon up high and chewing tobacco and sweet pipe blends down low, and then, bending her head back, she followed the beams to the wall behind her where Mr. Glover kept the fabric and embroidery thread and the blue boxes of Kotex that she hated Valerie to send her for. Quickly she looked away.

**Patricia Benton** was born in Charleston, SC, and grew up in a rural coastal environment surrounded by farmers and fishermen. She majored in journalism at the University of South Carolina where she learned to craft magazine articles under the instruction of William Emerson.

James Dickey and William Price Fox, who became her friends and mentors in fiction writing. During a period of newspaper and freelance magazine work and raising a family, she obtained her private pilot's license, seeing its potential use in a developing entrepreneurial venture in which she partnered. As CEO of a company working in more than 50 countries, Patricia participated in Harvard Business School's three-year Owner-President Management program. She enjoyed traveling, experienced many cultures, and thrived on problem solving. Now retired from the business world, she is focused on developing her literary skills. Her current projects include an archipelago of stories with the common thread of God and the South, and a story of true life crime and friendship. Her life revolves around her family, her friends, writing, traveling, dancing, the world and all that surrounds it, seen and not seen.





*Lou Dischler*  
*2013*  
*Novel Runner-Up*

## Posing For Picasso



Mealy was right about moving where they didn't know Mooch from Adam because that same evening an old Ford truck drew up next to Rennie on her way home. The truck was dry and dusty, but the driver was oiled well enough.

"Hey there, Rennie," the driver said. He leaned out his window with one arm swinging loose—Sherwin Goforth, the sometimes boyfriend of a frizzy brunette in the plucking department and former drinking buddy of Mooch's. Rennie didn't say anything because she didn't want to encourage him. She knew how he was.

"Say now, you too stuck up to talk to me?"

"I'm not too stuck up. I'm just in a hurry to get home fore it rains."

"You want a ride?"

"No thank you."

Rennie began walking faster but Sherwin kept his truck rolling alongside, telling her how Mooch had always said what a nice wife she was even if she couldn't boil water without burning it.

"Mooch said he was getting you a cooking class for y'all's anniversary. But shoot, listen to me, I've gone and ruined the surprise." He sipped his beer. "Course, him being dead and all, guess you ain't getting it."

"If you think you're funny," she said, "you're not. You're not funny at all."

"Wasn't trying to be."

They passed a sign saying "No Foot Traffic" and Rennie turned onto the old bridge over the gorge behind the plant. Sherwin followed her with his truck, pulling alongside again and edging over until Rennie was about to fall in the river. The bridge had no railings and a cold wind was gusting through, so Rennie kept one hand on Sherwin's truck and the other in the air. Finally Sherwin stopped and threw the transmission into park, leaving the engine running. The sky was damp and threatening and far below black water splashed and foamed over rocks the size of Buicks. Rennie slid around the front bumper and looked back at him.

"Somebody'll come along any minute," she said. "So best you not be stopping here. Best you back up and go on home."

"Don't worry about me. The plant is closed." Sherwin

turned on the headlights, got out and slammed the door. Rennie held her hand up to the light. "No it ain't. Mr. Mealy is still in there, locking up."

"He is, huh? Then who's driving that new station wagon of his? His pet monkey?"

Sherwin laughed at his joke, then leaned on the hood of his truck to dig out a can of snuff from the back pocket of his khakis. He'd played football in high school as a wide receiver and he still had those wiry legs and lanky build. With his polo shirt and perfectly pressed pants, he looked like an advertisement for a men's store.

"He doesn't have a new car," Rennie said.

"Oh now Rennie, don't lie to me." As Sherwin opened the can a gust of wind blew snuff up in his face. "Goddammit, look what you made me do." He tossed the now empty tin off the bridge in disgust, then lunged at Rennie and grabbed her wrists. "What I really want is a taste of those sweet lips of yours."

"I ain't giving you a taste of anything." She twisted her wrists in his hands and felt them burn.

"If you killed my buddy, least you can do is put out a little. It's only fair."

"You don't know nothing. I never killed anybody." She kept twisting and finally jerked free. He tried to grab her again but she slapped him, which just made him laugh. "Mooch said I could have a roll with his wife once his pecker fell off from overuse."

"That's a lie."

"Lots of people heard him. Course, he was pretty lit at the time, and he didn't know he'd have his own wife to blame for it falling off."

Rennie turned away and began walking down one of the parallel sections the company had built-up for cars. She glanced over her shoulder. Sherwin was backlit by the headlights, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"Now don't run off like that."

"You just get back in your truck and go on home."

"Or else what?"

"Or else you'll be sorry."

"I will, huh?"

Rennie stopped and picked up a clod of dried mud fallen from someone's bumper. As Sherwin stuffed the handkerchief in his back pocket, Rennie windmilled the

clod and almost nailed him, but he twisted aside and caught it with one hand. A shower of dust and grit fell in the headlights. He did his Indian touchdown dance, then jumped and spiked the clod over his truck. Rennie turned and began walking, faster this time.

"I still got it," he said behind her. "You see that, Rennie?" Rennie kept going.

"Still got it—*shit!*"

Rennie glanced back; Sherwin was gone. She stopped and stood there watching the truck as its white exhaust licked the breeze.

"Sherwin?"

Something was going on, she was sure of it.

"Sherwin?"

Someone was yelling but she couldn't tell from where or what they were saying over the roar of the river. She went back slowly, ready to run if Sherwin was tricking her. Then she saw fingers scratching at the rotten wood of the roadbed. White fingers scratching like hungry termites. She edged closer and saw him where he was hanging in a hole.

"Hell's fucking bells." He looked down at the thrashing water, then up at her. "Give me your hand, Rennie."

"I said you'd be sorry." She squatted and studied him as he tried to lift himself. Lit by the headlamps of his truck, splinters glistened in his hair like black toothpicks. "You got tar in your hair. It'll take ice to get it out."

"Screw the hair, just give me your hand."

She inched her hand out to him, then jerked it back when he tried to grab it. He swung precariously by the tips of his fingers before regaining his grip.

"Damn it, Rennie! You trying to kill me."

"No I'm not."

"Then help me, goddammit."

"If I do you'll pull me down."

"Oh come on, that'd kill both of us. You think I'm crazy?"

"I'm not taking chances with you, Sherwin."

"Rennie, don't be that way."

"You can just get out by yourself." She stood.

"Fu-u-uck, don't do this!" He tried to pull himself up again and the boards groaned as if they might give way entirely.

"All right, I'm sorry. Is that what you wanna hear? I'm goddamn *sorry* I said anything."

"I don't believe you one bit." She started off. It was drizzling now and she didn't want to stand around there and get drenched. She'd already done that with Mooch and once was enough.

"Rennie?"

She walked on.

"Hey, Rennie, you're a frigging idiot, you know that? Mooch said how you burned things up. Said his food always tasted funny, even when it wasn't all burned up." Rennie was running now with Sherwin screaming behind her, how he was going to get her good when he got out of there. "I'll get you Rennie, you hear me? I'll get you!" But he never did.

They found his truck Monday morning after it stormed all weekend. The truck had run out of gas on the bridge but Sherwin Goforth was not to be found. The sheriff came

*This dark but funny novel follows a seemingly innocent young girl, Rennie, on a contemporary picaresque journey in which she tangles with the Dixie Mafia and commits a series of heinous crimes. The narrative walks a fine line between the humorous and the macabre as it gradually reveals Rennie's complexity and keeps the reader guessing how much of her rising casualty list is planned and how much is spontaneous. Despite the book's dark subject matter, the author keeps us laughing and rooting for Rennie until the book's satisfying conclusion.*  
—Deborah Grosvenor

into the foot-chopping department and asked Rennie if she'd seen him when she'd left the plant and she said she hadn't. He said Sherwin probably meant to pick up Sara Lou for the Friday night movie, but got there too late and had the bad luck to run out of gas. Rennie said it'd be a shame to miss the movie because Jerry Lewis was pretty funny, and the sheriff said, "So they did have a date?" "I saw Sara Lou plucking her eyebrows in the ladies room, so maybe they did." "But you didn't see who it was?" "No, not exactly. It's generally Sherwin, but I think she had the date with Marcus." This was a lie, of course. "Marcus, huh?" "Uh-huh. Marcus McFarland. He works with his half-brother over in Mountain Pine." "And you have no idea what happened to Sherwin?" "Well, maybe he wandered off in the woods and met up with a bear. Or maybe he found that still y'all been looking for and got himself pickled." "Or maybe somebody pushed him right off the bridge," the sheriff mused, looking out the window toward the gorge with his eyes nearly shut. "Could be, if he ran into Marcus. He's a hothead what I hear." "Is that right?" "That's what I hear. They called him Marcus the Mauler in high school." "The Mauler, huh?" "Uh-huh." "Say, didn't they have a name for you too?" "I don't know what you mean." He flipped through his notebook. "Knock-their-eyes-out Rennie." He looked up. "Wasn't that it?" "That's just cause I had good looks. Just something they said about my looks." "Now what I hear, they called you that for your pitching. You played girls' softball, is that right?" "Yeah. Before I got married." "And didn't you bean a few girls? Knock them out?" "Not on purpose."

"Just some wild throws, huh?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes they'd step into it."

"And you didn't bean Sherwin on the head with a softball, I guess?"

"No sir. I didn't even have a softball."

"It'd be pretty strange if you did. Still, be a shame if something happened to him. He was a good boy."

"He was. Everybody said nice things about him.

Everybody but Marcus."

The sheriff looked thoughtful and wrote something in his book. After he left Rennie got to thinking how Sherwin really wasn't all that bad when he wasn't drunk, at least compared to Marcus. He dressed nice, had a steady job at his daddy's lumberyard, and had seemed interested in her on the bridge. So she decided, if he ever climbed out of that gorge and asked her out properly, she might even say yes. And the more she thought about it, the surer she was of her answer.

"Yes, Sherwin," she said to the mirror at home, "I'd be pleased to go to the movies with you."

Rennie even ironed the dress she would wear—a red-check shirtwaist with black filigree on the collar she'd drawn with India ink. But Sherwin never asked her out and a few days later they found his body wedged between old car tires in the river, about where Fine's Tire Recapping had once stood. They weren't such good tires, though, and the plant had gone out of business. Ira Fine, who owned it, threw all his inventory in the river, and then a man who had an accident when his retread blew out shot Ira in the foot. Rennie's brother had called it a "fine irony," one of his jokes Rennie pretended to get but didn't. Sherwin was found with his head in one of Ira's retreads, and Rennie told the girls in the foot chopping department that Ira was to blame for throwing tires in the river, because who could swim through tires?

"The sheriff should arrest him for throwing stuff down there," she said. "It's littering. Poor Sherwin was kilt by litter."

"His legs were broken," said one girl. "You can't swim with broken legs."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"And what do you care about him anyway?" said another.

"He wasn't your boyfriend, was he?"

Rennie shrugged. Later she heard them whispering about another love triangle gone sour, and when they saw her they stopped and walked off. Then she heard a deputy in Franklin's Drug store saying some crazed man-killer was on the prowl and he glanced at Rennie when he said it.

Her reputation was ruined as thoroughly as Mooch's hair and she knew she couldn't let things go on this way much longer. Reverend Littlejohn said if you were wandering in the desert with no food and no prospects, you prayed to Jesus and Jesus would lead you to the Promised Land. And Rennie discovered how right he was soon after she ate too much of the butter cake her mother made for her eighteenth birthday. Her father had said a girl's eighteenth birthday was the most special of all and she'd remember hers forever. Well,

she remembered it, but not the way she'd imagined. For one thing, there weren't any guests except for her mother and her brother Buddy, and her father of course, recently out of Baptist Hospital. Her father was Arthur Lexicon Beauregard, a direct descendant of the famous Civil War general, PGT Beauregard, whose rusted sword was mounted over their fireplace mantle. Everybody in the South knew who the General was. Even some in the North. Once a reporter had driven down from New York to do a story on the General's descendants, but he never wrote it because he died in his motel room. They found him face up in the shower with the water running. After the coroner ruled the death an accidental drowning, Rennie's father had laughed and said, "Some rats don't have sense enough to keep their mouths shut." And Rennie knew he was right. Stupid to drown in the shower, kind of like drowning in the rain. Kind of like Sherwin, when she thought about it, because it had rained on him and his legs were broken, just like that reporter's.

*Lou Dischler was born in Louisiana and graduated from Tulane University. He worked for a research company in South Carolina for two decades and now holds 59 US patents. After an unfortunate change in management, he looked for something else to do, and took a novel writing class in the south of France. He fell in love with the process and has been writing novels ever since. **Posing for Picasso** was a story Lou had to write, if only because he had so many connections to it. His aunt, for instance, was an investigator for Jim Garrison and traced the movements of one of the book's minor characters—Lee Harvey Oswald. Another story set in Louisiana was *My Only Sunshine*, published by Hub City Press.*

## Novel: OTHER FINALISTS

**Last Clear Chance**, Bob Bachner, New York, NY

**Opus Brooklyn**, Glenn Vanstrum, La Jolla, CA

**Private Collection**, Geoff Wyss, New Orleans, LA (Sent)

**Rich**, Martha Burns, La Luz, NM

**Stained Glass**, Diane Manning, Houston, TX

**The Man Who Trounced God at Chess**, Jacob Appel, New York, NY (Sent)

**The Road to Sturgis**, George Gier, St. Charles, IL

**Veiled Men**, Ann Stewart McBee, St. Francis, WI

**Wickwythe Hall**, Judithe Little, Houston, TX



One of life's great enigmas was that an idea so colossally misguided could come from the mouth of a woman so stunningly beautiful. That mouth—with its adorable gap between the two front teeth—belonged to Erica Sucram, editor-in-chief of Hager Crossing's weekly newspaper, *The Double Crosser*, and the idea was for Grossbard to pen a regular column in which he answered ethical questions from readers. Among the arguments against the plan was that Grossbard didn't know the first thing about ethics—he didn't even consider himself a particularly ethical person—and he hadn't written anything since college, unless one counted an occasional case report published in a psychiatric journal. Another objection was that fifteen years had done nothing to diminish his high school crush on the auburn-haired editor, a woman now married—happily, it appeared—to a broad-shouldered blowhard who infuriated Grossbard to the tips of his ears. Add to that the fact that he only planned to remain in Hager Crossing for a few months, and that he was unreliable by nature, as well as somewhat lazy, and Ted Grossbard couldn't conceive of any justifiable reason to assume the role of "Mr. Morality" for sixteen thousand hapless souls who, unlike himself, hadn't yet had the sense to escape a sleepy Philadelphia suburb best known for its annual Quince Pudding Festival. But Erica had asked him. And she was still dazzling. And he remained an idiot—at least where women were concerned.

Only this combination could explain how he'd come to be seated in a vacant conference room on the sixth floor of the Hay & Halstead Building, from which *The Double Crosser's* staff kept a wary watch over the town, contemplating a letter that asked: If you're going to commit a murder, is it worse to kill when the victim is sleeping or awake? (PS: This is a serious question.)

He'd separated the readers' questions—of which dozens had arrived during the course of only seven days—into three stacks. One pile contained letters and email messages that sought advice, but did not raise genuine issues of right vs. wrong: Can I sue my daughter's pediatrician and still play tennis with his wife? Do I owe it to my husband to visit a marriage



*Jacob Appel*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Novella



## The Amazing Mr. Morality

those that have absolutely nothing to do with ethics. As though I'm the 'Answer Man' or something. Here's my favorite: Is it true that actress Deanna Durbin left movies because she's afraid of germs? What's unfathomable is that somebody cared enough to ask."

Erica peered through the Venetian blinds, then returned to the conference table and set down her cup. "I really appreciate you doing this."

"You may not appreciate the questions I've chosen," he said.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. Like I told you, the

counselor before I file for divorce? And his favorite, handwritten in pink on lined notebook paper: How many sex partners does it take to become "promiscuous"? In a second pile, he placed the run-of-the-mill moral challenges of the sort that he'd anticipated when they'd launched the column, questions in line with those Erica had fabricated for their first installment the previous week: My employer fired me unfairly, but accidentally paid me overtime for a shift I didn't work.

Do I have to return the money? The third set of letters, which Grossbard reread with increasing gloom, posed quandaries that seemed to spring from the minds of sociopaths. Even his four years as a psychiatry resident at one of New York City's busiest public hospitals hadn't prepared him for this much unvarnished evil: I've discovered that my sister's husband is cheating on her; when I tell her, is it reasonable to expect her to compensate me for the information? And My aunt plans to leave me \$10,000 in her will to look after her dog; is it okay if I drop the animal off at a shelter after she dies and use the cash to help pay for my kid's college tuition (a better use, in my opinion)? And Is it wrong to remove a demented relative from life support before Jan 1 to avoid adverse changes in the tax code? Grossbard held out hope that a few of these dilemmas might be pranks—but certainly not all of them.

A rap on the door jolted him from his despair. Moments later, Erica entered the conference room, carrying a steaming beverage. Grossbard was about to thank her for the coffee, when she took a sip from the cup. "Any progress?" she asked.

purpose of this column is to generate interest, and if that means stirring up controversy, so be it.”

The purpose of this column, reflected Grossbard, is for me to indulge the momentary delusion that if I spend enough time with you over the next few months, I’ll be able to lure you away from that glad-handing husband of yours. Deep down, he suspected he’d have to settle for something far less: an opportunity to mock the people he’d grown up around without their realizing it.

“Can I help at all?” asked Erica.

Grossbard shook his head. He wondered at what age—if ever—he’d lose his desire for her. Seventy? Ninety? Or maybe she’d always be branded indelibly upon the romantic lobe of his brain as the dreamy sixteen-year-old girl who’d told him he was “too smart” for her and then proved it by dating a hockey player.

“Okay, I’ll let you work. Just get me something by four o’clock.”

So Grossbard opened his laptop and started typing: Intuitively, killing a person as he sleeps might seem more ethical, since it would likely cause that person less suffering. On the other hand, the victim would lose a chance to make a final statement while dying, and possibly an opportunity to clear his conscience before God, which still matters to some individuals. Moreover, if vengeance were one’s principal motive, then a case could be made that giving the victim an instant to recognize that he is going to perish, and why, achieves a higher degree of justice.... His goal was to keep his responses as ambiguous as possible.

**Jacob M. Appel** has published short fiction in some 200 literary journals including *Agni*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Conjunctions*, *Confrontation*, *Colorado Review*, *Columbia*, *Florida Review*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Stream*, *Iowa Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Nebraska Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Raritan*, *Seattle Review*, *Shenandoah*, *South Dakota Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Subtropics*, *Threepenny Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *West Branch*, and *Xavier Review*. His nonfiction has appeared in *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, and *Ploughshares*. Jacob’s short story, *Shell Game with Organs*, won the *Boston Review Short Fiction Contest* in 1998. Another story, *Enoch Arden’s One Night Stands*, won first prize in the *New Millennium Writings* competition in 2004. A third story, *The Ataturk of the Outer Boroughs*, won the *William Faulkner-William Wisdom* short story competition. Jacob has also won competitions sponsored by a variety of journals. His story about two census takers, *Counting*, was short listed for the *O. Henry Award* in 2001. Other stories received “special mention” for the *Pushcart Prize* in 2006, 2007 and 2009. His plays have been performed at the *Manhattan Repertory Theatre*, *Adrienne Theatre* (Philadelphia), *Detroit Repertory Theatre*, *Heller Theater* (Tulsa), *Curtain*

*You can go home again--but generally, no good will come of it. What distinguishes Jacob Appel's novella is his well-controlled and winning voice, which is restrained, droll, and more than a bit sneaky. The story focuses on the surprises of daily life in this most ordinary little town, where moral missteps are everywhere--lucky for our (anti) hero, who returns after many years to write an ethics column for a local paper. The plot is also perfectly-scaled for the novella form: enough happening to keep a reader motoring through, but not too much happening that the story demands a novel's worth of development. —Lisa Zeidner*

*Players* (Columbus), *Epilogue Players* (Indianapolis), and *Intentional Theatre* (New London), and and have received more than one hundred public readings. Jacob holds B.A. and an M.A. from Brown University, an M.A. and and M.Phil. from Columbia University, an M.D. from Columbia University’s College of Physicians and Surgeons, an M.F.A. in creative writing from New York University, and a J.D. from Harvard Law School. He has most recently taught at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where he was honored with the Undergraduate Council of Students Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2003, and at the Gotham Writers Workshop in New York City. He also publishes in the field of bioethics and contributes to such publications as the *Journal of Clinical Ethics*, the *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, the *Hastings Center Report*, and the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*. His essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Detroit Free Press*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Washington Times*, *The Providence Journal*, *The New Haven Register*, *The Albany Times-Union*, *Orlando Sentinel* and many regional newspapers. He currently practices psychiatry in New York City.



*Julie Chagi*  
2013  
*Novella Runner-Up*



## My Beautiful Money

I left my mother in her state of blissful remission. May it last, I prayed. May it last. I left her, and I sped down to Marin County from Ashland, but instead of heading to my houseboat in Sausalito, I kept on going over the Golden Gate Bridge and then down through the Marina, and I zipped into an empty parking space right in front of the Heritage Building—an event so rare I knew luck was on my side. For a moment I knew how my mother must feel—blessed.

I took the stairs, rising one step at a time, waiting for that first glimpse through the wide-open doors of my gallery, where I might catch what was happening without the script of my presence. My heart thumped some off-beats, letting me know in its own fluttery way that it would rather be blind to certain things. But even when my arrival was expected, it gave me a thrill to walk through my doors, pretending for a moment that I was a stranger, and to enter into strangeness.

Isobel saw me at once, flashing her vivid smile. She was deep in conversation with a man. When he saw her smile, he turned.

It was the Argentine who'd robbed me less than ten days ago.

Yes, it was the same man with the white shirt, the beautiful Italian suit, the same black hair, one-sixteenth of an inch longer now, curling just so over his white collar. We recognized each other instantly. His face had shed some of its aloof demeanor, but I didn't betray to Isobel that I knew him—if you can call being tricked by someone knowing him.

"You poor thing," Isobel clucked. "Don't tell me you drove straight through?" She was eyeing me critically—what? Did she want me to make a good impression on my robber? Without waiting for an answer, she said, "This is Alberto. A true friend of ours. He's the gentleman I told you about, remember? He's the one that tackled that thief and got our money back."

My brain was like the cylinder of a gun clicking around to find a bullet, click-click, it went, not being able to put this man at the scene of Isobel's robbery, when he'd been the culprit in mine. The man's face—so *Alberto* was his name!—portrayed a kind of ease, a fraudulent ease, I

thought. Why had he come back?

"Our two thousand dollar day," I said, turning my eyes to him. "So you saved us two thousand dollars. A lot of money for us." I was referring, of course, to the money he'd stolen from me—co-incidentally the same amount. "What impelled you to go after Isobel's thief?"

"He's a good man!" she put in.

Alberto threw back his head in a pleasure I had never seen during *my* robbery. "Any maiden in distress captures my attention."

His act was so good I had to laugh.

He said, "The thief was athletic . . . yet lacking in strategy." He lifted a hand toward the door, as if still seeing the action. "For example, he neglected to insert the envelope containing the money into his pocket. He held it well above his head, leaping. I witnessed this most dramatic exit, followed by a thunderous, outraged voice—that of Isobel, your trusted associate here."

Isobel's face flushed pink.

He hadn't answered my question, of course. And if you asked me, they seemed too chummy. But my mind refused the idea that they were each other's type.

"I am most pleased to have been of service to you," Alberto bowed slightly toward me. He put the slightest stress on *you*, making a shiver of delight traverse my spine.

"This calls for a drink," cried Isobel. She was already hurrying toward the doors, ready to slam them shut before any wayward customer could come in. We both knew those types—people who didn't want to be left alone in the corridors at closing time, as if shops could provide a certain kind of shelter for empty souls. It was six o'clock sharp.

But I begged off, disoriented, suddenly exhausted from my trip, angry, perhaps, that I hadn't confronted the man.

I left them in the gallery and began descending the stairs. The ancient magnolia in the courtyard branched out over me, its huge white blooms in oblivious splendor, but its buds in tight-fisted closure—whether in promise or in un-readiness I couldn't say. What had I come back to? It was all I could do to tear myself away.

Down, down I went, with each step feeling more and more the outsider. Jealous. Yes, it was true—I was jealous!



*The author's protagonist is extremely well drawn: she's wary, pensive--and more than a bit gullible. When this San Francisco gallery owner finds herself the victim of a robbery, she couldn't be more startled to be drawn to the thief, while her dying mother deals with a very different kind of con artist. This first person narrator draws us into her gentle perplexity, and gives us a surprising--yet utterly convincing--relationship.*

—Lisa Zeidner

Jealous because once again Isobel was prevailing in the flirting department? Because she seemed to be so taken with this beast who'd robbed me, he who was holding nineteen hundred and fifty of my dollars? I wondered—did my feelings have more to do with him, or with Isobel? After all, she had her full figure, and that Southern, easy way with people. And then here was me—thin-hipped still, at thirty-four, and not so easily vocal with strangers. And they were up there, the damsel in distress and her savior. Chatting it up, setting up a date, no doubt, right in my shop. Yes, my gallery! I'd built it, working so many hours, and now there they were, cavorting. Oh, cavorting—hardly! Hadn't he seemed interested in me? I thought he had, I willed that he had. He had. Oh, Alberto. Why did you rob me? Why? We could have been so fabulous together. You, with your style, me with my taste. My beautiful aesthetic. You with your curling black hair over your collar.

I stopped this mental jabbering and went into the cafe at the foot of the stairs for my usual double cappuccino with foamed whole milk to go. I asked Chewie to please not put on a lid. I hated it when the lid demolished the foam, because that was the part I adored, that foamy milk balancing the bitter and promising completion. He started to smash the lid on. "Stop!" I cried.

He looked at me as if I were the problem. Chewie was such an asshole—oh, I could go into detail here—a real smart ass, and I was sorry to see how much business he had. All he had to do was provide people with coffee, counting on their addiction. It was really too sad to contemplate. He was making a fortune on sappy tourists. Give me a break. I bought his coffee, I did—but not every day—and only to be sociable. But these tourists didn't have any idea what great coffee they could sample in San Francisco. I could have told them: it wasn't on the wharf!! No, no, and no!!! Are you kidding me? Not on the wharf!

You are not your self, I told myself.

I'd parked my car near the foot of the stairs, and my watch said I still had fourteen minutes. I rounded the corner, careful to take a sip so as not to slosh any foam. There, leaning against my car—was none other

than Alberto. Yes—Alberto. The one and only. Getting his beautiful suit all dusty from all the crap my car had accumulated from my trip. There he was, leaning against my car as if he knew me.

I stopped.

He pierced me with his look, making me forget the hot coffee scalding my wrist. I asked myself—why don't you forget he stole money from you, and see what might happen? My self confirmed, Yes, why not? It might be FUN, for a change, since you lead such a rigid, desultory life. It might make you into another kind of HUMAN BEING—it might give you a chance at happiness!

But did I follow my self's advice to forget the insult, for happiness' sake?

"You robbed me," I said.

He regarded me.

"Might we leave this for another discussion?" He had only a slight accent—the exact amount to be disarming. But leave the most important thing between us—the robbery—until later? I could see right then he was on south of the border time, where everything happened *mañana*, not like here.

"There is that small detail that it was *you* who prevented a second robbery. Is that something we might discuss?"

"It is," he said. "But I have a pointed question for you. Would it be appropriate to have this discussion in a more civilized place—that is, other than the street? I find my concentration isn't so clear in this location."

I looked at my watch. There was the warning on the meter that you could only go one time around—no double dipping, so to speak. But how could I get into my car with a robber? "Where do you have in mind?"

He said we might leave my car in the garage across the street. He would be most happy to take care of the cost. He'd noticed what looked like an authentic Spanish restaurant a few blocks down, if I would find pleasure in the walk.

I took him up on the garage offer, especially because I didn't want Isobel to see us conversing. She could be incredibly jealous, and I needed her to be in a good humor when she was working. That was why I hadn't minded if she sipped a glass of wine, early on—I could see it improved her mood and our sales, but only up to a point, until it was a downhill trajectory too speedy for thought.

I made Alberto walk to the garage while I drove my car in.

I'd never been to the place he mentioned—*La Cita*—a little pathway winding down an alley. Was I impulsive? I admit it. For one thing, I was hungry, and for another, I was always interested in a good story—especially when it included aspects of my own life.

Once we were seated, I decided it would be fitting to have a glass of red wine, and then I gazed at him. It was

hugely difficult to keep all the pieces in this puzzle from colliding and messing each other up.

He said, "Before we tackle the question of how I happened to retrieve your money the other night, it might be prudent for you to hear my life story."

I laughed. "I sense you are protracting the moment."

"Eh...I wish to give the moment some coloration."

Coloration—of coarse!

"Why is nothing simple any more," I asked. I was speaking as if we'd always known each other.

"Because life is anything but simple, especially when one finds oneself in unforeseen circumstances involving..."

"Don't say it," I said, putting my hand up. I wanted and didn't want.

"I'm of the impression that, were you to know my history, you might find it compelling, to the degree that having been robbed might recede, if only slightly, into the backdrop."

I'd taken my first small sip of the wine, and felt the most pleasurable heat expanding throughout my middle. I hoped against hope I wasn't paying for it with the money he'd stolen from me. Then I had a thought, and it was this: be direct, yes, that was key.

"Did you know my gallery was going to be robbed a second time?" I asked.

"I possessed that information," Alberto said.

"Then I must ask. Are you now in a difficult position, with regard to the person or personages who were carrying out that mission?"

"I am," he said. "But, if I may assuage your concern—it is more like a family squabble. Nothing that can't be worked out."

"You have me speaking in your formal mode," I said. "I don't feel like my old self."

"We are unlike our old selves," Alberto said. His eyes seemed to be reflecting light off the candles, until I could see that the fire came from inside him. His eyes—with their overabundant shine—I thought: there is nothing average about this man.

We sat for some minutes, probably absorbing the unnaturalness of having become two entirely new persons.

"The thing for us," he said, lifting his glass, "the thing for us would be to go tango dancing."

Julie Chagi is a native Californian. She studied philosophy, humanities, and literature, and has taught both philosophy and English composition. Her stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction* and *The Best of Writers at Work*; she was shortlisted in *Best American Fiction 1995*, and won the 2009 William Faulkner-Wisdom gold medal for her short story, *The Camel*. She has placed in the Faulkner-Wisdom competitions for short story, novel-in-progress, and novella. She and her husband, Darryl Chagi, live in the Santa Cruz Mountains and have

six grandchildren between them.

Of *My Beautiful Money*, Julie Chagi writes: "This novella grew out of a short story, "Brother Spirit," which was a runner-up in the 2008 Faulkner-Wisdom Short Story Competition. With the help of Carole de Santi, the *Words & Music* editor with whom I met that year, I realized it wanted to be a novel, but, having only written short stories, I put the project on the back burner for several years. In 2012 I submitted a draft in the Novella category under the title, *The Shopkeeper, The Thief, and His Horse*, and it made finalist. Moira Crone, the judge, gave me excellent advice for improvement, and so here it is in another iteration. It has been a joy to work on, and I love the longer form."



**Bertie Deming Smith**, who has for many years been an umbrella sponsor of the Faulkner Society's annual *Words & Music, A Literary Feast in New Orleans*, is shown here with her late husband **Joe Smith**, former publisher of the *Alexandria Town Talk* newspaper. A portion of Mrs. Smith's annual grant to the Faulkner Society is designated for underwriting the Novella Prize in the Society's international literary competition.



*Steve Gates  
2013  
Novella Runner-Up*



## **Sandy and Wayne**

By the sheer volume of what was moved, what was excavated and shaped on the earth, no item on an interstate job paid more than dirt. And no operation could slowly and stealthily erode and eventually consume a construction company's finances like earthmoving if it were mismanaged. Next to the estimator—an engineering and finance wizard—the dirt foreman, Wayne, that estimator's proxy on the ground, was the most crucial hire in a workforce. When Sandy watched Wayne among his fellow foremen, she saw the deference they paid him. He was not a talker in company, joked only when he had you one-on-one. But when he spoke, his mates fell silent and listened closely.

The day Maurer's heavy equipment was to arrive on the job, Wayne marshaled a row of three tanker trucks full of diesel. On the radio, on television, in the papers came the announcement that Arkansas Highway 468 would be closed that morning. Permits were in order, and before dawn, flashing barriers went up, highway patrol posted officers, and flaggers mustered.

Sandy lit a Marlboro and walked over to Wayne's pickup. Wayne was leaning against the open door, the C.B. mic in his hand.

He winked at her. "You know, in Missouri there'd be no way in the world you could get an inspector out at this hour."

"Glad to know we're doing something right down here."

He smiled. "Didn't say it was right."

After some chatter crackled up from his C.B., Wayne leaned in the truck window and blew the horn three times.

Back in the darkness, miners' lights snapped on atop hardhats. Flashlights lit and threw frantic bolts. From tents, pickups, and carryalls, dark figures emerged and stretched. Far off against the black, ragged tree line, the flash of an arc welder sparked. On each of the fuel trucks, fog lights glowed, and men in green jumpers stood ready.

Sandy marveled at this for a moment—Maurer had brought in far more forces over the last week than any company she had inspected. With a shudder she recalled the haphazard way the previous, failed company had mustered heavy equipment onto the job,

how she would catch them driving some gargantuan scraper across a county road with no permit, obliterating shoulders and tearing the roadbed into chunks.

"Cold?" Wayne handed her a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

Sandy took the cup and thanked him.

Very soon Peterbilts with long trailers arrived, eight of them, and on each trailer rode a yellow Caterpillar earthmover dismantled so that its cab, engine, and yoke tilted on one end of the trailer. The scraper and maw rested on the back. The machines looked like deep-bellied, yellow tiger beetles with their heads split off.

The Peterbilts lined up in pairs. On the trailers of the lead pair, men scrambled. They rattled chains loose and quickly unlimbered iron ramps down into the dewy, red soil. With the help of a track hoe that had an iron hook on its bucket, men with acetylene torches and tremendous wrenches set to work fastening the giant bellies of each earthmover to the cabs and engines.

In the commotion, Wayne left her side and took a seat on the cab of the first Caterpillar assembled. With a grunt and a long squirt of black smoke from its stack, it rumbled awake. Wayne backed the yellow monster down the two ramps as the Peterbilt edged forward. With another growl and shot of black smoke, the Caterpillar surged to the side then lurched to a stop beside the fuel tanker. There Wayne cut the engine. Gasmen in green jumpers clambered up on the earthmover with fuel lines cradled in their arms.

Wayne hopped down and shouted at the next crew waiting in line. The Peterbilt he had unburdened smoothly pulled away just as another gurgled into its place.

Wayne walked back to her, wiping his hands and forearms on a cloth black with grime. He tossed it down at his feet. Mechanics bearing grease guns tended the joints and bearings of the Caterpillar as it fueled. Behind them, the dawn sent a silver curtain across the east.

She appreciated this outfit's agility. From wherever they had bought or leased these scrapers, Maurer hauled not even a single extra ounce of fuel, not a spurt of excess grease. Even some of the massive cotter pins they brought from stores on site. Each scraper



arrived, she figured, with just enough fuel to start it, back it off the semi, and land it empty next to the fuel tanker.

"Well, lead inspector?" he asked, lighting a Salem. The flames threw an orange light on his face. The solid chin, the sharp nose, the clean-shaven jaw irked her. With a country girl's hard-bitten sense, she was suspicious of good-looking men from more sophisticated parts of the Ozarks.

"Oh, I seen that other bunch arrive with just as much flare," she lied.

"But did you yourself come to see them marshal up?" Wayne asked. "Personally?"

It occurred to her that Wayne had access to the Daily Diary of AR4005, the running record she was required to keep of everyday happenings along the jobsite. Unlike most other contractors she knew, he might be one to read it. After what she had seen this morning, she was sure he knew the answer to his own question. He was a step ahead of her.

"It's what you do after you unload that matters," she said.

Cigarette glowing, he turned to face the operation as she was seeing it and stood uncomfortably close, his warm hip and hard belt catching her just below her ribs.

Up above in the sky, now turned navy blue, a star with a long silver tail hung. The tail ran askew in a direction the mind couldn't put right, especially when the streak didn't vanish but seemed to have skidded to a stop. It had to be that comet, Hale-Bopp, which she had heard so much about on the Early Ag report.

"I thought cosmic events were supposed to make you feel like a tiny dot in a vast universe," said Wayne.

Freshly full of diesel, the next scraper roared, then advanced toward them. When its driver wove side-to-side, swung the scraper's maw up and down to test the hydraulics, the huge yellow earthmover seemed to wag and dart, its head independent of a swinging tail and torso. They reminded Sandy of mink she had seen chasing and fighting on White River when she was a young girl, only these were animals of metal, impossibly large, fiercely unnatural, save for the speck of a driver hovering in the cab far above the dirt.

"You feeling tiny, Wayne?"

He blew a long breath of smoke into the air, watching the scraper twist and rumble down the red scar of earth. "Goliath couldn't touch a hair on my head."

**Steve Yates's** novella **Sandy and Wayne** was chosen by acclaimed novelist and short story writer Lauren Groff as the inaugural winner of the Knickerbocker Prize and was published in *Big Fiction Magazine* in hand-set type on a letterpress. More about *Big Fiction* and an interview with Yates resides at <http://www.bigfictionmagazine.com/>. Born and reared in Springfield, Missouri, Yates is an M.F.A. graduate from the creative writing program at the University of Arkansas. In Fayetteville he worked three summers on the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department as a construction inspector and surveyor. **Sandy and Wayne** is set amidst the interstate construction

*It's hard to imagine a less likely setting for a love story than on a dusty Arkansas road construction crew. But this author makes it work. Sandy and Wayne are as tough and hard-nosed as they come, so their romance is touching without ever being sentimental. Yates makes great use of his insider's knowledge of this setting. In a way, the landscape itself is the star of this story--sometimes lush, sometimes severe and threatening.*

—Lisa Zeidner

jobs as highway was built through the Boston Mountains from Fayetteville to Fort Smith.

Yates is the winner of the Juniper Prize in Fiction and in April 2013, University of Massachusetts Press published his collection **Some Kinds of Love: Stories**. He has published short stories in *TriQuarterly*, *Southwest Review*, *Turnstile*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Valley Voices*, and many other journals. In *Best American Short Stories 2010*, Richard Russo named one of Yates's works among the "Distinguished Stories of 2009." In 2010 Moon City Press published his novel, **Morkan's Quarry**. Portions of **Morkan's Quarry** first appeared in *Missouri Review*, *Ontario Review*, and *South Carolina Review*. A novella-length excerpt was also a finalist for the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society William Faulkner / Wisdom Award for the Best Novella. He is assistant director / marketing director at University Press of Mississippi in Jackson, and lives in Flowood with his wife, Tammy.



**Lisa Zeidner**, judge of the novella category, founded Rutgers University's MFA program.



*John Vanderslice*  
*2013*  
*Novella Runner-Up*



## **Reflexology**

She'd told me her first name—Claudine—but other than that I only knew she was a nurse. In the ER, I thought she said. Something that connoted disaster. She may have said Georgetown Hospital, but there was also the George Washington Hospital, only 8 blocks from Constitution Hall. I had no home address or phone number, not even the make or model of her car. But when she walked away from me that night, I knew I would try to find her again. I let her go because I thought I had enough information to do it.

I gave myself a week, pretending that I didn't need to call her, that I could count the evening as a harmless, serviceable date. But by Friday the entire night was dissolving into folklore. Certain aspects of her features—the curve of her ears, the specific texture of her hair, the shape of her nose and her waist—were slipping from my memory, merging with memories of other women I'd dated. If I didn't act soon I'd be left with nothing but air. The next Monday at work I stared at a pile of disputed claims, ones we'd processed but that customers were so unhappy about as to write an actual letter in response. On top was a claim for treatments for an intestinal blockage. We'd rejected it with one of our stock killer phrases: "Not a Medically Indicated Procedure for Treatment of the Diagnosis Given." Apparently, the patient was just not supposed to shit for the rest of her life.

I called the ER unit at Georgetown and asked for Claudine. "I'm a friend," I said. "No Claudine here," a woman answered, a raw voiced gal who sounded in a hurry.

"She's not there now?"

"She's not here ever."

"Why?"

"There's no Claudine here," she repeated.

Of all the imagined outcomes of my phone call, this hadn't even made the list. I struggled for something to say only to mutter, "I know she works there." That got me laughed at—hoarsely. I asked if there were Claudines employed anywhere in the hospital, but this only earned me a hangup. I proceed to try the ER at GW, but the result was the same. No Claudines. With nothing to lose, I called every other hospital in the District—I got out the Yellow pages to be certain—but still didn't find her. I could only suspect she had given

me false information—a made up profession or a made up workplace—to throw me off her scent. It must have been an instantaneous decision on her part. She read me on the spot and decided I was no one to be trusted. But had I been that unattractive—even in my stupid UVA t-shirt—or that obnoxious? I thought back to the concert: her smiles, her conversation, her eagerness to go inside the hall with me. No, I hadn't. Nor had my I've-Just-Been-Lied-To radar gone off.

After work I went over the mental tape of our discussions, replaying every word of what I could remember her telling me, especially about her job. She had that very day tended to a man whose heart had failed during surgery. They'd revived him. No one with such a condition stays in the ER, I realized, if he'd ever been there in the first place. It was after 5:00, but I had to give it a shot. I called the ICU at Georgetown. Even if I couldn't talk to her, I could verify her existence. Somebody would know her. As it turned out, the woman who answered did not sound particularly on top of things, but—and this mattered more—she didn't sound officious either.

"I'm looking for Claudine."

Pause. "I don't think there's a Claudine working here." Pause. "In fact, I know it."

"Are you sure?"

Pause. "I said I know it. I don't know any Claudines, actually. Not even at home."

*And where is home?* I wanted to ask, but instead I whined, "But I know she works there." As useless a claim as the day before.

"But she doesn't," the woman said. "I'm sure."

Then it occurred to me to describe her.

"That could be a couple people, actually."

"Can you tell me their names?"

I heard—all the way through the phone, across a dozen miles of wire—the woman stiffen mightily. "Why exactly do you need to know?"

It was probably against policy for ICU nurses to take personal calls on duty. This was Intensive Care, after all. This was Pending Disaster Town. What happened if a patient crashed? Too it might be against policy—and why I didn't consider this before I don't know—to give out the names of anybody, patient or nurse, especially to some unidentified creep on the telephone. In point of fact, I stood almost no chance. Without knowing what else to

*Dan, the affable young man at the center of John Vanderslice's Reflexology, falls for Claudine hard, pursues her hard--and makes a series of unsettling discoveries about her. What begins as a dating story turns into a much darker sort of mystery. An excellent job with an unreliable narrator, who draws us in, gains our trust--and then turns out to have some very serious blind spots.*

—Lisa Zeidner

say I tried the truth. “I met her at a concert. I’d like to see her again.”

I heard the thaw immediately. She sighed. She almost said “Awww.” Her voice was smiling. “That could be Beth. Beth Smothers.”

“Does she have freckles? On her forehead and just above her cheekbones?”

“Oh. No.” Change of tone. “You probably mean Deena.”

Deena. Deena. Of course.

“Is her real name Claudine?”

“Deena? I don’t think so.”

“Could it be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Deena? Everyone calls her Deena. That’s what I call her.”

“Think about it,” I said.

She hesitated, a hiccup of a second. “Think about what?”

“Or can you check to find out?”

“What do you mean ‘Check’?”

“Well, I mean—”

“You mean like look in her file or something?”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, I’m not sure. I could, I guess. But I’m not sure where they are. I don’t even think they’re on this floor. Why would they be? I don’t know if I’m supposed to.”

“I understand.”

“Are you sure you’ve met her before?”

“Dead certain.”

“I could just ask her.”

“Who?”

“Deena.”

“You mean she’s there?”

“Of course.”

Of course? *Of course?*

“She’s there now?”

“I saw her a little while ago.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“Oh. Hmmm. I guess. Why not?” I heard her put the phone down. It couldn’t be this simple. It really couldn’t.

“Hello?” the woman said, her voice more doubtful than curious, more bored than anything else. But the

voice was her’s. I recognized it at the first syllable: small but modulated; Midwestern yet rabbeted of the more obvious nasality; a little breathy; a little sultry. A voice of experience and youth at the same time; washed of neither hurt nor naïveté.

“Deena. I think you know me. This is Dan Casey?”

My name didn’t just fail to ring a bell. It brought the clapper to a standstill. She was silent for a span of chilly, articulated seconds. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Maybe you want Gina.”

“No. I know it’s you. I recognize your voice. You went to the Goriki concert?”

“Yes,” she said, a reaction so happy, so unbridled, I almost couldn’t believe it came out of her. I let the moment brim. Mission accomplished. *Mission accomplished.*

“I didn’t think you’d mind a call.”

When she spoke again, her voice already sounded a little different. “Not at all.” She thought for a moment. “You know, I’ve been thinking that we should have had that picture taken. It would have made a nice souvenir.”

“We still can. Just somewhere else.”

She hesitated. “Yes,” she said.

“I’ve been thinking I should have gotten your phone number.” This was a laugh line, but I don’t know if it came across that way. Because it was also true. “I almost couldn’t track you down.”

“It’s amazing you did.”

“Yes it is. Deena.”

## Novella: OTHER FINALISTS

**15/33**, Shannon Kirk, Manchester-by-the-Sea, MA

**A Turn of the Stomach**, Chandler Groover, Athens, GA

**Baldwin Cottage**, Wendy Simons, Stevensville, MI

**Dark Swans and Painted Faces**, John Shalestock, Warrenton, VA

**Death House Blues**, Barnes Carr, Houston, TX

**Earth Drum**, Matt Bell, Wallops Island, VA

**Feeding Instructions**, Stan Kempton, New Orleans, LA

**Jonas in Frames**, Chris Hutchinson, Houston, TX

**Sleepy Time Down South**, C. W. Canon, New Orleans, LA

**Thief**, Alyce L. Miller, Bloomington, IN



In her silence, I heard puzzlement.  
 "I asked for Claudine the first time."  
 "You called twice?"

"I've called a lot more than that. I called GW. I called Providence. I called Washington Hospital Center. I called Greater Southeast. I called Howard. The only Claudine I found was a cranky administrator at Sibley. She sounded like a sixty year old Bostonian."

Deena tittered appreciatively, a start at least. "I can't believe you tried so hard to find me."

Yes, I had, hadn't I? And the meaning of my effort came streaking into the line between us, revealing what almost everyone knows should be kept secret for as long as possible. Two minutes into our reunion I might have already damned my chances with her.

"Well," I said, "it wasn't that hard, actually. A few phone calls."

"A few," she said.

"A few."

We talked for as long as we could, which wasn't that long. This was the ICU, and she was in the middle of the early evening shift. I did get her phone number, though. We left it that I would call her the next night at home. Starting tomorrow, she said, she was back on days. "Which is good. I can't stand working nights."

I tried comedy. "Oh, that's okay. No concerts to go to tonight, anyway."

She hesitated. "I almost never go to concerts."

**John Vanderslice** was born in Washington DC but raised in the eccentric community of Moyoane Reserve in southern Maryland, a kind of nature reserve for anti-social, highly educated Washingtonians who like trees more than people. He attended Catholic schools for twelve years and then went to the University of Virginia. After a few years working a terrifyingly dreadful job as a letter writer for a large insurance company, he moved on to graduate school: first at George Mason University—where he met his wife Stephanie Vanderslice—and then the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he enjoyed the best four years of his life, including the birth of his first son, Jackson Henry. He and his wife moved to Conway, Arkansas in 1997 and have lived there ever since, working in the Writing Department at the University of Central Arkansas and raising their two boys. John has published almost sixty short stories as well as poetry, nonfiction, book reviews, academic criticism, and plays. His work has been featured in journals such as *Seattle Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Laurel Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and *Crazyhorse*. His stories have also appeared in several fiction anthologies, including *Chick for a Day*, *Tartts: Incisive Fiction from Emerging Writers*, *The Best of The First Line: Editors' Picks 2002-2006*, and *The Man-Date: Fifteen Bromance Stories*, forthcoming from Prime Mincer Press. John's collection of thematically linked short fictions, *Island Fog*—all the stories are set on Nantucket Island, Massachusetts—is forthcoming in 2014 from Dialogos/Lavender Ink Press.

## Recommended Reading: Simon Mawer & Mendel's Dwarf



**Simon Mawer** was born in England and spent his childhood there, in Cyprus, and in Malta. His novels include *The Fall* (winner of the Boardman Tasker Prize), *The Gospel of Judas*, and *Mendel's Dwarf* (long-listed for the Man Booker Prize), and his bestselling novel, *The Glass Room*, which was short listed for the Booker Prize. Mawer appeared at **Words & Music, 2011** when *The*

*Glass Room* was published in the United States. It is one of best novels of the last ten years in terms of war and its collateral damage.. He now lives in Italy with his wife and teaches at St. George's British International School in Rome. Recently, Other Press, has published his novel *Mendel's Dwarf* in the United States. Like his great-great-great-uncle, geneticist Gregor Mendel, Dr. Benedict Lambert struggles to unlock the secrets of heredity and genetic determinism. However, Benedict's mission is particularly urgent and particularly personal, for he was born with achondroplasia—he's a dwarf. He's also a man desperate for love and acceptance, and when he finds both in Jean, a shy librarian, he stumbles upon an opportunity to correct the injustice of his own, at least to him, unlucky genes. Entertaining and tender, this witty and surprisingly erotic novel reveals the beauty and drama of scientific inquiry as it informs us of the simple passions against which even the most brilliant mind is rendered powerless.

### Reviews

"A grand scientific adventure and a tragic human love story...as idiosyncratic and mysterious in its own way as the first gene." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Simon Mawer writes beautifully, and the pleasure of his novel comes from the chance to watch him consider the mystery of the world, to report on the clarity with which nature speaks to us." —*New York Times Book Review*

"Furious, tender, and wittily erudite." —*New Yorker*

Ten days spent on the *Microspirit*, a freighter not so much threatened by rust as held together by it, convinced me it was time to pick an island, any island. So I picked Pig. Part travel-agent calendar and part Far-Side cartoon, the island of Pig, itself an outer island of Yap, was a destination so familiar I wondered why I had bothered coming it all.

I glanced out the salt-covered porthole of my tiny cabin. Dozens of people - shirtless men in loincloths, topless women in grass skirts, and naked children - had gathered along Pig's narrow beach, eager to greet the first ship they'd seen in six months. The adults stood in the shade under palms, the trees' trunks bent permanently backward by the constant breeze while the kids splashed in the calm, turquoise-clear water. Pig was small - about 30 acres - and appeared flat enough that were the weather to worsen - not typhoon or global-warming worsen, just a little wind and rain worsen - I could imagine waves washing over the entire island, submerging this little saucer of crushed coral like a dish in a sink slowly filling with water.

I'd come in search of capital-P, Paradise. Not a unique mission, granted, but I wanted to know if Paul Gauguin's Paradise still existed - the one with the flowering trees glistening with recent rain, the beautiful women carrying baskets of fruit, the smiling tigers. And if it did, why didn't people just move there? Was it lack of ambition or too much ambition that kept them away? Or was life simply too hard on a place like Pig? Or too easy? I didn't know. But I had a hunch that an ideal life is not something you just back into. You have to make some arrangements.

For me, those arrangements started months earlier but finished here, in a small cabin of the aptly named *Microspirit*, with me trying to tie on a *thu* or loincloth. According to custom, I was supposed to wrap eight-feet of blue cloth in such a way that it covered the right places without making me look like a prom-night carnation. I failed in both respects. Flamboyant hoops of extra material draped off my hips yet I could feel cool air in increasingly funny places. Unsure what else to do, I crammed the extra bits inside an inner loop but that sufficiently loosened things enough to send the whole



Alex  
Sheshunoff

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Narrative Nonfiction



### Paradise Misplaced

I worried there wouldn't be room. The *Nanospirit* was loaded to the rim with elderly, topless women, a wooden coffin, and a sprawling pile of baskets and Tupperware. But this was my Pacific coming-out party. I wanted to wow them. *Thu* and smokes in hand, I stepped towards the ladder, then, seeing the boat rock three stories below, I hesitated again.

"Use the ladder," I heard a man's voice say behind me.

thing sliding down to my ankles. Then genius struck: a safety pin! In a humbling moment of desperation akin to looking for a misplaced wallet in the freezer, I scoured under my cabin's metal bed - perhaps a safety pin had *just fallen* down there. I was in luck. Sort of. Along with a few Raman noodles, some dust, and a Pop-Tart wrapper, I found a paperclip. Not perfect, but with hope and a little pluck, I managed to bend the paperclip in such a way that it nicely accessorized if not actually fastened my loincloth. In the distance I heard a chain uncurl, indicating that the dingy that would take passengers to shore was about to leave. I grabbed a Ziploc bag of Lucky Strikes and headed to the deck. My plan: present the cigarettes to the island's chiefs, take a look around, and assuming it was the Paradise I pretty much expected it to be, ask if I could stay.

Given the *Microspirit's* tight schedule as it circuted the outlying islands of Yap, I'd have only an hour to make a good impression, and, hopefully, a decision, before rushing back to the boat to get my bag of clothes and books. I was too focused on my slipping *thu* to notice the absurdity of my plan. I'm pretty sure what my answer would have been had a guy from Yap showed up at my door and said, "Do you mind if I stay here? I have this idea of Paradise and it looks almost exactly like your apartment."

To actually get the last quarter mile to Pig I had to take the *Microspirit's* dinghy, a sort of *Nanospirit*, which rocked in the waves maybe 35 feet below the deck. I hesitated for a long moment. Getting into a small boat is always a tricky proposition. Getting into a rocking boat in the open ocean even harder. Doing so on a rope ladder in a *thu* seemed, well, unwise. Even if I somehow made it down,

His tone was helpful, not sarcastic, as though I'd been considering making a leap for it. I turned. It was Chief Chuck, an enormous man with a preference for snug, white *thus*. (He was the first living tongue twister I'd ever met; he'd introduced himself to me a few days earlier as "Chief Chuck from Chuuk.")

"Watch," he said and, just as a wave raised the dingy closer, Chief Chuck stepped in front of me and slid down the ladder, skipping every rung before flopping heavily into the boat. He landed on his back amid some baskets that mushed against the side of the coffin. His satisfied expression suggested his embarkation had gone perfectly. He waved for me to follow. With one hand holding both the Ziploc bag and the other firmly holding my *thu*, I took a few steps down the ladder. It swung a few feet across the side of the ship. I took a few more steps. With 25 feet still to go, I discovered why the inventor of the paperclip, Walter Hunt, later built America's first sewing machine: paperclips bend. My *thu* covered me in the same way holding up a pair of jeans in front of your privates might cover you; it worked well enough, but, at that moment at least, not all angles were created equal. While in the Pacific, I'd hoped to reduce the number of variables in my life to find out which were the most important - take away electricity and friends and see which I miss the most, that kind of thing - but clothes were never supposed to be on the list. In need of escape, I found myself fixating on the physicality of things: the handles on a woven basket, the sun reflecting off the dinghy's small outboard engine, the scar on a woman's ankle.

Before I slipped into a *thu*-induced stupor, gravity took over. That, frothing fear, and the basic instinct not to dangle nearly naked in front of twenty elderly women. I slid down the ladder and tumbled into the dingy, successfully holding onto only my Ziploc of Lucky Strikes. Not exactly Fred Astaire, but Chief Chuck from Chuuk was hardly Ginger Rogers. I had arrived, and I was pretty much sure I'd wowed them.

**Alex Sheshunoff** is a writer whose work has appeared in *National Geographic Adventure*, *Slate.com*, *Marketplace* on National Public Radio, *The Anchorage Daily News* and other, very prestigious media outlets. Before deciding to call himself a writer, Alex snuck through Yale and started and ran an internet company in New York called E-The People - a nonpartisan precursor to Moveon.org but with a pun in its name. Burnt out and facing a quarter-life crises, Alex gathered the one hundred books he was most embarrassed not to have read in college and moved to a small island in the Pacific. He later wrote a book about the experience (**Halfway Between Yap and Pig: Why Not To Buy a One-Way Ticket To a South Seas Island With Only Three Letters In Its Name**) and got to rewrite the book while getting a masters degree in creative nonfiction writing from the University of Iowa.

*This is a delightful read. A young man shepherding a bumbling Internet start-up in New York City becomes disillusioned with his station in life: not only work, but also his relationships, his poor health conditions, and the pressures of "making it." He goes off to find an ideal paradise and finds himself on an island called Yap in the middle of the Pacific. The book could potentially have a wide audience. The author states that searching for paradise is, in fact, an unoriginal endeavor; but this doesn't stilt the narrative. His self-deprecating tone and cleverly drawn observations of his own life carry what is, at its core, a very simple story that everyone has thought about once or twice or thrice. Simply put, the story is a learning experience, in which both we and the narrator will learn not only about the narrator himself, but also about the culture of a world we know very little about. — Jeff Kleinman.*



*The narrative nonfiction category was judged by literary agent Jeff Kleinman of Folio Literary Management. Jeff is among the faculty of Words & Music, 2013.*

Because of his unique last name, Alex is often asked if he's somehow related to Ian Shenanigan Sheshunoff, the first-place winner of the Diaper Derby Crawling Contest at the 2008 Alaska State Fair. They are indeed related. Ian is his son. And they were living in Anchorage until recently. Today, Alex and his wife, Sarah, live in Ojai, CA with Ian and his equally talented younger brother, Andrew.





*Sybil Morial*  
*2013*  
*Narrative Nonfiction*  
*Runner-Up*



## ***Witness to Change***

### ***Riding with Jim Crow***

When we were about 11, my cousin Adoria and I used to dream about taking the train all by ourselves to visit her grandparents in Franklin, LA. The state had a much more complex system of rail stations when we were young, and Franklin was located only three hours away, just above Bayou Teche. We would talk about it with our Uncle Morris who told us that a large mechanical crane would carry the train across the Mississippi. Adoria and I talked about this idea so much that, by the time I was an adult, I had converted it into an actual memory. Our parents, though, would have never consented to let us young girls travel alone.

I was a teenager before I took a train trip by myself, all the way from New Orleans to Boston. Unlike the dreamt trip to Franklin, this journey would be a long one, about twenty-five hours. I awoke at six a.m. to a mild gray day. The night before, my mother told me: "Take a lunch to eat at your seat on the train."

My father lifted his head from behind a newspaper: "You can have your dinner later in the dining car. The laws have changed and you can eat at a table. The conductor will come through the cars to announce dinnertime. The dining car may be several cars toward the back. You will have to walk through."

I dressed for the trip in a navy blue suit, and brought my hat and white gloves downstairs. That was *de rigueur* attire back then for female travelers. My luggage was already at the door ready to be put in the car. Once it was stowed, our whole family piled into the car: Mother, Daddy, Jean, C.C. and Cookie accompanied me to the train station for the eight a.m. departure. It felt exhilarating to be traveling all by myself, riding on the train.

The Southern Railway Station was a grand building on Canal Street, the main downtown shopping street where there were upscale stores, as well as a variety of other stores including Woolworth's. In the 1950s, Negroes were permitted to shop in the store but not to sit at the counter to eat.

My father parked the car and he and my brother C.C. carried my luggage to the COLORED WAITING ROOM to check it. The arched doorway, which led to the MAIN

WAITING ROOM, was for whites only. We had to enter the station through a door around the corner on the side street.

The porter greeted us warmly and called my father "Dr. Haydel."

Daddy doffed his hat and said: "It's nice to see you this morning."

The White Waiting Room could be seen from the Colored Waiting Room; the clerk behind the counter served both white and colored customers. The White Waiting Room was larger and brighter with new-looking benches, the benches in the Colored Waiting Room were dull, worn, and scarred.

We walked out on the platform and there was the Southerner, the sleek steam train that traveled the route from New Orleans to New York. It was nearing 8 a.m., and another porter on the platform was encouraging people to continue walking along the track to cars further down. When he saw us, though, he held his hand to the first car behind the engine. We hugged and kissed goodbye as the porter said: "Step up and board the train. It will be leaving shortly."

As we boarded, he directed me to turn to the right at the top of the steps where I found I was in the back half of the baggage car. When I turned to look for a seat, I realized these were filling up quickly with what appeared to be only colored people. I sat in a seat next to the window. Soon I heard the porter shout: "All Aboard!" and the train began moving slowly out of the station. It was exciting to be moving on the train. I looked around and smiled at the people who smiled back at me and settled in for the long ride to New York.

Soon a white conductor came through the car to collect our tickets. The rhythm of the train on the tracks was soothing as I watched out the window at the changing countryside from Louisiana into Mississippi. The train went by small towns with one room stations and farms where I could spot fieldworkers tending to the crops. They all seemed to be Negroes. The conductor stuck his head into our car and called out the station stops in Mississippi: Laurel, Hattiesburg, Meridian. Around noon, I ate some of my lunch. Everyone else in the colored car seemed to have brought lunch as well.

As the hours passed we made stops in Alabama and

*This memoir is not just a memoir. It's a history, a personal history, you might say, though the word personal is kind of a misnomer too, because the personal is very public in this case, as the manuscript tells the story of a black family's life in New Orleans during the era of Jim Crow laws. It's one thing to know of the laws, but it's another to see them from the pragmatic view of a black family experiencing them, to see how they affected their lives in a quotidian but consequential way. These two words – quotidian and consequential – are hardly ever put together, and I think this is why the manuscript works: it does a good job of handling the moments in which the family experiences the laws. It is neither melodramatic nor willfully removed. These moments are handled deftly... The narrator who is telling us the personal story is a voice worth following. —Jeff Kleinman.*

Georgia. At about five thirty, I wanted to go to dinner, but there had been no announcement about the time. I stepped into the next car looking for the conductor. (He had not actually visited our car since he collected our tickets.) He came rushing from the car ahead and before he said anything to me, I asked:

"What time is dinner being served?"

He coughed then said, "Now."

"How far back is the dining car?"

He sputtered something I couldn't understand and then said, "About four or five cars back."

I passed him and crossed through the doors between cars. Reeling through car after car, I finally came to the dining area.

The dining car was segregated in the most unusual way. Negroes wishing to dine on the train were assigned to one table at the end of the dining car—next to the kitchen. A curtain was drawn around the table after we were seated so white people didn't have to look at us. We ordered from the same menu and we were served by the same waiters. They were all Negroes, as were the chef and other kitchen personnel.

We spent the night sleeping upright in our seats. The Southerner arrived in New York at Penn Station at about 8:30 a.m. the next day. I was not sure where I would board the train for the rest of my trip. I went to the information desk and learned I would have to go to Grand Central Station to board the New York—New Haven—Hartford Railway Train to Boston. I retrieved my luggage, and took a taxi to Grand Central. I picked up a snack and went

through the bustling waiting room to the correct platform. As I boarded the train I immediately observed that I could sit in any car that had a vacant seat.

The return trip was another strange ordeal. I boarded the Southerner bound for New Orleans at Penn Station in New York City. I sat in a car that seated both white and colored people. As soon as the train crossed the Mason-Dixon Line—I believe at Baltimore, Maryland which was the border state into the South—we colored people were moved to the segregated car, the baggage car, half with seats, the other half for baggage with a wall separating the baggage section. I was back on the train with Jim Crow.

The Jim Crow Laws were state and local laws enacted in Southern and border states and enforced between 1896 and 1965. They mandated "separate but equal" status for African-Americans. In reality, this led to treatment and accommodations that were almost always inferior to those provided to white Americans. Although it was legally mandated that the facilities provided should be equal, they were not. Jim Crow laws, in fact, allowed whites to legally segregate blacks. The most important laws required that public schools, public places and public transportation—like trains and buses—have separate facilities for whites and blacks. But the reality was quite different, even when, in 1946, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated seating on interstate busses and trains was unconstitutional. The power of enforcement fell to the states and many Southern states refused to comply. Segregation continued in the South for another thirteen years, years after my ride on the Southerner.

Inevitably, it was a complex task to maintain your dignity within the ironies of Jim Crow, but my parents were wise in the ways of the racial world. They set an example.

*Sybil Morial's lifetime involvement with human and civil rights dates back to the 1950s, when she became an active member of the Urban League of Greater New Orleans and the League of Women Voters. She was a founder of the Louisiana League of Good Government, a non-partisan, interracial women's organization devoted to civil liberties and full participation in government for all Louisiana citizens. Both her late husband and her son served as mayor of New Orleans. During their terms, Mrs. Morial worked to improve the quality of education and healthcare for minorities. She also served as executive producer of *A House Divided*, a highly acclaimed documentary about the desegregation of New Orleans.*

*Morial's other civic affiliations include the Metropolitan Area Committee, the United Fund, the New Orleans Council of Arts for Children and the Amistad Research Center. Morial holds a master's degree from Boston University. She has five children.*



*Leah Lax*  
*2013*  
*Narrative Nonfiction*  
*Runner-Up*



## Uncovered

Another day, after midnight I edge open the back door, try to make sure it doesn't creak. I put the car into neutral and slide down the drive with the driver side door ajar. Once in the street, I ease the door closed and start the motor so that I could be anyone, a passing car that stalled, a hassidic mother escaping to her lover.

Hands on the wheel, foot on the pedal, I have no thought, no sense of moral outrage, no nausea with my subterfuge or with any of the other fruitless duplicities that will come. I won't let myself imagine the betrayal that will linger in my children's eyes for years.

Soon, I will tell myself that I do this as a matter of survival, pikuach nefesh, that, like Levi scrubbing his hands on the Sabbath when he had cancer, the Law stipulates that doing what you have to do to save a life supersedes the Law. That's how I feel, I will tell myself, that I go to Jane in order to survive. I will soothe myself with this justification in the Law, even though I have had little regard for the Law outside of our home for some time.

But right now, as I roll through the sleeping hassidic neighborhood, there's only a reptilian kind of instinct propelling me forward, a body scream. I hide the car in Jane's garage and let myself in her back door with her key, into the house where she now lives alone. Inside the door, I pull off the scarf. Through the kitchen, then the dark still den, down the hall, her even breathing, and I slide into her bed. She wakes, turns to me.

In her arms, I cry. For Levi (which she doesn't appreciate). For all those lost years. For thinking that I could live without knowing the simple peace of this. Warm bodies echoing one another. Steady breath next to me in the night. Silent, constant presence roused to electric in the morning, then back to tandem being

before I slip out for home just after sunrise. For now, this is all that matters. I imagine that won't be true for long.

Jane has a collection of stones in a shallow copper bowl on her vanity, among them royal blue sodalite, green malachite, deep red carnelian. One morning, I find her holding a handful to the early light. She stands, quiet, tilting her open palm this way and that, marking the way light shifts and dances on the polished surfaces. Her face is full of keen observation and wonder. Colors leap. It's a simple moment of stillness, earth, stones, color. Being.



*The 2013 Prize for Best Novella, is made possible by **Theodosia Nolan** of El Dorado, AR, who with her daughter and son-in-law Tia and James Roddy and her grandson Peter Tattersall of New Orleans, is a long time patron of The Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society and its projects, including the William Faulkner -William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition.*

The sensory world underlying language rises into three dimensions.

But day-to-day I don't live in a three dimensional world. Sarah is preparing to leave for yeshiva. I don't want to send her into the life I've lived all these years, but hassidic life is who she is, and I can't imagine cruelly shaking her identity just as it's forming into adulthood. Look at her, I think—taller than me, shining brunette hair in an elegant wave to her shoulders. She just

graduated from the hassidic school. She stepped up to the podium as valedictorian and addressed the community with maturity and polish far beyond her fourteen years. I could almost hear the crowd draw in their collective breath. I think, she's been formed here.

So has my mothering. My job has been to steep her in the Law, inspire her to faith, and none of that has anything to do with my own opinions, which before the huge old stream of history seem small and newly formed. I don't understand yet that I could gently redirect my daughter, don't understand that my presence at her side, coupled with her own young vision and the excitement of new freedom, could turn into a happy adventure. I don't



even understand that instinct can be a mother's greatest guide. We rise, we rise, the Group still says inside me, above our natures. Only God's Word within us has validity.

"You'll be leaving soon," I say to Sarah the afternoon before her departure, and I sit down next to her on her bed.

She grins and nods.

"Listen," I say. "There's something I want you to remember."

"What?"

"Our life, hassidic life, even when you're away at school—it's a gilded cage. You'll make friends and have fun there, and they'll keep telling you every day that it's a perfect life. But it's only good if you never need out, if you never need more. You might need more someday. If you ever do, that will be okay. I'll help you."

"What do you mean?" Sarah says. She looks uncomfortable, puzzled. I take her hand.

But at that moment Levi comes in. Then together, her loving parents present her with a necklace of curved links in three colors of gold. Sarah stands and Levi blesses her with a life in Torah and gives her an awkward hug.

"Wear this and remember what I told you," I say as I close the clasp at the back of her neck. How deeply I want to believe in this moment that my young daughter will remember what I said through all her coming years away from home, that as she matures she will come to understand my warning, that over time, the cage of the Law the yeshiva will seal around her will come into focus. But Sarah is looking to Levi, her face suffused with ineffable love.

I will live with this: That I sealed Sarah into hassidic life at this turning point, into the exhausting, joyful, endless mothering and the workload and silence she will bear, so that all the while she will think it her purpose. She was born and all I did was make the bed, spread the sheets, and she's gone.

After Sarah leaves, I cling to Jane, but I make no changes in my life, still afraid to open up to Levi or leave. Jane begs. But when Passover approaches, I throw myself into the holiday determined to keep up appearances for now, disappearing from Jane for weeks. All the kids fly in from their various yeshivas. When it's all over, I'm relieved to find Jane still waiting.

Sleeping at my "friend's" house becomes an open secret. Shalom, always affectionate and deeply attached to me, becomes withdrawn, angry. Itzik plays basketball on the drive, then brings the ball into the house and bounces it on the Mexican tile and against the wall as if telling us that our home is breaking. Bang. BANG. One morning, Levi seems distraught. When I corner him, he admits dreaming of losing me in a crowd where he wanders, searching.

One morning, watching the news with Jane over coffee, we see the North Tower of the World Trade Center hit. We become a tiny island in a shifting world

*This memoir covers the 30 years the author spent as a part of an ultra-orthodox Hasidic community. The writing is often very solid. She employs a tone that is understated, cold, and distant, but it warms at the right times, like when she explains the significance of a particular event. Many memoirs don't apply this knowing current self, they just rely on the craziness of the facts, and this author doesn't do that. Similarly, she also makes jumps in time, explaining how an event coincides thematically with something that either happened prior to or after the story's "present action." In terms of voice, I like that the author is willing to sprinkle in a few Yiddish words here and there. This inclusion might be polarizing, but I think the play with the two languages off each other (English and Yiddish) is emblematic of the struggle the author has/had with the Hasidic community.*

—Jeff Kleinman.

with bodies falling through air. The second plane hits. There's the mushroom cloud of collapse, another collapse, the Pentagon, the Pennsylvania field, ghost people in white fleeing Manhattan. I have that sense once again of being jerked outside of my life and into the American community, of being wholly, irrevocably a part of that, as if we ourselves are crossing that Manhattan bridge by foot utterly permanently changed and left dusted in white. The world is crumbling.

At home, I hold to my silence about the obvious. I don't know why. Fear? Training? Waiting for the right time when there is no right time? I don't know. I've stayed far too long. Levi, the boys, me, we don't approach our long slow tumble with words.

Even so I insist on staying long enough to make Shalom's bar mitzvah for him the following January. But on that festive day, Shalom simply reads his speech from a page and then absents himself from the festivities, stays outside with friends and (I will find out years later) smokes marijuana. Levi makes a speech with a long sad face trained on me about his gratitude for my devotion to home and family. Is he trying to bring me back? Is this his good-bye? Then (community gossip must be doing its work, preparing the way for me to leave) Rabbi Frumen rises to the podium, looks at me in blatant reprimand and delivers a lecture about the merits in heaven that come to a properly modest woman who obeys the Law.

In the midst of bar mitzvah preparations, my short story about two gay boys in a yeshiva, *Berkeh's Story*, wins the *Moment Magazine* national contest. The magazine has a distribution rate twenty times that of a typical literary

journal. Many thousands will read it. Jane whoops and dances at the news. At the university, where I am near graduation, Dan Stern holds the issue up to his seminar with my name on the cover and tells the class he is proud.

Within days of the publication, the phone rings at home mid-day while the boys are at school. I hear, "Is that Leah Lax?" It's a vaguely familiar man's voice in a heavy Yiddish accent.

"Yes. Who is calling?"

"This is Rav Shechter."

The voice of the Law. Rav Shechter doesn't call people. He's a rabbi's rabbi, highly respected in the Law—people, hassidic people, particularly rabbis, even the most honored and powerful, call him. This is the same voice—only a voice—to whom I once abdicated the great and terrible responsibility for the decision to abort my unborn child. Adrenalin high, heart pounding, fighting old fear implanted in me of the Law, fighting my impulse to submit to a Rabbi's ultimate authority, I think, I'm ready. I have to be.

"Is that the Leah Lax who wrote such a story in a magazine?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were a frumeh woman mit a shetl!"

A religious women with a pious wig. "That's what they say of me," I say.

"So how could you do such a thing!"

I swallow a hard stab of old guilt. But in this moment, my character, Berkeh, in the short story, is real. In this moment, In this moment I love him more than myself, and Rav Schechter just called him "such a thing." Berkeh is not such a thing. "Rav Schechter," I say, "have you actually read the story?"

"Of course not."

"Then how did you know about it?"

"People came to me."

"If you did read it," I say, "you'd see that Berkeh's a good boy. He learns, he dovvens. He wants to do the right thing. He does no sin."

"So?"

I am breathing hard. "Berkeh is many boys in our schools. You have to admit that. He is many of our boys. And Berkeh was born the way he was born. God made him that way. All I did was show him from the inside. I showed his struggle."

"But you've hung out our dirty laundry!" the rabbi cries out. An ultimate hassidic crime.

"I've done. No. Wrong," I say.

The rabbi hangs up.

I stand shaking, the dead phone in my hand. I've spoken back to the Law.

I am not dirty laundry.

## NARRATIVE NON-FICTION OTHER FINALISTS

### **Blameworthy:**

**The Culpability of Cody Posey,**  
Martha Burns, La Luz, NM

### **King of the Gunrunners,**

James W. Miller,  
New Orleans, LA

### **Right to Revolt,**

Patricia  
Boyett, New Orleans, LA

### **The Inventor of Memories,**

Peter Selgin, Milledgeville, GA

### **Not About Love,**

Zena Petersen, Provo, UT

**Leah Lax** holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. Her short fiction and nonfiction have won national contests. A 2000 collaboration with artist/photographer Janice Rubin created The Mikvah Project, still touring Austria and Germany after twenty-six U.S. cities. In 2007, Leah wrote "The Refuge," the libretto for a commissioned work produced by the Houston Grand Opera. "The Refuge" debuted at Wortham Center in Houston to a glowing full-page review in the New York Times and national broadcast on NPR. Uncovered is Leah's memoir of thirty years among the Lubavitcher Hassidim as a secret lesbian. She is represented by Brandt and Hochman Literary Agency. She is currently working on a novel set in Houston.



*Patrick Samway*  
*2013*  
*Narrative Nonfiction*  
*Runner Up*  
**"I am Properly Back Where I  
Started From"**



Theological Postscript to  
**"I am Properly Back Where I Started From":  
Flannery O'Connor to Her Editor Robert Giroux**

Patrick Samway, S.J. ©

Flannery O'Connor's stories and novels deal not so much with imaginative elements of "make believe," but rather with imaginative pieces of fiction which rely on a spiritual emphasis for their creative success.

From one perspective, her fiction reveals characters who, though free, nevertheless experience human limitations; they can either accept themselves and their limitations or they can flee and attempt to escape the self-defeating dread in their lives. "Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery," O'Connor stated forthrightly to Eileen Hall, editor of the Savannah-Atlanta diocesan Bulletin, in March 1956, "mystery that is lived." While O'Connor began with this theological premise, she nevertheless followed her characters once she had created them, interested in seeing where their fortunes and choices would lead them, rooted whether they knew it or not in a Christocentric world.

One of the tasks of the fiction writer for O'Connor was to achieve a sense of metonymy, of the whole found in a representative part, of relationships that begin from the concrete here-and-now and spread out in some mysterious, transcendental fashion. In her essay "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," O'Connor wrote succinctly about her theory of literature: "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story, is called the anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation." Avoiding the trap of trying to locate her fiction within some theoretical metaphysical discussion about the notion of reality, she states in her essay "On Her Own Work," that an anagogical vision offers some type of basis for finding language that rejects unacceptable limits.<sup>1</sup> Her finest tales display an elusiveness within some framework of ambiguity, which makes it impossible to reduce them to a specific theological message, something that O'Connor would have eschewed. More than anyone else, I believe, William Lynch, S.J., one of my former professors, helped her in validating her particular literary direction.<sup>2</sup>

In developing his interpretation of the analogical

imagination, not only in Chapter Six of *Christ and Apollo*, but also in his series of essays "Theology and Imagination," which O'Connor likewise read and commented upon, Lynch brings together sameness and difference, stressing that the things of this world have their own reality, but also participate, as George Kilcourse notes in a discussion of Lynch's thought, in the larger community of being.<sup>3</sup> For Lynch, as emphasized by Kilcourse, the analogical is "that habit of perception which sees that different levels of being are also somehow one and can therefore be *associated in the same image*, in the same and single act of perception." As God became incarnate in Jesus—especially in the Gospel according to Saint John where images of bread, light, a road, the Good Shepherd, to cite but a few, point to the other-worldly—so too does the human imagination probe the finite, the particular, and the limited as a way of describing the mysteries of the infinite God. Thus Catholic theology at once embraces the world and yet at times renounces it, but always sees it—even in its negative forms—as a participation in God's mysterious plan for his people, while seeking to go from the specific to the horizon of the eternal moment. Finite and infinite realities coalesce, for Lynch, and thus there is no need to pull together what has never been separated. For O'Connor, the mystery of God in every part of the universe undergirds the Christian imagination.

But more is at stake, I believe. The Manichean temptation for the human imagination, as Lynch explains, is "to win its freedom by seeking quick infinities through the rapid and clever manipulation of the finite" rather than passing through "all the rigors, density, limitations, and decisions of the actual" (545). In a telling fashion, O'Connor says that Lynch "describes the true nature of the literary imagination as found in a penetration of the finite and the limited.... In genuine tragedy and comedy, the definite is explored to its extremity and man is shown to be the limited creature he is, and it is at this point of greatest penetration of the limited that the artist finds insight. Much modern so-called tragedy avoids this penetration and makes a leap toward transcendence, resulting in an unearned and spacious [sic] resolution of the work."<sup>4</sup> Though O'Connor did not ascribe to the entirety of Lynch's thesis, she did agree with his general theory, since she realized its potential for explaining the Christic imagination, which she saw linked to the



*In terms of subject matter, this is a very illuminating book. The milieu is blue blood literary figures of the early and mid 20th century: O'Connor and Giroux, as well as figures like Robert Lowell and John Berryman. It has a built-in readership: readers of O'Connor and admirers of that circle. Also, it could prove timely, since Boris Kachka's book about Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, entitled *Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art at America's Most Celebrated Publishing House*, is just out.*

—Jeff Kleinman

anagogical interpretation of Scripture as expressed in the Latin phrase "*Littera gesta docet, quod credas allegoria, moralia qui agas, quo tendas anagogia*" ("The literal teaches events, allegory what you believe, the moral teaches what to do, the anagogical where you are headed").

I feel sure O'Connor would have altered or at least highly nuanced her views concerning the four-fold interpretation of Sacred Scripture, given not only the insights in Lucretia Yaghjian's fine article on O'Connor and Christology, but also the incredible hermeneutical developments in Scripture since her death, led in the United States by such eminent scholars as Raymond Brown, S.S., Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland Murphy, O. Carm.<sup>5</sup> O'Connor's assessment of Scripture reflects a Church that was just beginning to deepen its study of the Jewish Bible and the New Testament, much of it borrowed from innovative work of German scholars. She would *not* have been aware of the dramatic impact it would have on the discussion and decrees of the Second Vatican Council. Her penchant for accepting a four-fold reading of Sacred Scripture is not without merit, yet one would be hard put to find Scripture scholars today who embrace interpretations of Christian sacred texts based solely on medieval theological categories.

It is most curious that those who tend to discuss O'Connor's views on theology and philosophy rarely mention that she was never formally trained in either discipline. This does not mean, of course, that she did not understand the specific books she read, but her knowledge did not come from a face-to-face encounter with experts in these fields. Instruction by trained professionals and the resulting focused classroom discussions can assist one in gaining a larger view of the topic under discussion. To talk about O'Connor's theology and the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, as most of her critics tend to do with varying degrees of insight and depth, infers a history of the knowledge of specific doctrines and why and how they were formulated by numerous Church councils, from Nicea (325) to Trent (1545-63), which dealt with issues

about the nature of Jesus as Christ, the trinitarian God, and the Church. To omit an acknowledgment of these councils is, in effect, to reduce the history of the Church to a spiritual memo or message. Though O'Connor showed no interest in the specific decrees of the First Vatican Council (1869-70), she seemed willing to learn about the Church's complex process of up-dating and change taking place in Rome during the latter years of her life. Above all, her letters to Betty Hester in *The Habit of Being* show her absolute conviction in the dogmas of her Church. Unlike the final decrees of the Second Vatican Council, not in full force during O'Connor's lifetime, those of the First Vatican Council tended to be prescriptive rather than descriptive, based on what it considered to be assured, rock-solid, absolute certainty that could easily sniff out anything to the contrary.

Focused, concentrated, and forthright, O'Connor's statements about faith have a curious a-historical character about them, since they do not take into account the stories and statements about Jesus the Christ in the New Testament or the sometimes controversial development of doctrine and Christology over the centuries. Why are there so few specific references in the collection of her occasional prose, entitled *Mystery and Manners*, about the events of Jesus's life as mentioned by the four evangelists or by Saint Paul in his various letters? O'Connor clearly preferred to express her religious faith by relying on dogmatic concepts, such as sin, redemption, grace, and the sacraments, particularly baptism, all within a context of the Christian mystery in its intensely dramatic sense. She had no intention of solving problems as if they were pieces in a Rubik's cube. Throughout her entire life, O'Connor *heard* passages from the Jewish Bible and the New Testament read by priests at Mass in Latin, which might have proved to be an obstacle to her from entering into the drama of Christ's life.

But such generalities can be deceiving, since the rituals and readings of Holy Week that vividly recall Jesus's Passion are extraordinarily gripping. Still and all, the use of Latin in O'Connor's day provided a sense of awe for many faithful, not because they could necessarily understand Latin as a language (O'Connor had just one credit in high school Latin), but because it opened up and seemed to include a sense of the divine—and a way to be transported back to the days when Jesus walked around the Holy Land, preaching his counter-cultural message. All of this is to say that O'Connor's discussion of theology, particularly its Thomistic formulations, reflects much of the thinking of her particular time and society.<sup>6</sup>

O'Connor became a consummate short story writer whose place in fiction is assured, not only because of her theological bias, but because she was ahead of her time, out of the mainstream of writers of the 1940's and 50's, and wrote in a postmodern mode, by which I mean her work goes beyond modernism, which refers to a radical shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities evident in art and literature during the post-World War I period. Modernism broke with so-called Victorian bourgeois

morality, rejecting nineteenth-century optimism and opting instead for moral relativism. In their attempt to throw off the aesthetic burden of the realistic novel, these writers introduced a variety of literary tactics and devices, including the radical disruption of the linear flow of narrative, the frustration of conventional expectations concerning unity and coherence of plot and character, and the deployment of ironic and ambiguous juxtapositions to call into question the moral, theological, and philosophical meaning of literary action.<sup>7</sup> Several forms of modernist thought ground themselves in their own self-presence—without God and without a center. The pared-down, fragmentary, non-chronological poetic forms of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound revolutionized literature and, in turn, much of the American poetry and fiction of that time period.

Postmodern movements in literature and theology have attempted to challenge some modernist tenets. Thus a fair number of postmodern literary theorists, rejoicing in intense irony and intellectual comedy, tended to deconstruct works of literature, arriving at books filled just with words arranged in certain, discernible patterns. But not all postmodern theorists, especially those who believe in God, such as Flannery O'Connor who kept her eyes and heart on a definite theological center, are deconstructionists. As a postmodernist, one ahead of her time as it were, O'Connor resisted the temptation to depict her fictive world a-linguistically and a-historically. In alignment with the thinking of the Second Vatican Council, a good number of her characters, people filled with marvelous foibles, are on a pilgrimage, holy or otherwise, in need of conversion. O'Connor wrote about those whom the modern tradition too often repressed: the mystic, the prophetic, the marginalized—in short, she dealt with otherness, difference, transgression, excess—current notions (some even might say buzz words) so much part of contemporary critical parlance today.

O'Connor once wrote in "A Fiction Writer and His Country," that a literary vocation "is a limiting factor which extends to the kind of material that the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively. The writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live, and so far as he is concerned a living *deformed character* is acceptable and a dead whole one is not" (emphasis mine).<sup>8</sup> And this explains, in part, why she is so beloved to adult readers who know about otherness, difference, transgression, and excess, but difficult for young adults who have yet to amass a critical number of potentially mortal weaknesses. O'Connor's postmodern tendencies, seemingly old-fashioned, down-home, and local, nevertheless have a universal appeal, rooted in a polyvalent, unrestrictive sense of the Christian mystery she herself demanded in her own fiction.

For many, O'Connor's work can be conceived as an effort to recover the ideal of the Holy in an age in which both the meaning and reality of the concept have been obscured. She believed that the loss of the Holy involved for society a concomitant loss of depth and a

subsequent diminution of being. Therefore she felt the need to journey through the radically profane, embracing evil at times in order to rediscover the good, pursuing the demonic in order to arrive finally at the Holy.

Her fictive journey through life was motivated by a desperate desire to affirm a basis for human existence that transcends the waywardness and willfulness of the individual human self. Furthermore O'Connor's characters are free to choose their final dwelling places. She constantly kept her focus on mystery and manners—the mystery of Christianity, sometimes radical Protestantism but more often traditional Catholicism, and the world of Southern manners.

If Flannery O'Connor did not want her mule or wagon stalled on the same track when Faulkner's *Dixie Limited* came roaring down, something similar could be said about her tremendous strength as a fiction writer focused on Christian mystery and Southern manners. Other writers with similar interests would be well advised to take alternate routes.

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 "The Nature and Aim of Fiction." Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1969. 72. See also "On Her Own Work," *Mystery and Manners* 107-18.
- 2 O'Connor reviewed two of Father Lynch's books: *Christ and Apollo: The Dimensions of the Literary Imagination* (20 Aug. 1960) and *The Integrating Mind: An Exploration into Western Thought* (4 Aug. 1962). See Flannery O'Connor's *The Presence of Grace and Other Book Reviews*. Leo J. Zuber, comp., Carter W. Martin, ed. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1983. 74-75, 94.
- 3 Lynch, S.J., William. "Theology and Imagination II: The Evocative Symbol." *Thought* 29 (Winter 1954-55): 529-54. See George A. Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination: A World with Everything Off Balance*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001. 114.
- 4 *Presence of Grace* 94.
- 5 See Lucretia B. Yaghjian's "Flannery O'Connor's Use of Symbol, Roger Haight's Christology, and the Religious Writer." *Theological Studies* 63 (June 2002): 268-301. See also *Mystery and Manners* 72-73, 111.
- 6 See Brad Gooch's informative essay "Thirteenth-Century Lady." *Flannery O'Connor Review* 5 (2007): 23-34.
- 7 See John Barth's "The Literature of Replenishment." *Atlantic* 245 (January 1980): 65-71.
- 8 "A Fiction Writer and His Country," *Mystery and Manners* 27.

JACK WAS MAKING his case for a different way to live. Simpler, closer to the earth, he called it. To show Elise what he meant, he tipped back on his kitchen chair, balancing on two legs. He worked best by demonstration, so she paid close attention. She didn't want to miss his point and have to sit through the whole thing again. He teetered farther and farther back in the chair. At the exact moment she thought he'd gone too far, his hands shot out and he lurched forward. The chair landed on all fours. "That," he told her, "is how I feel all the time."

"All the time, Jack?" she asked. They'd been having this conversation for several years now, but the idea of it still caught her off guard.

"I don't want to own anything more than I need," he said.

He stood up and pushed the chair away, leaned over the table, his face inches from hers. His lips were chapped, unnaturally red. "But I'm talking about a whole lot more than just things, Elise. Where everything counts." He put his hands on her shoulders like he was about to shake her, but they only sat there, feeling hot and feverish through her blouse.

She took a deep breath, nodded her head, and said, "Yes, okay."

And just like that, they put their house on the market, and cashed in the college funds of the children they decided not to have, after all. They quit their life in Portland, he at *The Oregonian*—he'd grown to hate the smell of ink—and she at Multnomah County Library (where she'd loved everything until her kidnapping), and bought a small farm along the John Day River.

Reversing direction is a process, Jack told her. She knew nothing happened overnight, but she wasn't as sure they'd been going the wrong way.

THREE MONTHS LATER on a Saturday afternoon, they arrived in Lostine, Jack driving the U-Haul truck, with his Pantera blaring no doubt; Elise following in their Landcruiser, radio off, spelling words backwards to make new words. *Snug guns; tool loot*—though no words under five letters counted. *Deliver reviled* was her current favorite. *Wobble elbbow?*

She parked next to Jack and waited for the dust to settle. Through the bug-splattered windshield, she



*Sharon Thatcher*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Novel In Progress



### Trespass

stared at her new home. The two-story clapboard farmhouse jutted from the earth like a white domino (or tombstone), 4 black dots for windows, black tricorne roof. Behind it loomed a peeling red barn, and to the right of the barn stood a silo, which according to Jack, was a good candidate for upcycling into a guest house. He'd written an article for *The Oregonian* about converting silos into eco-homes. Elise preferred rooms with corners.

A porch light burned. Electricity was on at least. They'd given up their cell phones for a landline, only to learn later it would take weeks to get service. She could've used her cellphone during the drive to call Jack and tell him to slow down. She'd parked at a McDonald's—under a tree where the starlings that scoured the parking lot congregated—and when she turned on her wipers, found she had no windshield fluid. Jack was supposed to have checked everything. Finally, she pulled over and used bottled water and her bandana—now she knew for sure how they got the name *doo rag*—to clean the window enough to see light.

The For Sale sign, property of their realtor, Maud—a mauve-haired pigeon of a woman in her 60s—had been uprooted and forgotten on the front steps. When Maud first revealed the owner had died (and after seeing Elise's stricken face upon hearing the news), quickly added, "At the nursing home *in town*," but still jerked her feathery head in the direction of what would be Jack and Elise's bedroom, *upstairs*. It creeped Elise out to think someone might have died in her new home; but didn't every house built in the '20s have at least one deathbed under its belt?

Today had to be 90°. Too hot for May. When she opened her car door, Jack was right there waiting. His bear hug pressed her face into the pearly snap buttons of the old-style western shirt she'd bought him at a thrift shop for his birthday. Demonstrative Jack. A hands-on man suited more for carpentry than writing a weekly column about it. Always rubbing his hands—big basketball player hands—along railings, scratching his back against edges of posts, door frames.

She squealed when he lifted her off her feet and carried her like a bride up the steps, her white Keds



bouncing off his thighs, she worrying the whole time about his knee injury from college. It had been ten years since he'd last carried her anywhere, and that was into the Caribbean on their honeymoon when she'd worried more about her ass hanging out of her bikini than his bad knee.

He set her down on the porch, and with hands smelling of steering-wheel leather, cupped her face. "No regrets?" he asked.

"None." She wanted to smile, but found her mouth too dry.

The day Elise told her parents she and Jack were quitting their jobs in Portland, and reversing direction, her mother took Elise aside and said, "I always knew he'd ruin your life." Then she cried.

All this time her mother had kept her feelings about Jack inside? Her father loved Jack. He'd commended his son-in-law for following his dream of leaving his "sissy desk job to go do real work." Her father had retired a disillusioned desk jockey.

Elise thought her mother loved Jack, too. How he was always there for her, particularly after the kidnapping. "No one's ruining anyone's life," Elise said. "We're just moving to the country."

They unloaded the rugs first—the Egyptian, the Oriental, the hand-knotted red Moroccan—and left them rolled up against the living room wall. Jack carried in boxes marked kitchenware, linen, books, and put them all in the dining room. Elise carried in the two magnums of Champagne kept ice cold during the drive. Jack insisted on spending a week's grocery money for the real deal.

After calling it quits, they took off their shoes and rested their backs against the hard oak floor, faces turned toward each other. The wood was cool against her bare legs; her elbows tingled at the funny bone.

Jack reached for her hand and squeezed. "I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you."

*Just like Mom.* "What a thing to say."

"You know what I mean."

It began to rain. It wasn't supposed to rain. Maud disclosed the leaky roof days before signing. Jack didn't bat an eye. He told Maud 'no worries', he'd planned on replacing the roof anyway. The last six solar months of his weekly column had been dedicated to sustainable green roofs, enough for his next how-to book.

He should have at least asked for a goodly credit for Maud's breach of ethics, maybe some of her commission. They could have caused her some grief. But, his *Que Sera, Sera* attitude was one of the things Elise liked best about him. He even went around mumbling the damn song half the time. Even still, a little show of backbone every now and then wouldn't hurt Laidback Jack.

"I'd better go get that roll of Visqueen," Jack said. "Tack it over the leak."

Elise stayed inside, mindful of Jack's footsteps overhead, her eyes flashing to the ceiling with each fi-TOOSH of his nail gun. Her father had given Jack the nail gun "for some real use." He'd bought it for himself when he retired. "World's first fuel cell powered cordless

*Trespass is the alluring story of a woman and her husband who escape from Portland, OR to the country, to simplify their lives and to create a safe haven after a recent kidnapping that has left the wife shaken. Upon arrival at their rural home, they encounter unexpected problems with the old house, along with a young couple camping on their property. Although the trespassers initially agree to leave, they don't, and their lurking presence becomes increasingly threatening to the new owners, causing fissures to develop in their marriage as the husband dismisses the danger that his wife perceives. Told in a clear and compelling voice, Trespass is the creepy tale of a fresh start gone awry. It combines the best of a good mystery with the intriguing tale of a marriage in transition, and has the hallmarks of a tension-filled, satisfying story.*

—April Eberhardt

nailer. No hoses or compressors required. Two nails per second, Jack! 2,200 nails per battery charge!" Overkill for the birdhouses he built for Mom. *Poor Daddy.*

When she went to screw a lightbulb into the socket, she found a spider nesting inside. The spider—black and hairy, crab-like with four red eyes (her reflection in each one!)—fell, no *leapt* at her, landing on her shoulder, skittering across her neck. She screamed, flicked it off, did the heebie jeebie dance wiping her arms, shaking out her hair. She finally saw it sprinting across the floor where it crawled inside her Moroccan. The rug she'd grown to hate.

*Her Moroccan... Her nightmare. With a gun. Hiding in her car after work—Drive beetch or I keel you—red-eyed in the rearview, wearing a fez for chrissake! in Portland! wanting money and a ride to nowhere, violining a watch chain over the veins in her neck—approvingly, lovingly—every time she turned where he told her.*

Elise gasped when the front door blew open. Jack stood in the doorway wiping his feet. "It's just me." Water dripped from the tip of his nose and off his earlobes, like pink lactating udders. She'd read that spiders ooze liquid from their udders (okay, mouths) to feed their babies. Charlotte taught her brood to throw their silks and catch their own prey; that's when they went off and left her. Those who stayed behind ate her body after she died. It's what spiders did.

She found a towel for Jack. He put it over his head, and motorboating his lips, rubbed his hair and face dry. He finally met her eyes. "Hey, you okay?"

She waved him off—her ‘everything’s fine’ sign.

He dropped the towel. “El? What is it?”

“A spider,” she said.

“C’mon, talk to me.”

She shrugged like a mute, palms up.

He sighed, “Where is it, this spider?”

Did he need it to be *more* than just a spider?

“Inside the Moroccan,” she said.

He lifted one end of the rug, kicked it, lifted the other end; nothing. “Everything eventually gets back to the Moroccan?”

“You’re the one bringing it up.”

Jack sighed. “It’s been 3 years, El—”

“It’s not like he raped me, right?”

“Those are your words.”

The old argument erupted like a home-made bottle rocket. *Hah! You think I don’t know YOU?* “Driving around with a gun to my head doesn’t cut it for you? Not enough *danger*?” Unfair, but it was in her script, just like his next sentence would come out of his stinky, dirty hamper.

“Goddamnit, Elise, don’t put words in my mouth.”

“The words were already there! Only now you’ve added goddamnit.” *Like that’s enough to convince me you’re concerned.* She picked up his towel—a faded picture of Dimebag Darrel on it—and spread it over the box marked BOOKS. “Really, I’m fine. It was the spider.” *Truce.*

JACK POPPED OPEN the 2<sup>nd</sup> bottle of Champagne. None spilled this time. He’d changed into his blackwatch pajama bottoms. She was in her silk camisole and tap pants. They were sitting on the air mattress they’d blown up for the night, backs leaned against the wall under the front picture window. Elise picked at the wide-striped white and beige wallpaper. When Maud first showed them the house, she’d tapped on the wallpaper, “It’s the original,” as if it were a selling point. What sweet old Maud didn’t know was the expense they’d incur getting rid of the stuff.

“To simplicity,” Jack toasted.

She clinked his glass. Bubbles popped under her nose when she drank.

Then: “I saw a tent and a van,” Jack said, “back by the fence line.”

She swallowed her Champagne too quickly.

While she spluttered, he said, “When I was up on the roof.”

“And you’re telling me *now*? Jesus, Jack.”

“You were jumpy enough. I didn’t want to—”

“It was the *spider*, I told you.” She sat up on her knees, put her glass on the window ledge. “Where? Where is this tent?”

“Near the stand of cottonwoods at the far edge of the meadow. Probably just stopped for the night, don’t even know they’re trespassing.”

“They?! Don’t even know they’re trespassing? How do they think this house got here? *They*? How big is

this tent?”

“Or he. Or she. Not a big tent. I don’t know. I didn’t see anyone.” He patted the empty area of air mattress beside him. “I’ll let *whoever* it is know they need to move on in the morning. *If* they’re still here at all.”

*Yeah right... Unless you invite them—and Maud too!—to stay a couple months.*

She scooted back over to him. “That’s just weird,” she said.

He nuzzled her neck, kissed her shoulder...

“Jack?”

...kissed her lips.

When he leaned back to look in her eyes, she said, “They’ll be gone first thing? Either way?”

He stroked her hair. “Either way,” he said.

After they made love and Jack fell asleep, she stood at the window, staring out at the black night. She mistook a distant car’s headlight for a flashlight beam; branches scraping the house for someone trying to break in.

**Sharon Thatcher** received her MFA in Creative Writing at Boise State University. Her short story **Trespassers** was a runner up for Best Short Story in the 2009

**William Faulkner-William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition**. Currently, she is in the process of expanding this short story into a full-length novel with the title **Trespass**. Literary Agent April Eberhardt has selected **Trespass** for the 2013 gold medal for Best Novel-in-Progress. An excerpt from the Novel-in-Progress will be published in the 2013 edition of **The Double Dealer**, which will go live a couple of weeks in advance of **Words & Music, 2013**. Sharon lives and writes in Boise, ID, where she’s surrounded by friends and family, who inspire her daily. She has dedicated her win to her daughter, Haley, and sons Richard and James. **Trespass** is her second novel.



**April Eberhardt**, judge of the Novel In Progress category, founded her own agency after 25 years as a corporate strategist and consultant. April will participate in **Words & Music, 2013** again this year as a faculty member.



*Chris Tusa*  
*2013*  
*Novel In Progress*  
*Runner-Up*



## ***The City of Falling Stars***

All across the city dead birds were falling out of the sky. At least that's what the woman on the local radio station said as Maurice and his daughter, Audrey, drove through downtown New Orleans. The woman said flocks of dead birds had been found near City Hall and Lee Circle. She also indicated that scientists were testing the air for gas and chlorine leaks, but that no one knew for sure what killed the birds.

As the woman's rusty voice crawled through the speakers, a lump of fear settled in Maurice's gut like a dead fetus. He stopped at a traffic light and glanced over at the same pile of abandoned cars he'd seen stacked under the overpass for the last few months. The junked cars were caked with a thick layer of grey silt, and Maurice thought they looked like Hollywood props from the set of some new post-apocalyptic movie. After the traffic light turned green, he turned onto Annunciation Street. He'd only travelled a few blocks when he heard a strange thud, as if something had hit the car.

"What was that?" he asked, imagining a bird striking the car, the roof splattered with bloody feathers and bird guts.

"What was what?" Audrey said.

"That sound." Maurice rolled down the window as he spoke, listened to the low hum of traffic from the overpass, then glanced up at the flicker of streetlights. It had been nearly eight months since the storm, but the skyline still looked cracked and war-torn, littered with what looked like bombed-out buildings, luxury hotels with the windows blown out, dirty white curtains waving in the wind like flags.

"I didn't hear anything."

Maurice was a thin, muscular man with a receding hairline and a small potbelly. His stomach was polluted with ulcers, so as usual he was sipping from a bottle of Maalox.

"I wonder if it was one of those birds," he said, still glancing out the window, his startled eyes frantically scanning from left to right. "The ones they're talking about on the radio."

"Jesus, Dad," Audrey groaned, her voice tainted with frustration. In the last few months she'd grown exhausted from constantly having to dismiss Maurice's silly fears. In the past, her mother had been burdened with the task, but ever since her parents had separated, it had become Audrey's responsibility, and for the last few months she'd worn it the way one might wear a hand-me-down dress that didn't quite fit.

"It wasn't a bird," Audrey said, the frustration building in her voice. "Or hail. Or a falling meteor. Or whatever else you're worried about."

"What if it was the gas tank, then?" Maurice asked, his eyes scanning the rearview mirror. He took a swig of Maalox. "I read on the Internet that in certain trucks there's a faulty wire in the gas tank that's been causing them to explode. People even reported hearing a strange thumping sound coming from the rear of their truck."

Audrey raised her eyebrows. "You don't even drive a truck."

"If it can happen in a truck," Maurice said, his voice twitching, "it can happen in a car. Fourteen trucks have already exploded. One family was burned alive. Another man survived, but half of his face was burned off. He lost an ear, and his nose was melted to his face. They had to construct a new nose and ear using cartilage from his rib."

"Jesus. The gas tank is fine, Dad. I thought you were going to stop worrying so much."

Maurice had spent most of his life worrying. For as long as he could remember, he'd been frightened of the world around him. To make matters worse, for the last twenty-two years he'd worked as an underwriter for United Life Insurance, so he dealt with death on a daily basis. Over the years all the catastrophes he'd warned his clients about had piled up in his brain, so much so, that the inside of his skull had become wallpapered with images of shark bites, train wrecks, mushroom clouds, plane crashes, mudslides and falling meteors. When he wasn't at work, Maurice spent most of his free



time memorizing homicide statistics, fatality reports on automobile accidents, tornadoes, and earthquakes. When the family went on vacations he worried about whether or not the sun tan lotion secretly caused skin cancer or whether or not he'd be electrocuted in the hotel pool as a result of a short circuit in an underwater light. Even when he was at work he found himself researching statistics on drive-by shootings, serial killers, organ snatchers, killer whales, and anything else he could find.

"I thought I was doing better for a while," Maurice said. "And then the hurricane hit. It just seems like ever since Katrina, New Orleans is so much more dangerous than it used to be."

"The whole world is dangerous, Dad." As Audrey spoke, she fiddled with the rape whistle that was dangling from a chain around her neck. Maurice had given her the whistle when she'd started college, and though she hated it, she'd worn it religiously, mostly because she knew it made Maurice less concerned about her safety.

Maurice took another swig of Maalox. "Did you know that statistically Disneyland is the safest place in America?"

"So what?" Audrey said. "You want move to Disneyland? You can't live there, Dad. It's a theme park."

"I'm just saying, statistically it's the safest place in America. Do you know only nine people have died at Disneyland since it opened in 1955? And all of those, except one, were accidents. Drunk kids sneaking into the park and drowning, people getting their heads lopped off while riding some roller coaster, stuff like that."

"What about the other one?" Audrey asked. "The one that wasn't an accident?"

"Some guy got stabbed to death in Tomorrowland. He groped some girl's breast, and her boyfriend got mad and stabbed him."

"So what's the moral of the story?" Audrey asked, her words tainted with sarcasm. "Feel a girl up in Disneyland and you'll get stabbed to death?"

As Audrey said this, Maurice heard the thumping sound again.

"You didn't hear that?" he asked, a tiny tumor of fear growing inside him. He sat up in his seat and hugged the steering wheel.

Audrey rolled her green eyes and sighed. She was bony, with light brown skin and long, thin hair the color of red velvet cake. She had a crooked nose, and she wore thick white-framed glasses. The Radiohead shirt she was wearing stopped just above her navel, exposing her silver waist chain and the black swan tattoo just above her hipbone.

She unbuckled her seatbelt, leaned into the dashboard, and glanced up, but all she could see was a black sky cluttered with dull stars. "This is so ridiculous," she said. "There's nothing to see. Maybe you should pay attention to the road, instead of worrying about some stupid bird."

Maurice was actually surprised that Audrey wasn't more upset about the birds, mostly because she'd

*In The City of Falling Stars, dead birds are falling out of the New Orleans sky, and Walter Mullgrave, reeling in the aftermath of Katrina, and separated from his wife, who's pregnant by another man, suspects the worst. Convinced of a government plot, Walter begins to see danger in everything around him, all the while guzzling Maalox and erecting a storm shelter in his front yard. His children, both amused and annoyed by their father's creeping paranoia, humor him, as does his wife, but the semblance of normality they attempt to maintain as a family is quickly crumbling. This witty tragicomedy, distinguished by snappy dialogue and a subtle sense of the absurd, convincingly captures the uncertainty and fear pervading the country in the wake of 9/11 and Katrina, and amid the continued undercurrent of war. —April Eberhardt*

spent the majority of her teenage life protecting animals. She'd been attending Tulane University for the last two years, and when she wasn't at school, she was usually volunteering at the Humane Society or rounding up friends to rally against some recent act of animal cruelty. She'd seen a documentary on poultry farms in high school, and ever since then she'd been a vegetarian. Her bedroom was covered with pictures of turkeys cooped up in metal cages, bloody chickens hanging upside-down from hooks, monkeys with metal electrodes strapped to their skulls. Her wrecked Hyundai was plastered with bumper stickers with catchy little sayings like: *Club Sandwiches Not Seals* and *Save a Fox, Shoot a Hunter*.

Audrey turned the volume down on the radio. "Have you talked to Vivian?" she asked, trying desperately to distract Maurice from the birds.

Vivian was actually Audrey's mother's name, but ever since Vivian and Maurice had separated, Audrey had refused to refer to her as *Mother*.

"I spoke to her on Thursday," Maurice said, staring out the driver's side window as he spoke, at a fluorescent moon flickering between the passing flurry of high rises.

"When's her ultrasound?"

"Next week," Maurice said.

"Is what's-his-name going with her?"

"Vincent?" Maurice asked, arching his neck as he continued to stare at the sky. "I don't think so."

"Has he even called to check on how the baby's doing?"

"Your mother says he doesn't want anything to do with the baby. He's married with two kids. I don't think his

# 2013 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

wife even knows.”

“What the hell did she ever see in that guy anyway?”

“I don’t know, Audrey,” Water said, a hint of exasperation in his voice. “If you’re so curious, why don’t you ask her when she comes over on Monday?”

“She’s coming over for dinner again? We just had dinner with her a few weeks ago.”

“Yes,” Maurice sighed. “Dinner twice a month. That’s the plan.”

“What’s the point of you two getting divorced,” Audrey asked, “if I still have to have dinner with her every two weeks?”

“We’re legally separated, not divorced.”

“Don’t play semantics, Dad. She moved out, and the only time you see her is when we have these little bullshit dinners where we all act like we’re still a family.”

“You should want to have dinner with her,” Maurice said. “She’s your mother.”

“Mothers don’t leave their family and have babies with other men.”

“Regardless of whether we’re living together or not,” Maurice said, “the fact is we’re still married. And who knows, we may even get back together at some point.”

“People don’t get separated so that they can get back together.”

They stopped at a red light and Maurice glanced up at the sky again, scanning it for any sign of the dead birds. “I read somewhere that fifty-one percent of all spouses cheat on their mates,” he said, “so at least we’re normal, statistically I mean.”

“Jesus, Dad! You’re serious?”

Maurice sighed and turned to Audrey. “I’m just trying to find some silver lining here, Audrey.”

“There’s no silver lining, Dad. She cheated on you, and now she’s pregnant. You should be happy it’s over.”

But Maurice wasn’t happy it was over. In fact, he couldn’t remember being happy once since Vivian had left. He missed her desperately, and her leaving had left him deeply depressed, so much that his doctor had put him on Prozac, which Maurice had been taking for the last few months.

“I can’t just stop loving your mother just because she cheated on me, Audrey.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to spend all your time pining over her, that’s all. Rochelle’s mom just got divorced. You’d like her. She’s a complete MILF. She looks like one of the Desperate Housewives, the red-headed one. And she owns her own business.”

Maurice turned the volume up on the radio, and the woman’s staccato voice wormed its way through the car. “What in God’s name is a MILF?” he asked, cracking a smile.

“It’s kind of like a Cougar, you know, like a hot older woman.”

“I’m not dating any MILFs, Audrey. Or any Cougars. I just need to be by myself for a while.”

“Ok, but Rochelle said her mom thinks you are hot.”

“Really?” Maurice said, feeling a bit guilty that the compliment had put a smile on his face. “She thinks I’m hot?”

“Yep, she said you looked like a younger version of Denzel Washington with glasses.”

“Denzel Washington, huh?” Maurice smiled to himself. “No,” he said, his face growing serious, “regardless of whether we’re living together or not, the fact is I’m still a married man, at least officially.”

As the traffic dragged to a crawl, Maurice stopped at a red light and glanced over at the Oriental rug store on the corner. The sidewalk in front of the building was littered with heaps of bricks and cinder blocks, twisted strips of aluminum siding tangled in a web of electrical wire. The roof was caved-in, only ripped pieces of tarpaper left where shingles had been. Maurice had passed the building a hundred times, and ever since the storm, the massive plate-glass window in the front of the store had been covered with a large piece of plywood, spray-painted with a message in white letters that read: *Will reopen soon*. But as he passed the building, Maurice was surprised to notice that the message sprayed across the plywood had been changed. The new message read: *And I saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. --Revelation 13:1*

As he drove down Napoleon Avenue, Maurice remembered how he and Vivian had purchased an oriental rug from the store just after their son Brandon had been born. He thought about Vivian, and the sadness and hopelessness he’d felt since she’d left began to blossom inside him. In the last few months, on more than one occasion, he’d considered swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills, even hanging himself. And though Katrina had blown through his life just months before, leaving his house relatively unscathed, a small part of him sometimes wished that a second storm would come along, that its bloody waters would wash away his wrecked life and swallow him gloriously in its swirling black wake.

**Chris Tusa** was born and raised in New Orleans. He holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Florida. His debut novel, *Dirty Little Angels*, was published by The University of West Alabama in March of 2009. He recently received a grant from the Louisiana Division of the Arts. His work has appeared in *Connecticut Review*, *Texas Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Southeast Review*, *New South*, *South Dakota Review*, *Passages North* and others. Aside from teaching in the English Department at LSU, he also serves as Editor for *Fiction Southeast*. His debut collection of poems, *Haunted Bones*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press in 2006.



*Jacob Appel*  
*2013*  
*Novel In Progress*  
*Runner-Up*  
**Surrendering**  
**Appomattox**



The most amusing aspect of Emmanuel's letter wasn't his contention that the Civil War hadn't taken place; it only was later in the afternoon that Betsy and I began to joke about that claim—exchanging musings about other historical events that hadn't taken place, like the extinction of the dinosaurs and the death of Elvis. No, what initially struck our funny bones was my colleague's reference to his unshakeable belief that the Greer family gene pool carried a "misfortune allele," a rare genetic mutation that brought perennial back luck to the ill-fated few who carried it.

When I first encountered Greer, more than thirty years before, he'd still been in the process of developing his particular version of genetics. I was a graduate student at Columbia University at the time, and as a novice aspiring to a career in nineteenth century history, I'd looked forward with anticipation to meeting Betsy's illustrious relative. We'd arranged an intimate dinner party at the brownstone of my father's widowed sister, Alma Smythe Newcomb: In addition to Emmanuel, we invited my faculty adviser, Charles Hopkinson, and his wife. Hopkinson was only five years my senior, but he was already a rising authority on Lincoln artifacts. Having never before met my wife's cousin, I also secretly harbored a fantasy that he might fall for my aunt. Yet when the appointed hour finally arrived, Emmanuel showed up with a large portfolio under his arm. He was shorter than I had expected, older than his dust-jacket photos by some years, and his limbs were disproportionately stunted for his wisp of a torso.

"So you're Betsy's betrothed, are you?" he asked when I opened the door—before he'd even entered the foyer. I admitted that I was and led him into the parlor. The Hopkinsons and Aunt Alma had been present for some time, having passed the previous half-hour struggling to find a conversation topic of mutual interest. After exhausting the impact of modern technology on archiving (Hopkinson's suggestion) and the shortcomings of my late uncle (Alma's suggestion), the three had been awaiting our arrival in awkward silence.

"Let me congratulate you then, Nicholas, on an excellent choice—from a genetic standpoint!" Emmanuel's enthusiasm pierced the tranquility. "Thank you," I stammered.

"My grandmother's family—that's your intended's side of my family—has always been genetically lucky. Has Betsy told you that her great-uncle once won the Rhode Island state lottery? In contrast, the rest of my relatives have been beset with generations of ill-luck. We carry a misfortune gene." This was long before the start of Emmanuel's public descent into eccentricity, so I figured that he was speaking figuratively, and I smiled. It wasn't until several minutes later, his charts spread out on the carpet of my aunt's parlor, that I began to wonder if the author of *Lincoln's Psyche: Excursion into the Unknowable*, wasn't a first-rate crackpot.

"Take a look at this!" Emmanuel declared, pointing at the diagram that he had uncoiled and weighed down at the corners with several books and an ashtray. "Of the eight hundred twenty-three direct descendants of Ebenezer Greer, a remarkable five hundred nineteen have met their deaths through unnatural causes." "How morbid," observed Aunt Alma.

"Morbid, indeed. The evidence is overwhelming. Nan Greer Hanson became the only Anglo-Saxon to perish in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire when she was crushed by the body of an Italian seamstress who jumped from a ninth floor window. Captain Archibald Greer was ordnance officer for General Custer at Little Bighorn. My third cousin, James Scott Greer, went down with the Titanic in 1912, and his brother Benjamin Stanton Greer sank on the Lusitania three years later. It's uncanny!"

One had to concede that this makeshift family tree was enough to raise eyebrows. Emmanuel had labeled each of his relations who'd perished under unusual circumstances with a large plus, while a minus sign indicated those few who'd survived to old age. The project resembled a child's arithmetic exercise. Even Hopkinson, whose scholarship has always been distinguished by a focus on statistical evidence, appeared genuinely impressed by the mass of data Greer had mustered to support his claim. His bizarre visual aid had thoroughly eclipsed my plans to discuss my own research on battlefield diaries.

"Every major disaster of the past three hundred years has involved a Greer. Greers went down with the Maine and the Reuben James and the Edmund Fitzgerald; they burned in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the



Great New York Fire of 1836. They jumped off the General Slockum as it exploded in the East River. At the San Francisco Earthquake, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Haymarket Riots, the Southampton Hurricane of 1938—always a Greer on hand to give his life. What do you make of that?”

“An unsettling coincidence,” said Hopkinson, relighting his pipe.

“Not a coincidence at all, my friend,” Emmanuel countered with glee. “Not fate. Not God’s will. That’s all outdated rubbish, medieval superstition. It’s genetics.... A misfortune gene. And I’m the last surviving carrier....” “Then you have no children?” inquired Aunt Alma with a lack of tact that our society permits matrons of a certain age. “I think it must be rather lonely having no children.”

“I used to feel that way, but now I thank my lucky stars I don’t have any offspring. With my death, this particular misfortune gene will perish too. The last of my lineage, I am. And look here at these crossed lines,” he added, pointing to an X on the chart. “The most extraordinary thing—I realize this may be hard to swallow—is that I have a double dose of the misfortune gene. My father and mother were distant cousins, so I picked up one allele from my mother’s father and another from my father’s mother. That alone is evidence of my bad luck.”

Hopkinson attempted to interject at that point, but Emmanuel would hear none of it. “I’m doomed to be present at the greatest disaster that history has ever witnessed,” my wife’s cousin declared. “Maybe nuclear holocaust or an encounter with a giant meteorite.” “How dreadful!” exclaimed my aunt.

“I’m not sure if I follow you,” Hopkinson finally managed to ask. Emmanuel was on his knees, scribbling across the diagram with a charcoal pencil. “Do you mean to suggest that you believe luck is inherited?”

“Of course, it is,” answered Emmanuel. “Haven’t you ever read about people who win casino jackpots multiple times or who always escape disaster by a hair’s

breadth—like the Unsinkable Molly Brown?”

“But the odds favor someone winning the lottery multiple times,” objected Hopkinson. “Not any particular person, obviously, but someone.”

“Of course the odds favor someone winning multiple times,” agreed Emmanuel. “If that someone carries the right genes.... Imagine how we could reshape society if we had charts like this for all families, if we knew who the lucky and unlucky people were. Think of the ramifications for gambling, for the stock market, for the safety of public transportation.... Airlines, for instance, could limit the number of unlucky passengers on any given flight.”

*Jacob M. Appel has published short fiction in some 200 literary journals including Alaska Quarterly Review, Apalachee Review, Beloit Fiction Journal, Conjunctions, Confrontation, Colorado Review, Columbia, Florida Review, Gettysburg Review, Green Mountains Review, Greensboro Review, Gulf Stream, Iowa Review, Louisiana Literature, Michigan Quarterly Review, Nebraska Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, Raritan, Seattle Review, Shenandoah, South Dakota Review, Southern Humanities Review, Southwest Review, Story Quarterly, Subtropics, Threepenny Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, West Branch, and Xavier Review.*

## Novel In Progress:: OTHER FINALISTS

**Amelia’s Tenant**, Kathleen Crowley, Belmont, MA

**Beautiful Men and Me**, Robin Martin, Brooklyn, NY

**Bondage**, John Malone, Lafayette, LA

**Fire on the Island**, Timothy Smith, Paris, France

**Light from Elsewhere**, Joyce Miller, Cincinnati, OH

**Lower Case Love**, Geoff Schutt, Gaithersburg, MD

**No. 1 – A How-To Guide For Making It to the Top in Rock**

**and Roll**, John Elderkin, Charlotte, NC

**Painting Her Life**, Pamela Reitman,

San Francisco, CA

**Pater Noster**, William Coles, Salt Lake City, UT

**Perfect Son**, George Wen, New York, NY

**Portraits**, Anonymous

**Push**, Peter G. Olivero, Rochester Hills, MI

**Right is Right and Wrong is Wrong**, Ken Mask, Lafayette, LA

**Sun Eye, Moon Eye**, Vincent Czyz, Jersey City, NJ

**The Blue Hour**, George Harrar, Wayland, MA

**The Blues for Sarah**, Irene Mosvold,

Louisville, KY

**The Diamond Mountain**, Ellis Anderson,

Bay St. Louis, MS

**The Doctor’s Wife**, Rita Ciresi, Tampa, FL

**The Shakespeare Order**, Becky Frusher, Lorena, TX

**The Sound of Falling Darkness**, Lyn Di Lorio, New York, NY

**The Unattended Moment**, Marcia Peck,

Minnatonka, MN

The Vermillion Sea, Marylee MacDonald, Tempe, AZ

Three Living, Three Dead, Christian Livermore,

Savannah, GA

*In Surrendering Appomattox, American Civil War Professor Nicholas Smythe makes a startling discovery: the Civil War may never have happened. Following the untimely death of his wife’s eccentric cousin, Professor Smythe receives in the mail a rare photo of Abraham Lincoln, along with instructions to contact a mysterious person in Ohio who holds the key to the photo and the truth about the Civil War. Unfolding in a rollicking style, with colorful characters and entertaining insights into the hierarchies and pretenses of the academic world, Surrendering Appomattox. —April Eberhardt*

Margot stood and watched the log burn as she pursued that love affair that Southerners have with fireplaces in old houses. Gas, water and lights had been off in this part of New Orleans since Katrina, and Margot's building was dark and damp. She felt good, though. Tonight was her fortieth anniversary. Forty days and forty nights since the hurricane, and she was still here, still holding out in this old pile.

She smiled. Right here, on the blue tiles of this hearth, she and her husband had made love for the first time, eighteen years ago. The hurricane and flood had stranded Pete in Memphis, but hopefully he would be coming home next week. Margot took pride in her own independence and resourcefulness, but Pete was her anchor, and she missed him sorely.

She poured a glass of anisette and smoked a joint as she cranked up her emergency radio and found a Montréal short-wave station playing New Orleans jazz. A virtuous version of *Chicago Function 1* poured down from the sky, with Sidney Bechet on soprano sax, Mezz Mezzro at clarinet, and Hot Lips Page on trumpet. Margot did a little dance as she grabbed her own sax and fell in with Sidney. At least, she tried to. Truth was, she was what was diplomatically known as an emerging talent. Obscure was a better word. But she enjoyed herself so much, she knew it had to be good.

A minute later she got knocked back to earth.

She'd heard a noise.

Quickly she turned the radio off.

Margot had grown up in this old house. It had its own ways of commenting on changes in the weather, and there was indeed a thunderstorm banging away outside. But this was something else. The front door downstairs, warped by the flood, had just been forced open.

She barely moved as she listened. As far as she knew, she was the only resident who remained here in the Cemeteries district. Most of the time the only people she saw were coast guardsmen flying over in helicopters as she sunbathed on her gallery, and national guard troops cruising through on the scent of corpses in wrecked houses. Looters came out at night, though, like some of Ann Rice's coffin kickers. That might be one of them downstairs now.



*Barnes Carr*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Short Story



### ***Needle Man***

she shouldn't be doing this. She had never been one for dangerous confrontations. But damnit, this was her apartment, this building her home, primitive as it was at the moment. She refused to be intimidated.

She cracked the door and peered out into the gloom. A figure stood across the hall, bent over in front of the door to Apartment D. All Margot could make out was a shape silhouetted by the light from a tiny flashlight. Suddenly the window at the end of the hall was lit by a crack of lighting and she saw that yes, it was a man, wearing a wet raincoat and hat. He had a suitcase, but that was all.

Thunder came in after the lightning, heavy as

Wind slapped the shutters and rain gravelled on the roof, but beneath all that she could hear the prowler walking on the buckled floorboards. Judging from the weight of his steps, it was a man. Then came the bump of his shoes on the staircase.

He was coming up.

With no phone service yet, no 911, there was no way she could summon help. She enjoyed the solitude of this place during the days but she dreaded the nights when the darkness sealed her in tight as a Thermos bottle and her imagination taunted her. The silences were just as bad. They closed in on her, roaring in her ears. But this was not suggestibility. This was real. There was an intruder and he was coming up the stairs.

The only real weapon Margot possessed was a German SS dagger her grandfather André had brought back from the war. She put down her drink and the joint, and eased the dagger out of its scabbard. It was sharp and double-edged. With it in her hand, she felt a measure of the confidence she had always drawn from André. He had taught her how to use it, and she was fairly certain she could defend herself, if only she could marshal the courage to act.

The intruder's steps reached the second floor. The floor creaked as he came down the hallway. Margot quietly dropped her shoes and padded across the room in her socks with the dagger in her hand. When she got to the door she approached the peephole from the side. She looked out, but couldn't see anything.

She held her breath as she quietly turned the deadbolt. She knew

a safe hitting the floor, and the man looked up, startled. Well, he obviously wasn't a looter. Probably not a very good burglar, either. He looked like just another refugee trying to slip home through the security perimeter the army had installed around the city. Except this home wasn't his.

A scrape of metal on metal, and he opened the door. The couple who rented Apartment D, Jack and Billie Ellison, had evacuated before the storm and must have lent this man a key. He looked around furtively, Margot thought and then he stepped forward into a fathom of darkness. A moment later the door was slammed shut and bolted.

At last, a man in the house again. That was comforting.

Maybe.

She closed and locked her own door, and jammed a chair against it. She pulled her sleeping bag over in front of the fire and blew out the candles on the mantelpiece. She kept her clothes on as she settled into the gloved softness of the sleeping bag. The sudden appearance of a stranger in her building had violated the quiet solitude of her post-Katrina life, and it took her a while to get to sleep.

Sometime later, something woke her. She sat up with the electric taste of fear in her mouth. The storm had passed. The fire had gone out, and everything in the room was bleached gray by the first light of day. She spotted a broken pane of glass on the floor. A gust of wind had blown it in. That's all.

She gave the place a final look, then went back to sleep, with André's dagger on the floor beside her.

When Margot awoke again, sunlight stretched lazily through the French doors onto the polished wood floor. She went out on the gallery. The storm had left the sky a sapphire blue, the air as crisp as a stalk of lettuce in a Bloody Mary at the Old Absinthe House. She hauled in the buckets she had set out to catch the rain, and in the kitchen she boiled some water over a camp stove and dripped a pot of Café du Monde. She drank a cup as she looked out over the neighborhood. She had not heard any dogs or birds or squirrels since the flood. This entire quarter, now designated Military District IV, lay petrified beneath its own interminable silence.

Her yard was littered with trash the flood had left shingles, limbs, toys, fence boards. And everywhere, scraps of clothing lay like flags of a defeated army. Still, she luxuriated in the sensation of cool floor on her feet and warm sunlight on her face. She loved this time of morning, when she was convinced that her awareness of the world was absolutely brilliant.

That brilliance was tempered, though, by the task she faced today. Her grandfather had died at LaSalle Hospital in New Orleans during the flood. Margot had been to see the New Orleans police, the state police, the criminal sheriff, the civil sheriff and the Red Cross, but had not been able to find out the cause of death or even where the body had been taken. Now she was going over

*An ambitious, beautifully written story that captures the enduring impact of a natural disaster upon characters so diverse that they come to represent a whole city.*

—Ron Rash

to the hospital in person.

She pulled on some sweats and headed out. She saw that the door to Apartment D was open, and she stopped to call on her new lodger.

"Hello!" she said. She knocked on the door. "Anybody home?"

She took a few hesitant steps into the apartment. Silence was imbedded in the room like an axe. She called out again. She was about to leave when the man came out of the bedroom.

He was thin, not like a man who keeps trim by working out, but like someone who hasn't been eating well. His hair was short, the color of dirty concrete, and his face was tight, with a humorless mouth. A stubble of beard covered his cheeks like sand spilled on a floor. He was older than Margot, at an age when he probably no longer worried about what amusing things he could look forward to on weekends. He wore a rumpled blue dress shirt and black trousers. The eyes were dry and cinereous, hard as volcanic rock. Not cruel eyes, but remote, resentful.

He advanced toward Margo as if he intended to strike her down. She wished she had brought André's dagger. She was about to back out the door when the man stopped. He was so close she could smell his sweat and his bourbon breath. The eyes silently demanded to know what she wanted.

"I'm Margot Talley," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I own this building. My husband and I, actually."

The man stood over her, inspecting her as if she were a piece of rancid meat.

"Are you a guest of the Ellisons?" she asked, in what she hoped was a diplomatic but firm voice.

"Yes," he snapped. His voice was resonant, but in a damaged way, like a bad string on a bass guitar.

Here, Margot thought, is a man who has survived something. Something worse than a hurricane or flood. Like a wounded animal, he was beaten, perhaps mortally wounded. And he was in her house.

"Well, I just wanted to say hello," she said, her voice wavering between fear and some odd sympathy for him. Maybe the poor man was just worn out, like a tool past its warranty. She wanted to do something for him.

"There's a kitchen at the church down Canal Street," she said. "They serve hot meals and give out water and ice. And they have portable showers in their parking lot. Were you here for Katrina?"

He didn't answer, just shuffled into the kitchen and started rummaging through cabinets and drawers. "I have a pot of coffee," she called after him. "Would you like



a cup?"

The banging stopped and he came out again.

"Yes," he replied, impatiently, as if he had been waiting all morning for her to get out of bed and take his order.

"Cream and sugar?" she asked. But damned if I'll stir it for you.

"Black," he said, scratching his cheek and looking around for something.

All right, so he was a grouch. Maybe he'd had trouble sleeping last night, too. His attitude did improve a few minutes later after he took a pull from the big mug of chicory coffee she brought him. Further improvement came after he found the bottle he was looking for, and added a shot of Old Crow. She noticed he left the cork out when he put the bottle down.

She tried to engage him in conversation but received nothing more responsive than grunts and irritated looks. She did pry from him a few words that when cobbled together revealed that his name was Harry Wicks, he was a doctor, and his house had been destroyed by the flood. He knew the Ellisons from somewhere he wasn't terribly clear about, and they had lent him their apartment here for a few days.

"I have some business at the courthouse this week," he said.

"Were you here during Katrina?" she asked, again.

Again, he didn't answer directly. He just finished his coffee, put the mug down, and gave her a growl which she could have interpreted as a yes, if she wished. Then he shuffled over to the couch. He laid down, crossed his ankles, and covered his eyes with his arm.

"Well, nice talking to you," Margot said as she withdrew. "Let me know if you need anything."

The only answer she got was an annoyed snort.

Getting to the hospital involved detouring around a number of intersections where federal emergency contractors in white hard hats used giant orange earth-moving machines to push storm debris into piles as tall as three-story buildings. When she finally arrived at LaSalle she found the building looking out on the world with windows sealed by weathered sheets of plywood. But it had never been a very impressive building to begin with; it could have been a school, or a mayonaise factory.

Margot walked up the driveway and found a guard sitting in a yard chair in the shade of the ambulance bay, with comic books and crossword puzzles stacked on the ground. He pulled the plugs of his iPod from his ears and turned his mirrored sunglasses up at her.

"Yes, ma'am, I understand," he said after she told him she had come to find out about her grandfather. "But the hospital's shut down. Nobody here but guards. All the computers and medical records were moved to corporate headquarters in Texas. I got the number here."

"That's very helpful," Margot said, watching her warped reflection in his shades. "Too bad we don't have any phone service in New Orleans."

"Yes, ma'am. I was sent down here from Michigan, me and eight other guys. I work twelve on, twelve off, with no days off. I ain't talked to my family since I got here."

He was a young man with a ruddy face, ale brown hair and an attempt at a beard that was probably supposed to make him look authoritative. Mostly he seemed a harmless fellow who normally spent his waking hours drinking beer and fishing. His outdoor muscularity verged on obesity and had been stuffed with reluctance into the discipline of his uniform.

"I wish I could help you more, ma'am," he continued. "But my instructions are not to say anything."

Margot raised her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. "About what?"

"About what happened here."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't answer, just twisted his mouth one way, then the other. Behind Margot, the neighborhood was so quiet it seemed to be listening. But she knew there was no one out there. They were hunkered down in places like Atlanta and Houston, waiting for somebody to tell them it was safe to return. Blue tarps covered damaged rooftops, and sediment from the flood had smothered yards and sidewalks with a viscid residue like ash after a forest fire. The area had simply been abandoned, leaving a Mezzogiorno of heat and desolation. Here lay the carcass of New Orleans, bless her sainted soul.

"Please," she said. "My grandfather died here during Katrina. All I want to do is claim his body. What happened here?"

The guard looked away and drummed a tattoo on the side of his chair. She gave him a ten-dollar bill. He looked the other way. She gave him another ten. The air was heavy with the smells of garbage and mud and, from somewhere, rotting flesh.

"All I can tell you is that I been sending people over to the coroner's office," he said. "That's where you should go. It's in the courthouse on Tulane Avenue."

She knew where all the damned courthouses were in New Orleans. This wasn't much return on her money. She stared at him, waiting for more. When it didn't come, she strode off, tossing an indignant thanks over her shoulder.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, putting his ear pieces in again.

The courthouse at Tulane and Broad was an elegant old limestone tomb with fluted columns and sculptures of pelicans, ancient symbols of death and resurrection, chiseled into the façade. Above doorways, bronze art deco plaques proclaimed *Law and Order* and *Mercy and Justice*. Inside the building, handwritten signs taped to marbled walls offered directions to offices that had reopened. She walked down the steps to the basement and got in line outside the coroner's office.

There was no electricity down here. The only light came from kerosene lanterns that cast bat-like shadows on the walls. Margot stood in the claustrophobic heat until it came her time at the front counter. A young woman

wearing a military camo shirt wet with sweat was waiting for her. She was a pretty girl, with straightened black hair, café au lait skin, and turquoise eyes. But there was tension in those eyes, a defensive impatience. This had been a bad day. Yesterday, too. And there was no reason to believe that tomorrow would be any better.

Hearing that Margot's grandfather had died at LaSalle Hospital, conversation in the office dropped and people turned to look at her. Behind them, the walls were sweating and the air was heavy with the smells of mildew and disinfectant. Under these conditions, computers and phones were irrelevant memories, like mimeograph machines and eight-track tape players. Records were kept on paper again. Stacks of documents were piled on tables. Clerks went through them with flashlights.

"We don't have any information about any deaths at LaSalle," the girl said in a measured, professional voice. But Margot sensed an undercurrent of something else.

Fear? Of what?

Margot held out copies of her grandfather's French birth certificate, American naturalization papers, driver's license, Social Security card and Medicare ID. "The hospital told me to come here for information," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. But all the bodies from LaSalle have been sent to the federal disaster emergency morgue at St. Gabriel."

"All the bodies? What do you mean?"

The clerk started to say something, then stopped. She busied herself shuffling through the documents Margot had brought.

"How many bodies?" Margot asked.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"What happened to them?"

The clerk didn't answer, just handed the papers back to Margot.

Margot put the documents away, then placed her hands flat on the counter. "I want to speak to the coroner," she said.

"He's in Baton Rouge this week."

"I can't believe this. All I want to do is make arrangements for my grandfather's funeral."

"Yes, ma'am."

A big deputy came over and stood beside the clerk and stared at Margot. What was he going to do, arrest her? This was a public office. These people were public servants. All she wanted was some damned information. But obviously the conversation was over. She turned and marched out. So things weren't going so well around here. Welcome to the club, buster.

Margot was halfway down the hall when a voice stopped her. The clerk caught up with her and handed her a slip of paper. "Here's the name of a doctor with the state medical examiner's office," she said. "He's at St. Gabriel. He might be able to help you."

The name was written on an office memo that carried the logo of the Coroner of Orleans Parish. Maybe

this would help. "Please tell me," Margot said. "What happened at the hospital during Katrina?"

The hallway fell quiet. Some people standing in the line outside the office stole looks at Margot. Others turned away. The clerk fingered the top button on her shirt as if it were a rosary. "I've got to get back," she said. "We're real busy."

"What is it that they don't want you to talk about?"

"All I can say is that you're not the first one who's been here. But there's no one in this office that can help you."

Margot folded the note and put it in her pocket. "St. Gabriel, then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

With that, the clerk hurried back to the office. Margot's shoes slapped stone as she climbed the steps. She bumped into a man coming down the stairs, and mumbled an apology. At the top, two old ladies saw her coming and got out of her way.

Leaving the courthouse, she noted another one of those platitudes that had been chiseled into the ramparts of the building: *This is a government of law, not of men.*

"Except when the law is out of town," she said.

Margot started across the avenue but had to jump back to avoid getting hit by a huge flash of orange. An emergency contractor's truck swept past her with horn blowing indignantly.

"Same to you, pal," she said.

On the way out of town Margot stopped at a post office where everybody in town had to go to pick up mail. After serving time in another line, she walked out with one letter. It was from her grandfather, mailed from the hospital and postmarked forty-one days ago, the day before Katrina.

She ripped it open and read it hungrily. "Sweet Jesus," she said. "They were getting ready to discharge him. What the hell happened?"

She read the letter again as she walked back to her car. The sight of a squad of 82nd Airborne troops questioning some Spanish-speaking men in work clothes reminded her that New Orleans was surrounded by military checkpoints. She would need some kind of document to get back in from St. Gabriel.

She found an emergency contractor's truck parked nearby, looked around, and swiped the pass off the windshield.

When Margot arrived at St. Gabriel, a dusty country town whose main attraction was the state women's prison, the last shadows of the afternoon were creeping across the stubbled remains of a cane field beside an unmarked sheet-metal warehouse the length of a football field. The presence of a cluster of federal guards at the gate signaled that this was the place she was looking for.

Inside the morgue, she found steel autopsy tables set up in rows the length of the building, and corpses in body bags being hauled in from refrigerated trucks outside. She watched doctors and morticians in sweaty white hazmat suits as they laid out the bodies

and removed the clothes and catalogued them. After a washdown with a curiously sweet-smelling disinfectant, each corpse was measured and photographed. A yellow ID tag was tied to a toe while dental x-rays were taken, fingerprints rolled, blood drawn.

Most of the corpses were bloated, and had turned gray. Some had decomposed to the point that they were little more than slimy chunks of meat and bone. There was no air-conditioning in here, just big fans that did nothing but shift the heat around. A thermometer on the wall read 97 degrees. A putrid smell stuck to Margot's face like oil.

Margot dodged two guards and found the office. A large woman with lines of fatigue scored into her face sat behind a desk, typing on a computer keyboard with her jacket hood pulled up against the wind of the air conditioner, apparently the only one in the building. In the light from the screen, the woman's face looked like a skull.

Margot introduced herself. "I've come to claim my grandfather's body," she said.

"Relatives are not allowed in here," the woman responded, without looking up.

"The Orleans Parish coroner sent me," Margot said, holding out the memo.

The clerk stopped typing. She looked up at the paper, and at Margot. She threw a cautious look out a window to the autopsy area. "The doctor you're looking for has left for the day," she said. "What's your grandfather's name?"

"André Duralde."

"Date of birth?"

"Six/eight/thirty-three."

The clerk brought up a page on her screen. "He died at LaSalle Hospital?"

"Yes."

"He's in our database but we can't release the body."

"Why not?"

"A hold has been placed on all bodies from LaSalle."

"What kind of hold?"

"For investigative purposes." The clerk's voice turned suspicious. "The coroner didn't tell you?"

"He gave me as much time as he could. He was really busy □"

The girl sniffed. "We're not exactly sitting on our hands up here."

"What do you mean, investigative purposes? What happened?"

The clerk opened her hands. "I heard that some of the terminally ill patients didn't make it. That's all I know."

"But my grandfather wasn't terminally ill. I just got this letter from him." She showed it to the clerk. "He wrote me from the hospital the day before the storm. He said he was feeling much better and they were going to discharge him. And now he's dead. I want to know what happened."

"Yes, ma'am. But there is nothing I can do. If you'll give us your phone number, someone will contact you."

"There's no phone service in New Orleans yet,"

Margot said. "You'll have to write me." She gave the clerk one of her cards. She started to ask if they had any damned stamps here, but kept quiet.

The clerk took the card and tucked it into a corner of her computer screen. Margot figured she would throw it away as soon as she got this nosy meddler out of her office.

"The best thing to do is keep in contact with the corner's office in New Orleans," the clerk suggested.

"That's it, then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Margot threw her a snappy thanks and fought an impulse to slam the door on her way out. Crossing the big morgue area she spotted a sign on the wall. *Mortui Vivus Praecipiant*, it read. Let the Dead Teach the Living.

"Good luck," she said.

When Margot got home that night she sat out on the front porch and played her saxophone and listened to the notes echo back to her in the dark. After a while she heard voices from the street, and went inside. Up in her apartment she lit a fire and sat on the hearth and read her grandfather's letter again. Even in illness and old age, his cursive writing had been graceful and confident, remnants of an age when even children from a modest background were educated well.

Margot used to love to hear André talk about his life. He was a native Parisian, and his father, an army officer, was killed in the German invasion in 1940. During the war, André volunteered as a runner for *Combat*, the French Resistance newspaper. The editor of the paper, Albert Camus, hid André twice when the Gestapo was looking for him. But in the closing weeks of the war the boy was arrested for spying. He was beaten and interrogated, and sentenced to death by beheading with a sword. His life was spared only after somebody in the office discovered he was fluent in German. He was then loaded into a cattle car and sent to Buchenwald. His mother, hearing that her only son had been executed, took her surviving child, a daughter, and fled west toward the advancing French and American armies.

At Buchenwald, André's wrist was tattooed with a number and he was assigned work as a translator. He survived pneumonia and typhus, but nearly starved to death. By the time the camp was liberated, he had lost most of his hair, his gums were bleeding, and he weighed forty-five pounds. He was twelve years old.

After sitting in a refugee camp in England for a year, André was reunited with his mother and sister, who had been sent to New Orleans by the Red Cross. As he matured he became a master carpenter and bought property, including this building where Margot had grown up. She looked up from the letter and touched one of the side elements of the mantelpiece. She had helped André build it from Louisiana old stand cypress when she was eight years old.

André outlived his mother, his sister, his wife, and his daughter. That was Margot's mother. Margot's earliest memories of life all seemed to have begun in André's lap,



clinging to his rough workman's shirt as he rocked her and sang to her in French. She loved André's mischievous winks and his hearty laugh and his smells of café brulôt, sawdust, and Prince Albert pipe tobacco. After Margot's parents died, André finished raising her, but he never remarried. He told Margot once that the only reason he would want need another wife would be to give him another daughter. But now Margot was his *petit chat*.

Margot took out a snapshot of André she had carried in her wallet since high school. It showed a handsome young man with glossy sable hair, Gallic nose, a sensual mouth, and chestnut eyes as innocent as a Valentine. The firelight cast a warm bourbon glow on the photograph as Margot studied every angle, every fold and plane, of André's face. She was almost his twin. She had always known that. And she had loved him in a way that would not meet the approval of the Church. Whose business was that?

Toward the end, André got old and depressed, and his years of *la belle vie* turned him into an obese alcoholic. Then he fell and broke his leg, and at the hospital he was further diagnosed as diabetic. But when Margot visited him two days before Katrina, he was in fine spirits. His leg was mending, the doctors had put him on a diet, and he had learned to inject himself with insulin. She planned to stay with him but he insisted that she go back to the house and secure it against the storm. Then after Katrina passed, the levees broke and she was marooned in a five-foot-deep lake. Venice, without the gondolas and tourists. She never saw André again.

Somewhere in all that, he died. Just like that.

Just like what?

What had gone on in that hospital? LaSalle wasn't some Third World shamble where the patients were fed beans and rice with a side of worms, and the staff had to shoplift light bulbs and toilet paper. It was supposed to be an old respected New Orleans hospital.

Margot folded André's letter and put it, along with his picture, in the strongbox she kept hidden behind a secret wall panel her grandfather had built into this apartment. As she closed the panel she felt as if she had just committed his remains to a mausoleum, but without a proper funeral.

She poured a glass of Burgundy and went out on the gallery. She had stumbled onto something, something that didn't make sense. Something had happened to a member of her family, but nobody would admit knowing anything about it. They just hid behind their brick-wall stares and dismissed her with practiced politeness. If she heard one more "yes, ma'am" she was going to cold-cock somebody.

She wanted the truth. She intended to get it. Tomorrow, though. She'd had enough for today. She went back inside and locked the door, then turned on the radio and slipped into her sleeping bag and went to sleep thinking about André.

Margot was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee the next morning when she heard on the radio

that investigators had concluded that some patients at LaSalle had died under suspicious circumstances during the flood. A grand jury in New Orleans was hearing evidence. No other information was available. Then a talk show came on. The New Orleans police chief was on the line, insisting that he knew nothing about media reports that drug dealers from a housing project near LaSalle had invaded the hospital during the flood and murdered some doctors, nurses and patients while stealing pharmaceuticals.

Margot tore up a piece of bread as she listened. Mass murder at LaSalle? Was that what nobody wanted to talk about?

She knew that half the police force deserted during the storm. Then riots, looting, gun battles and fires drove the city into anarchy. There had been no hope for assistance until the army arrived, but with all the political bickering between New Orleans, Baton Rouge and Washington, nobody had known when that would be. She stared at her empty cup. No thoughts of brilliance today.

André was killed by fucking druggies?

What did they do? Shoot him? Cut his throat?

She crossed herself and started to say a prayer, but was interrupted by the ring of the mechanical bell on the front door.

Downstairs, she wrestled the door open and found a man standing on the porch, holding a palmetto-leaf broom and showing teeth the color of old piano keys. He wore dusty work clothes and a rumbled top hat, which he graciously tipped to her. His skin looked rough as asphalt, but other than that, he seemed a healthy old gent, somewhere between Medicare and a nursing home. Behind him, parked in Margot's white shell driveway, was a battered pickup truck loaded with ladders and tools. What was this, some species of emergency contractor?

"Mawnin', ma'am," he said in a voice born to sing baritone in a gospel choir. "I'm inquiring as to whether y'all might re-quire my services. Rooster's the name. Chimney sweep extraordinaire."

Charming. Next there would be a conjure man on her porch.

"You're kidding," she said.

"Well, actually, these days we repairs chimneys more than we cleans 'em. Hurricanes ain't good for chimneys, and I been through enough of 'em. Floods, too. And tornadoes. And fires. It's all God's will." He grinned. "Can't do nothing 'bout it 'cept say three Hail Marys and hope the Saints don't lose on Sunday."

At that point Margot noticed that Rooster had two strong-looking young men sitting in his truck, drinking beer. Following a brief negotiation, during which Rooster assured her that he had a Web page and a Facebook address, she hired them to go down to the FEMA office and pick up a tarp and install it on her roof. That would take care of the leaks until she could settle up with the insurance company. When they got back, Rooster introduced his helpers, Clarence and Fish. Both gave her cordial smiles. Clarence kept watching Margot. It didn't bother her. She had been looked at before.

"Anybody on the second floor?" Rooster asked. "Once we get on the roof there might be some trash falling in."

"Just myself and Doctor Wicks," she replied. "Don't worry about him."

It was almost dark when they finished tying the tarp down. Margot paid them, then decided to check on her mysterious lodger. Wicks had told her he had been in town during Katrina. Maybe he knew something about the deaths at LaSalle.

She heated up a pot of gumbo, added appropriate measures of Tabasco sauce and filé, and set out across the hall. Passing a window, she saw Rooster and his boys loading their ladders onto the truck. Clarence was watching her again. All right, she had an admirer. Maybe he would make her a good price on cleaning up the yard.

Wicks answered her knock with another of his signature frowns. She held out the pot of gumbo. "Thought you might be hungry," she offered.

He started to close the door but was drawn in by the sweet smells of shrimp and sausage. She could tell he was wavering. Finally he stepped aside and admitted her.

She found bowls and spoons in the kitchen, and spotted two empty whisky bottles in the garbage can. On the kitchen table was a syringe, a vial of morphine, a stack of *Times-Picayune* back issues, and a box of chocolate bars. So, the doctor was not only a drunk, but also a junkie. Shoot up in the morning and spend the rest of the day eating candy while examining every letter of every word in every line on every page in the newspaper. André had had that kind of monkey on his back when he was younger. But Margot wasn't here to cure anybody of anything. All she wanted to do was stuff some food into the doctor and pump out some information in return. A simple transaction.

Margot moved a small table over in front of the French doors that were open to the gallery, and she lit two candles. Then, in memory of André, she lit a third one. She poured two glasses of a still chummy five-year-old Bordeaux and tried to engage Wicks in a real conversation, but he responded with his usual noncommittal noises. Finally he sat back and lit a cigar and stared out at the sea of blue tarps on the rooftops of the neighborhood. The sun had set beneath a bruised fruit sky, and the last light, soft as Spanish moss, came in the doorway purified by the stillness that guarded the grounds outside.

"Would you like coffee?" she asked him.

"No," he replied, watching the lights of an army patrol passing in the street.

She reached for the wine bottle. You don't have to thank me for the dinner, doc. I do this for all my tenants in time of disaster. Would you like to hear what I've been doing lately? No? Well, I'll tell you anyway.

"My grandfather died at LaSalle Hospital during the flood," she said as she filled their glasses again. "I've been trying to find his body. I went to the hospital. They sent me to the coroner's office. The coroner's office sent me to St. Gabriel. They bounced me back to the coroner.

And a friend on the NOPD wants me to go to the DA. I'm getting the runaround."

Wicks watched her, his veil of disinterest slowly rising.

"But I did find out this," she continued. "Several other patients died at the hospital during the flood."

Wicks frowned and blew a tube of smoke that dissolved into the darkness beyond the table. "I know," he said in a tired voice. "I was there."

Margot tried not to drop the bottle as she put it down. "At LaSalle? During the flood?"

"Yes."

"What happened? Some drug addicts broke in and killed people?"

"Absolutely not. Most of the patients were discharged before Katrina struck. Most of the hospital staff left, too. The patients who remained were terminals and DNRs."

"DNRs?"

"Do not resuscitates. Some of us stayed on to take care of them. Then the flood came and the building lost power. We had no lights, no air-conditioning. We operated on emergency generators until they ran out of fuel. Then the life support systems failed. People died."

"Were there patients who weren't terminally ill?"

"A few. We took care of them as best we could. But we were running out of food and water. On the third day, state police arrived with shotguns and assault rifles and ordered us to abandon the hospital. Our corporate headquarters in Texas was supposed to send in helicopters to evacuate the last ones, but they didn't arrive. We stole boats from driveways in the neighborhood and got the last of the patients out ourselves. But some didn't make it."

"How many?"

"I have no idea." He shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe half a dozen. We tried to make them as comfortable as possible toward the end. That was all we could do. They died naturally."

"Do you remember my grandfather, André Duralde? He was being treated for diabetes and a broken leg."

Wicks stared at his cigar as he rolled it on the edge of the ashtray. "No, I don't recall him."

When he looked up, Margot caught his eye. She believed that the eyes were the key to the soul. The soul, and the truth. But Wicks's eyes weren't that easy to read. For a minute he was silent. He just drew on his cigar and looked uncomfortable. Then miserable. When he started again, his hand was shaking.

"Some things happened toward the end," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Some patients were in awful pain. We gave them morphine but we weren't able to start IVs for dehydration. We did the best we could, but in that heat, their hearts failed."

Margot followed Wicks's eyes as he stared out across the street. A bright plaster moon rode high in the sky above the ordered rows of tombs in the Charity

Hospital Cemetery. And towering over the graves was a marker in the shape of a truncated column. She had seen that column all her life, but this was the first time she had thought about what it represented.

"You don't remember my grandfather?" Margot asked him, again.

"No," Wicks replied. A gust of wind crept in to bicker with the candlelight.

"A big man," Margot said. "He had gained a lot of weight."

"There was a large man. About three-hundred pounds, I believe. I didn't treat him, but I understand he had a heat stroke and died."

At that point, Wicks grew pale. Sweat began to run down his cheeks. Margot thought he was going to be sick.

"What happened at that hospital?" she asked. She had the edge now. She was insistent.

Wicks squinted as if she had tossed something corrosive in his face. Then he looked around like a man who's suddenly heard something. Something dreadful. Something haunting. He grabbed the brandy bottle and threw it. It hit the wall and shards of glass spilled to the floor.

Margot was too frightened to move. For a moment all she saw was the stain running down the wall like blood, and below it, a row of photos that had been spread out on the sideboard like playing cards. The pictures showed men and women in hospital beds. They looked old and weak and very ill.

"Dead," Wicks said. "All dead. We could have done more." Then he started crying.

Margot reached out across the table and touched his hand. He recoiled as if he had been bit. She could see the man was suffering, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do for him. She got up and quietly left.

Wicks appeared to be a responsible sort, she decided as she went back to her apartment. Despite that remoteness that bordered on rudeness, he had impressed her as being a caring professional who was dedicated to his calling but, for some reason, was down on his luck right now. Perhaps his drinking and his drug addiction had caused him to lose his job. Perhaps he had lost his family in the flood. But she thought that if he had seen anything unfortunate happening at LaSalle, he would have taken action to stop it, or at least to try.

Still, as far as Margot's search for the truth about what happened to André was concerned, she felt like she had been talking to a damned statue.

Margot sent the next afternoon with her chainsaw, cutting tree limbs for firewood. She had not slept well the night before. Thinking about André lying in that hospital, alone and dying, had kept her awake. And she had thought about New Orleans. Except for the older sections along the river, the city had sat under water for a month. But the hurricane only skirted the city before turning toward the Gulf Coast. The flood had resulted from levee breaches, and the years of official lies that preceded them.

Margot's husband used to serve on the Orleans Parish Levee Board. The appointees were ordinary citizens charged by law with inspecting the levees to make sure they were maintained. But Pete had told her how it worked. Once a year they were summoned to a lavish luncheon at government expense, and after a copious repast of Dom Perignon and oysters Rockefeller, they were whisked out in limousines for a tour of the levees. Then they were instructed to sign an official report asserting that all was well, that the city was safe from flooding. But they were shown only what the engineers and the politicians wanted them to see. They never saw sloppy design work or substandard construction. Pete finally resigned in disgust. A fool's errand, he called it.

The Great Flood was the result. Thousands dead and missing while the president of the United States chowed down on Texas barbecue basted with incompetence, and the governor of Louisiana and the mayor of New Orleans staggered around in the dark, tripping on their own stupefaction.

Margot bagged up some wood chips and hauled them out to the sidewalk. There was something new out here today. Graffiti had been spray-painted on the front of the little café across the street. A line marked the highest level the flood waters had reached. And next to it was a declaration: *We're had it up to here with breaches, ethical and otherwise.*

"Amen," Margot said.

She went back to sit down on her steps and drink a glass of tea. A crunch of shoes on the driveway announced the return of Rooster's helper, Clarence. He was wearing a Red Sox cap and a short-sleeved green surgical shirt that showed the muscularity of his arms. That, along with his workingman's hands and the broadness of his shoulders, reminded her of André.

"Evening, Miz Talley," he said.

"Evening, Clarence. You look worried. What's wrong?"

"I saw you the other day at the coroner's office." He took off his cap and with a summertime slowness wiped his shaved head with a checkered do-rag. "I was behind you in line. I heard you say your paw-paw died at LaSalle."

"Did you know him?"

"Yes'm. I worked at the hospital as a nursing assistant. I saw Cap'n Duralde everyday. I gave him his meds, I delivered his meals, I helped him to the restroom."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"No'm." His black eyes shimmered. "But I know they killed my momma."

Margot knocked over her glass, then picked it up and brushed the ice cubes off the steps. "Who killed her?"

"Some doctors. They killed Momma and some other patients."

She noticed a scar on his chin, a curl of white that broke the smoothness of his young cocoa skin. "Clarence, what are you talking about?"

"The doctors decided that help wasn't coming,



so they shot 'em up with morphine and midazolam. They were dead in three minutes."

"You saw this?"

"I saw one of the doctors, on a different floor from where Momma was. He had a tray with needles on it. He told me he was just going to make some old folks comfortable. He wanted me to help him."

"Were these patients conscious?"

"Some were, some weren't. But I could see what was coming. This doctor didn't want to do the right thing and stay with these folks 'til help arrived. He was hungry and tired and wanted a shower. He wanted to get out of there. I tried to stop him. Bitch had a pistol and told me to back off."

"But how do you know your momma was killed if you weren't there?"

"Another nursing assistant saw it. He told me. She wasn't terminal, Miz Talley. She wasn't a DNR. She was in a little pain, but she was awake and ready to go home. Trouble was, she was in a wheelchair. They would have needed a special chopper to get her out."

"Have you talked to anybody about this?"

"The district attorney. Piece of shit said there wasn't nothing he could do about it. So I went to see a cousin of mine who's a lawyer for the state attorney general. They investigated, and charged some doctors and nurses with murder."

Margot got to her feet. "I don't believe it. I was here for Katrina. I saw the riots and the fires. I heard the gunshots. I was scared. And I was hungry and tired and wanted a bath. But I didn't kill anybody."

"They stored the bodies in the hospital chapel," Clarence went on. "When the army came in, they found forty-five bodies."

"Mother of Jesus. That's what that grand jury is all about."

"Forget about them," Clarence said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean too many folks in high places are behind the hospital and the doctors."

"You mean money was passed?"

"I wouldn't doubt it, things being the way they are. My cousin told me the grand jury was set up so they

could pick and choose the evidence they wanted to see. But I'm going to find out who killed Momma."

"How?"

"My cousin is going to let me see Momma's death certificate. That's my legal right. All I need is the name of the doctor who signed it."

"Clarence, can you check on my grandfather?"

"Probably so."

"Let me know what you find out. Please."

Clarence used his foot to smooth out some shells in the driveway. Then he put his cap back on and looked at her with an awful suffering in his eyes.

"Clarence, don't do anything until you talk to me. You understand?"

"All right," he said.

"But it's going to be a short conversation."

The rest of the day passed heavily, a hot and windless stretch of blinding brightness. Margot couldn't eat or sit down or even read a newspaper. She tried to occupy herself by doing chores, but five minutes afterwards she couldn't remember what she had done. Upstairs, she poured another iced tea, using her mother's favorite drinking glass, and spiked it with vodka.

Her mother had died of lung cancer, and had been on morphine toward the end. Her doctor had stepped up the dosage progressively until a threshold was reached where another increase would be fatal. That forced Margot's mother to make a decision: to hold onto life, and the attendant suffering, for a few more days, or to end it now, quietly, with dignity and love. She gave the doctor a nod. He asked her again, and

she reached out and squeezed his arm. The dosage was increased, with Margot and her father holding her hands, and she went to sleep and never came back. Margot's father died six weeks later. He was old, but not in ill health. His doctor said he simply lost interest in living after his wife died.

But she knew that what Clarence was talking about here was an entirely different matter. This wasn't euthanasia. This was murder. With premeditation. The people who were supposed to protect Clarence's mother until help arrived just got tired and didn't want to bother



**Ron Rash**, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Serena*, judged the short story contest.

with her any more.

They didn't want to *bother*.

And Harry Wicks was one of them.

Wicks had told Margot that some of the patients had to be medicated for severe pain. But Clarence said that his mom had not been suffering badly. Nor had André. Margot knew that for a fact.

Wicks said that maybe a half-dozen died toward the end. Clarence said the army found forty-five bodies. Forty-five.

Then, to cap off a perfect case of ignored justice, the grand jury investigating the deaths was fixed. Deceit piled upon deceit. In Louisiana, that was not hard to believe.

The phone rang. After so many weeks of silence, the sound shattered the silence like a burglar alarm. Margot dropped the phone, then pulled it up.

"Sorry if I scared you, Miz Talley," Clarence said.

"Phone service is back. I'm on my cell."

"That's all right, Clarence. What did you find out?"

"Grand jury came back. No indictments. All the doctors and nurses got off."

"What else?"

"That doctor upstairs in your house. You said his name is Wicks?"

"Yes"

"Harry Wicks?"

"Yes."

"That's the one that killed Momma," he said.

"I don't"

"And there's more."

"What?"

"Wicks killed Cap'n André, too. Wicks was the needle man."

Margot felt the room tilt and slide away from her. Light in the windows seemed to compress and then explode into splinters like shrapnel. She held onto the kitchen table as she sank into a chair.

"I don't understand," she said. "Why would Wicks kill my grandfather? He was ready to be discharged."

"Wicks killed Cap'n André because he was too big to carry up two flights of stairs to the helipad on the roof. Wicks was one of 'em charged with murder."

Margot stood up again, and almost fainted. This was unbelievable. André had survived the Gestapo and a Nazi death camp, only to be murdered by a doctor in an American hospital? A doctor too lazy or too incompetent to handle a situation that countless doctors had handled before him, in disasters and wars?

And had Wicks really believed the state police were going to shoot everybody who didn't evacuate the hospital?

His lies were so grim they were sad. No, despicable. Now Margot felt no sympathy for him, only an abiding hatred and a desire for revenge.

She picked up André's dagger off the table. He had taken it from a guard in Buchenwald after the camp was liberated. Then he used it to kill a Frenchman who had collaborated with the Nazis. Just by holding the knife,

Margot felt some of André's strength and determination.

Wicks had told her he was in town because he had business at the courthouse. That business was clearly the grand jury session. And now he had beat a murder charge.

She would not let him get away with that. She would—

What, go over there and kill him?

She couldn't do that. She didn't believe in vigilante justice.

But was it because she didn't have the will, or because she didn't have the courage? She wished she were brave and decisive the way André had been. But inside she knew she was a coward. She threw the dagger across the room. It struck a cabinet and clattered uselessly to the floor.

"I saw the medical charts," Clarence said. "Wicks administered the drugs and signed the death certificates. And I saw the autopsy reports. The coroner said strong pain drugs had not been prescribed for either Momma or Cap'n André. But Wicks shot 'em so full of morphine that they OD'd."

"Clarence, this is a matter for"

"Who? The cops? The DA? *Another* grand jury? Wind ain't blowing no justice from that direction, Miz Talley. Justice is mine, saith the Lord. An eye for an eye."

"Clarence, where are you?"

The only answer she received was silence.

"Clarence!"

She heard the front door forced open. She hung up the phone. She stood, barely breathing.

Footsteps came up the stairs. On Margot's floor they paused a moment. Then they continued down the hall.

Margot got André's dagger off the floor and went to her door and looked out the judas hole.

Clarence was in the corridor, facing Apartment D. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and went in. The door was left ajar behind him.

A moment later she heard voices. Not a violent confrontation. More like a logical, reasonable discussion. A period of silence followed.

Then she heard the slam of a gunshot.

The sound reverberated off the walls of the hallway before finally falling into silence like dust mites. Then Margot heard nothing but the measured tick of the grandfather clock behind her. Time seemed to hold its breath.

Finally Clarence came to the doorway of the apartment, pale and trembling. He paused to lean against the jamb. His face carried the agonized look of a man who has endured a terrible inner struggle, has seen a difficult justice administered, and now is spent. He walked slowly to the end of the hallway and held onto the railing as he went down the steps, one at a time.

Margot watched him leave, then went over and found Wicks on the floor. The top of his head had been blown off. A pistol lay on the floor beside him, in an enormous pool of blood.

She went back to her kitchen, called 911, and gave the operator her name and address.

"I heard a gunshot across the hall," she said.

"Did you see anybody?"

Margot thought about how she should answer that.

Had Wicks committed suicide after being confronted by Clarence? Or had Clarence killed him? Wicks had been a man in deep emotional suffering, so if Clarence had shot him, could it qualify as a mercy killing? Margot almost smiled at the irony of that.

"Ma'am?"

Margot stood up straight and replied in the clear, strong voice that André would have used. "Didn't see a soul," she said.

"Lock your door and stay in your apartment. Police are on the way."

Margot hung up the phone, then stared out a window at the velvet blue dusk. The week's rain had begun to wash away sediment from the flood, and for the first time since Katrina, she heard sounds of life from the yard below. Frogs, and a nightingale, and a dog barking.

She took André's dagger and eased it back into its scabbard, then put it away in a drawer and shut it.

Barnes Carr is a graduate of Tulane University, with majors in American and British Literature. He was born in the Mississippi Delta and has lived in New Orleans most of his life, so he claims dual nationality.

He was a reporter and sub-editor for wire services and daily newspapers in Montréal, Boston, New York, Washington and New Orleans (the *States-Item*). His freelance journalism has appeared in the *New York Herald-Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and in England in the *Sunday Times* and the *Guardian*. When he was managing editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, Mississippi, his book editor was Ben Wasson, Faulkner's first literary agent.

Carr was executive producer for WRNO Worldwide in New Orleans, a commercial shortwave station broadcasting jazz and R&B to Iron Curtain countries in the twilight of the Cold War. At one point, his programs were denounced by the Soviet government as "counterrevolutionary trash," after which the station's ratings went up.

Carr's fiction has been published in the *Texas Review* and other magazines. He is now working on a narrative history titled *Dachniki: Atomic Spies Morris and Lona Cohen*, and a book of Katrina short stories, *Elysian Fields*. He was in New Orleans during Katrina, and "Needle Man" is based on true events that occurred in a hospital during the Great Flood.

It is his hope that publication of this story will bring renewed attention to an injustice that unfortunately

## Short Story: OTHER FINALISTS

*A Secret Service*, Paul Negri, Clifton, NJ  
*Charcoal*, Rachel Unkefer, Charlottesville, VA

*Half*, Sharon Harrigan, Paris, France  
*Hand in Glove*, Darlene Olivo, Concord, NH  
*Labor Day Was Yesterday*, Ben Shields, New Orleans, LA

*Lisbeth*, Anonymous

*Losing My Religion*, Ward Zimmerman,  
*Maneki Neko*, Jan English Leary, Chicago, IL  
*Riding in Cars at Night*, Tad Bartlett, New Orleans, LA

*Rock Salt and Rabbit*, Karin C. Davidson, Columbus, OH

*Speaking of the Dead*, William Coles, Salt Lake City, UT

*The Artist Colony*, Bruce Wexler, Elmhurst, IL

*The Hanging of Miguel Delgado*, Barbara Leni Yost, Phoenix, AZ

*The Longitude Problem*, Kate Bullard Adams, Charleston, SC

*The Monkey of LaMonte*, William Thrift, Columbia, SC

*Tired Feet, Rested Souls*, Carolann Neilon Malley, Grantby, MA

*Uncle Edgar and the Tintinnabulation of the Bells*, Susie Slosberg, Bronxville, NY

*White Butterfly*, Dick Sheffield, San Angelo, TXZ

*Year by Year*, MaryLee MacDonald, Tempe, AZ

too many people have chosen to kick under the rug. Carr divides his time between Houston, where he teaches, and NOLA, which he's always found to be an agreeable place for writing, and living.

**Photo of Barnes Carr by Lynda Elkin.**





*Chris Waddington*  
*2013*  
*Short Story Runner*  
*Up*



## **What Felt Good At The Time**

Amelia Ward called Richard Greene on a wet March evening, catching her fellow physician off-guard with his sleeves rolled and dishwasher running.

"Meet me at the airport, Dick. My mother's in the hospital again. I'll pass through tomorrow, OK?" The words poured out in a throaty, affectionate whisper that Amelia hardly knew anymore, not the steady voice that delivered bad news and explained options to her patients, but something she had last employed while resting her head on Richard's bare chest—a memory lit by cable TV in a hotel bed with blankets kicked to the floor; a moment, just before sleep, when she had idly traced Richard's furrowed brow with a fingertip, had kissed his eyelids until they sprang open to gaze at her with guilty horror.

Richard knew her voice instantly. She hadn't telephoned since November — since election night, to be precise, when he had crowed about Reagan's landslide and she had seemed to take it so well. Now his heart thumped and he struggled to keep his voice neutral — "I see." Uh-huh. "Of course," he said — as if a nurse were calling about some patient's medication.

"We can talk or have a drink," she said. "It's just two hours — a layover. Every flight connects through Minneapolis."

The remains of dinner covered the kitchen table. Richard's wife was upstairs, putting their daughter to bed.

"Not here," Richard said, more sharply than he had intended. He felt like a burglar, his ears tuned to the creak of the stairs, to the shuffle of his wife's bare feet on the landing. "Call me at the office. Not here. We agreed."

Amelia almost said something then, but her silence was enough to get his attention. He changed his tone and cupped the receiver. Suds ran down his arms, dripping unnoticed to the Italian tile floor, the fifth anniversary present his wife had expected. "Look, I'm sorry about your mother. I'll be there. What time?"

\*

Amelia used to laugh about it. One night she had said, "I feel like I'm in a French farce. We're always

switching bedrooms and slamming doors."

In fact, it was Amelia who slammed all the doors when they were together— not angrily, but in her haste to leave him when she saw Richard fiddle with the wedding ring on his finger. She would waltz into his life for a day, and would disappear in an airport limo, her face hidden as Richard stood on some street corner waving. He couldn't say no and Amelia could never say when. She paid her own way. She fed two stray cats that she rarely discussed. She practiced medicine in Billings, Montana.

At thirty-eight, Amelia knew enough about men — and, from the beginning, that was all she had chosen to know about Richard. It wasn't a defensive thing. Not knowing was part of the pleasure: to let herself be startled by the eager bounce of his walk, by his blind preoccupied gaze as he searched for her in a crowd, by that carnal smile, mirroring her own as she said the first things that came to mind. He liked that kind of thing, too: her cultivated heedlessness, her hands aloft like small birds attempting to nest in the tumbled mass of her hair.

In the course of three years, they had hooked up at a half-dozen seminars, had missed planes and had called home with excuses. One Labor Day weekend, while Richard's wife was attending a real estate workshop, they had snuck off to a borrowed cabin on Lake Michigan, never opening the drapes for two days. Either one could have broken the spell by saying "I love you." He took her elbow at parties; she undid his belt in the dark: moments that owned the vividness of a tossed coin glinting in air, when all seems suspended and prosaic options — mere heads or tails — matter less than the simple act of yielding to chance.

\*

Neither lover had seen the other's home, although Richard felt obliged to make an attempt. He feared hurt feelings. He anticipated the sad labels that might attach to their actions, and so, on a morning in June, he had called her from a payphone in Yellowstone Park. He was ready to leave his fly fishing buddies. He was sunburned and bored; just hours away, but Amelia had firmly refused him.

*A story whose brilliant final paragraph raises all that has come before into the sublime.*

—Ron Rash

“We’re doctors,” she said. “No house calls.”

\*

More recently, Richard had startled her with a Christmas card. It had come to her office from his office, thanks to a glitch in his mailing list software: a signature and a pre-printed salutation, a family photo tucked into slots on the front.

Amelia wasn’t disturbed by the bland, blond wife. *No point in complaining about the weather*, she thought. The woman came with the territory — a fact as inescapable as the arctic wind that whistled outside Amelia’s examining room, sifting snow across the parking lot where her Saab convertible sat alone. But Richard’s daughter was something else: a chubby, moon-faced four-year-old caught in her mother’s arms, squealing as she struggled, grasping at something outside the picture. Amelia understood the gesture. There was always something outside the frame and now it was Amelia herself, gazing in on lives that proceeded in Kodachrome color.

The man in the photograph couldn’t save Amelia from that certainty. Framed by boughs and tinsel, his soft face merely identified him, plain as a mug on a driver’s license, with blue eyes hidden by bifocal lenses, his thinning hair parted with the same precision he brought to the details of hotel rooms and restaurant dinners, to those little gifts he tucked in her baggage — a seashell, a bracelet, a tiny bottle of Shalimar left for her to discover when she returned to her empty house, perched high on the rimrock, with its vast prospect of Montana geology. Arranged on her dressing table, those tokens engendered wonder and dissatisfaction, as if she’d salvaged some immaterial props from a dream: a fruit without savor, a beverage that couldn’t quench thirst.

“Stupid, stupid woman,” she said, addressing her silent office. She ripped the card and shoved the remains in a bin reserved for medical waste: pipettes, syringes, sharp objects contaminated by blood. Yet the barb remained. Its poison seeped for weeks to come — not jealousy, not desire, not rage, but an old regret that compounded all those feelings and proved addictive, the very thing she had kept at arms length for years, having seen two divorces, a miscarriage, a nurse in bed with one husband, the death of her father, flings, love affairs, five bottles of Stoly chilled in a snow bank, a pistol in a shaking hand, and finally, the simple, dull pleasures of sleeping alone.

Amelia wanted none of that. She planned to call Richard eventually, but let a whole winter pass. Like a good doctor, she did no harm — except, sometimes, to

herself. She did her job. She drank a little wine at night. Confined to her examining room, she practiced a caution that she understood to be love, dealing in pills and lollipops and keeping the Kleenex handy.

Richard was equally cautious. Once or twice he had picked up the phone and neglected to dial. They had gone too far. He had told her as much. Nonetheless, he had retained a photograph of Amelia, a group shot of med school alumni in a publication full of such pictures. He could have left the magazine in plain view, but treated it like a loaded revolver, cramming it beneath papers in a locked desk drawer, safe from his wife and child. He knew there was danger there — a bullet for everything he held dear — and that danger held him, powerful as Amelia’s scent on his clothes or the memory of her sudden, ravenous movements.

\*

The lovers had met at USC, two distinguished grads returning for a conference on medical ethics. In the photograph, she stood to the left — “just like my politics,” she had joked — a dark-haired, talkative woman who had winked at him after the picture was snapped.

It still amazed him that she had singled him out, that he had dropped the medical shoptalk and asked her to dance in a hotel bar that overlooked the Pacific. Improbably light on his feet, he had felt old steps coming back — not an accident of timing and music, but something in their turning that resembled a larger choreography, like the pull of the tide, or the moon clocking across the backdrop of stars. Two martinis played a role, of course. Carried by the dance, they had walked the beach and found it easy to laugh at each other’s jokes. He talked about the struggles of marriage. She shared tidbits from her past. Eventually, they had kissed.

Richard pulled back first and Amelia switched to her bedside manner, blaming the full moon, which always brought strange cases to the notice of physicians.

“But this time, we’re the crazies,” she said. “We ought to know better.”

That “we,” so clearly articulated, had shattered all of Richard’s middle-aged caution.

He couldn’t discuss Amelia with anyone — and what would he have said in any case? They hardly knew each other and she tried to keep it that way. Richard let her navigate, yielding to a passenger’s pleasure as she led him to strange outposts of himself. He began to dress with more care. Old torch songs caused him to stare into space. Even his morning shave held new fascination, each swipe revealing a romantic likeness, the lover he had forgotten beneath other accumulations: a good son’s worried eyes, the graying sideburns, the wrinkles that surfaced when his daughter cried or his wife complained or something went wrong at the office.

And yet, Richard stayed true to his habits, able to bury Amelia for weeks at a time. He kissed his daughter, inhaling a milky innocence that he tried to claim for

his own. Most days, he rose before sunrise. He jogged through suburban streets. He golfed with colleagues and always told little jokes on himself — a number one skin man just like his Dad, one whose patients rarely died, he said, but who never really got well.

\*

On the concourse, she saw him first: pink-faced and late and thicker than she remembered, his tie loosened and collar undone, craning his neck toward her. She'd begun to think he wouldn't come — they both had reasons to skip this — but until now, she hadn't known how much it mattered to see him. She caught herself shifting from foot to foot and tried to compose her thoughts, licking her lips and smiling, hefting her briefcase, feeling the sweat on her palms.

*Let him find me*, she thought. He seemed half-blind, dodging baby strollers and luggage carts and the six p.m. crush of travelers, all those business types with sober topcoats and worried expressions that perfectly matched Richard's own.

For his part, Richard wondered if Amelia had stayed at the gate. He checked his watch and rehearsed excuses, ready to joke about slush and rush hour traffic and the charms of driving a four-year-old to a playmate's birthday party. His soaked shoes squeegeed over the stone floor, reminding him of the floppy footwear worn by the clown at the party, the one who had honked a bicycle horn at his daughter, who had scared the child and seen the problem and tried to distract her by pulling a coin from behind her ear.

*But where was Amelia?* Richard turned full circle and she stepped away from the pillar that half-concealed her.

"Over here," she said.

He tried to kiss her, just a social kiss, a peck on the cheek, but his glasses bumped her forehead as she turned away.

"Thanks for coming, Richard."

"Of course," he replied, though there was nothing certain about his expression. *Why the thanks? Was this different?*

Amelia might have asked the same questions, but couldn't get hold of the words. All her usual, flip greetings had failed her and there seemed to be tears in her eyes. She looked down quickly (some coyness, he guessed) and then she found herself laughing — at her feelings, at Richard, at their dubious relationship — now seeing his tasseled Italian loafers out of context, as they might appear if Richard were tiptoeing through the bunch grass and cactus that covered her patch of the Rockies.

"Don't try wearing those in Montana," she said. "People will think you're from Hollywood."

Now Richard was also laughing, happy to defuse the awkwardness with some teasing. "I thought you had put Montana out of bounds for me."

"It's a state of mind, Richard. I'll send you some tourist brochures."

Amelia couldn't tell where the conversation was going — or where the two of them could hide in the jostling airport crowd. There was no time for old times. Her layover was half over. Her next flight already sat at the gate, awaiting a cleaning crew.

Finally, Richard did the right thing and inquired about her mother. They had discussed her treatment before, so it was natural to fall into the language of medicine: dosages and drugs and remissions, *pain management* — everything but the patient herself.

"And what about you?" Richard asked. "How are you doing?"

"Under the circumstances —" Amelia broke off. She stood stiffly, like one more pillar in the row that supported the roof.

Then Richard pulled her aside, a firm hand on her elbow as a phalanx of flight attendants charged past, trailing squeaky, wheeled luggage and chatter about hotels in Copenhagen. In that moment, it seemed right to follow the group, moving past airport bars and duty free shops where others squandered their layovers checking prices and watching the time.

Richard talked at her distractedly, scanning the crowd for a colleague or a friend of his wife, someone quick to make judgments, to call out his name or present a hand for fumbling introductions. But that was simply a reflex. If someone had spotted them, his nervousness would have looked different, a matter of guilty secrets, not this purer sensation of breathlessness, as though he had stepped from Concourse B to a spot lit stage where he was expected to pull rabbits from his hat.

"I missed you," he said, finally squeezing her hand. "I wondered if I'd hear from you —"

"Not *when* you'd hear?"

"It started to seem —"

"Like what?"

"Like it felt good at the time, but maybe it was over. And now look where we are." Richard waved at the ticketing counters at the crowds lined up to check baggage. "We could go anywhere."

\*

They went to his car. They joked about who had been leading whom and which of them had first suggested a detour. Somehow it was all decided before they got to the drafty expanse of Blue Level parking — not a yes or a no, but an impulse that couldn't be derailed by the MONDALE sticker that Richard's wife had plastered to the station wagon's rear bumper, a force that gathered strength as Richard slapped his pockets for keys, assumed the worst, then waved them in a small triumphant gesture as she shifted her briefcase from hand to hand.

She shoved the bag onto the dashboard while Richard swept stray crayons out of the way.

"Don't let me forget it," she said, although that was exactly what she never let herself do. The briefcase held a dozen reports from radiologists: Benign cysts and



shadows — the good news to be handled by mail — and tucked in the deck one obvious mass spreading to lymph nodes swollen like late season grapes. Tomorrow she would have to explain this in person, a compassionate doctor with coils of grey in her hair.

Richard saw Amelia's face cropped in the rear view mirror: serious as his daughter tucking a doll into bed. He turned her gently, wrapping his warm hands around her wrists and feeling a throb in the butt of his palm where he'd slammed the steering wheel on the drive to the airport. He moved a hand to her knees and she swiftly undid the half-dozen buttons of Richard's coat.

"Like a surgeon," he said.

"More like high school," she said.

"Well, it feels good. You feel good," he whispered, sliding his hand across the top of her thighs. "I'm just a little mixed up."

That made her laugh: "I'm always that way when someone puts a hand underneath my dress."

She came astride him then, lithe as a girl, looking into his eyes and ignoring the clutter over his shoulders — the child seat and fast food wrappers, the little red mittens his daughter had left on the seat. She was thinking — she couldn't help it — but she kissed him anyway, a wet, friendly smack, undeniable as a dog licking a sleeper's face in the morning.

Richard recognized her perfume. It was something his wife wore, but that didn't stop him. He touched her earlobe with the tip of his tongue. He lifted her hips to settle her more comfortably on his lap.

Then Amelia said something. It took a second to register, for Richard to giggle:

"Hey, we don't have time for *that*," he said, picturing them in an inch high ad in the back of a porn magazine — HOT AMATEUR NASTY — caught *in flagrante* on airport security cameras, clinching evidence at some future divorce trial. "You're crazy," he said. But his hands were moving and the car seat creaked. In that moment they could have been anything to each other — no name, no histories — locking like dogs, if dogs could fumble with zippers and buttons and a panel of elasticized silk tugged aside.

A car door slammed and he felt himself slip inside her. He repeated her name and she put her weight on his shoulders.

It happened so quickly: a frantic rustle of fabric as both of them heard an engine turn over and die. It happened as high heels clacked towards them and voices echoed off the concrete roof.

It had to happen.

"Now," she said.

And it did. It happened. It really, really happened.

\*

They could have been anything to each other, but were themselves again. He felt the damp of the seat beneath him. She pulled her skirt into place and examined her flushed face in the rear view mirror.

*Someone in a picture*, she thought, *someone else*. And it was so brightly lit in the car's front seat. *Had anyone seen them?* It gave her a start to think so, savoring her relief as she noticed the smile Richard couldn't wipe from his face.

"You look like you ate the canary," she said.

"I can taste you."

"But can you digest me, Richard?" She combed a hand through his hair and held his gaze for a moment.

"I'd rather not pursue that thought. No happy outcomes," he answered.

"And we don't have time."

"No, we never do. I know the drill." Richard turned his gaze to the parking ramp's waffled ceiling, to the pipes and pillars and fluorescent lights that might conceal a security camera. "Do you think anybody saw us?"

She peeked at her watch.

"I need to go. If I run, I can still make my flight."

Richard fluttered his fingers, offering his empty palms for inspection. "I won't keep you," he said, finding solace in this small, sweet act of surrender, watching Amelia lift her briefcase and open the passenger door. When she looked back, however, his resolution failed. He reached out and cupped his hand just behind her ear, as if he might draw her into a kiss or pluck a missing coin from behind her hair, some triumphant act of legerdemain to break the spell they were under.

"I guess I never learned this trick," Richard whispered. Then he let her go. It was certainly too late for magic.

\*

And yet, that was not the entire story. Certain details could only be known by others: the stewardess who saw Amelia push a damp tendril of hair from her face and lapse into sleep before the plane was aloft; the cashier at the gas station who watched Richard scrub his front seat for fifteen minutes; the daughter who laughed to see Daddy's coat askew, buttoned out-of-sequence so the collar didn't meet at his neck.

Like a hall of mirrors, the whole world cast back reflections of who they were, lovers bared as surely as any security camera could do it, the hidden lens zooming in for a close up, airport cops stirring from their sloth, crowding closer to watch a stag scene unfold in grainy black-and-white. For years to come, the guards would have occasion to play back the scene, and so would Richard and Amelia. She would tumble her hair in a bemused, distracted gesture; he would draw a hand over his forehead, as though he could erase his thoughts with a swipe. And then, although their paths had diverged, the two doctors would ask the same questions: What's a love that can't be shared with the world? What's marriage without a witness?



*Susan Jeschke*  
*2013*  
*Short Story*  
*Runner-Up*



## ***Whispering Pines***

He was the new cook, she the 17 year-old waitress. They met in the late 80's inside the walk-in refrigerator of the Rusty Nail, a restaurant in southern Maine with a two-foot long hammer bolted above the door. Christy was standing in the back near the desserts devouring her third chocolate éclair, when she felt a rush of air. The man seemed to have appeared from nowhere, carrying a crate of potatoes. He was so tall his head almost hit the ceiling. His face was unshaven, his hair unnaturally dark. His lips were thick and tight and slightly blue. He stopped abruptly when he saw her and set the crate on floor of the walk-in, wiping his hands on his apron.

"You're the new cook," Christy said swabbing her mouth with her sleeve. She glanced sideways at the dish smeared with the half-eaten éclair.

He nodded and stared at her uncomfortably.

"Wayne told me. You met Wayne?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Such a mama's boy. You want an éclair?"

It was Saturday and snowing and she had a paper due for English first thing Monday morning. She was the only waitress working that night, just like the past three weekends, since Melissa started doing too much coke and calling in sick. It didn't take long before Melissa was "ill" so often that Wayne took her off the schedule though he didn't have the balls to fire her, despite the fact that business was dismal that winter.

Christy put her hands on her hips. "Does the cook speak?"

The man began stacking the crates of potatoes on the shelf, carefully turning each one so that all the labels faced out. Then he took a large, dusty Idaho Russet from a crate and handed it to her.

"You feel this?"

She had no idea what he meant. "Yeah, I feel it. So what?"

"You know how much effort went into making this potato?" he asked. "It's basically a goddamn miracle, the result of sun, water, soil, fertilizer, pesticides, time, and the

magic of DNA. It's God's work, really, you and me couldn't make a potato if our lives depended on it."

He squeezed her hand around the potato's uneven skin. "You know what happens next? This dirty old rock's going to get chopped up. Fried like the desert, in two-month old oil. Rancid oil. Then some old man is going to dump a bunch of sour cream on it, eat it in less than two minutes, and shit it out. That's what we do to miracles. Think about it." He paused and looked around the sterile interior of the walk-in like he was expecting a grenade. "I used to eat potatoes all day. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Now I eat whatever I goddamn want."

Christy raised an eyebrow and took a step back. "Well, looks like we hired a preacher along with a cook. You want an éclair or not?"

He grinned and ran a hand through his hair. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Christy looked at the floor, a wave of self-consciousness sweeping over her.

The man leaned his head against the metal shelves and laughed, his ribs shaking underneath his white apron. He looked her up and down, shook his head and smirked, then grabbed the half-eaten éclair from the dish and popped it into his mouth.

Later that evening, she found him chopping onions, tears running down his cheeks, biting a wooden match between his front teeth like he'd caught the tail of a rat. He was calm and seemed unhurried. When he was finished, he set the knife down on the cutting board and took the match out of his mouth. "It's supposed to prevent you from tearing up," he said.

"Never heard of that. Doesn't seem to work, though."

"It's an old trick from the Japanese monks. They were master cooks. Knew how to chop these fuckers without even blinking. But as soon as you take any air in your nose, you're fucked. I'll get it figured out soon." He set the onions aside in a bowl next to the cutting board and wiped the knife clean with a towel. A small trickle of blood slid down his fingertip.

"You cut yourself, Zen master," she said, and pointed at his finger.

He shook a few drops onto the floor then stuck his finger in his mouth. "Little bastard's numb as shit."

"You should put a band-aid on it."

He laughed. "Yeah, that's what I need. A band-aid." He stared down at his feet. "You been working here long?" Then picked up what appeared to be her nametag off the floor. "Christy?"

Cheap plastic piece of shit never stayed on. She put her hand on her apron where her name should have been. "A year."

"A year," he repeated.

"That's right," she put her hands on her hips "and I don't even know your name."

"Sanders." He grinned and his teeth flickered yellow in the light as he walked around the metal table to where she stood. He unclasped the pin from the back of the tag and poked the tip of it into his index finger that was still bleeding. "I can't feel pain in this hand. I can cut and burn the shit out of it and it won't matter. Makes me a perfect cook." He slipped the pin through her blouse near the top of her apron. She could feel the pressure just above her right breast where his fingers grazed her chest as he clicked the pin shut. A rush of heat brushed through her ribs. "Christy," he said, "you have a nice name."

"It never stays on," She put her hand over the nametag as if she needed at least for a moment, to keep it there, intact.

He smiled at her and then glanced at the stereo in the corner of the kitchen. "You like Zeppelin?"

She rolled her eyes, a gesture she often made when she was trying to seem older and wiser than she was. The truth was that she liked music but had always been a passive listener humming along to the radio in the cars of her friends and her old boyfriend Jeremy's Volkswagen, with a vague awareness of who was singing and what they were singing about. Her parents rarely listened to anything at home. They preferred Archie Bunker and screwdrivers made with cheap vodka to the stereo. She did know the one album by Zeppelin that Jeremy had given her as a Valentine's gift. Even now the mention of Zeppelin made her think of *What Is and What Should Never Be* and made her want to get high and lie down in the backseat of his wagon while he drove her around like a chauffer careening through the back roads of Kittery. Whenever she thought of him now she was filled with a sense of failure. It had been so easy with him. Like a soft pillow to rest your head on. Which is why she broke it off. It was unsettling to be taken care of like that and somehow unnatural. Besides, he was off to Harvard now. When would she have seen him? She worked on the weekends. He'd be busy with his new friends, his new life. They never would have survived. "Zeppelin's all right." Did she sound too eager?

Sanders walked over to the stereo and turned up the volume. She breathed easily once she realized

she actually recognized the song, *Ramble On*, from the same album. Jeremy used to fast forward that one. Guess he wasn't much of a rambler. Sanders began drumming on the counter with two fingers, scrunching his face up in concentration. Christy hopped up onto the metal counter next to the speaker and swung her legs as she listened.

"Hey Sanders, you got a smoke for me?" Wayne's lopsided face peered like a searchlight through the round window above the swinging doors that led to the main dining room. Sanders nodded, pulled a cigarette from a pack of Camels in his jeans pocket and set it on the counter.

"Thanks man. I'm all out." Wayne lit the cigarette there in the kitchen, a blatant code violation. It was his latest, pathetic attempt to fit in. They called him John Wayne behind his back. Not that long ago he was a busboy with greasy hair and a soiled shirt. He was not the most hardworking of the bunch and he depended on a cut from Christy's tips to make a decent night's wage. Now, thanks to the owner, his uncle Jack, he was the boss. Obviously, Uncle Jack was grooming him to take over The Nail someday. Big fucking prize. During the past few weeks Wayne had begun to act more like his uncle than the kid Christy had always known. He'd bark orders at the cooks and waitresses then ask them if they wanted to hang out after work. The worst were these impromptu "visits" on his days off. Hanging around like an extra stool at the bar.

"So I see you two have met." Wayne said blowing puffs of smoke in the direction of the fire alarm.

"I bet you didn't know this guy was a musical encyclopedia," Wayne said wrapping his arm around Sanders like they were brothers. Sanders flinched but stood there, allowing Wayne to continue on his behalf.

"Nope. Didn't know that, Wayne." Christy had begun poking the holes of a saltshaker with a toothpick. Sanders shrugged.

"Sorry man. I didn't mean to embarrass you." He gave Sanders a friendly dig in the arm.

"Just telling it like it is. Who else could name every King Crimson album and song?"

"That's enough," Sanders said.

"The man doesn't like praise."

"I said that's enough." Sanders turned down the volume on the stereo and flashed Wayne a reprimanding stare.

"All right. You need a ride home, Sanders? Car's in the shop, right?" Wayne seemed to be wrapping things up, thank God.

"I'll hitch."

Wayne was insecure, overly talkative, and socially awkward but he had a sixth sense that would come out at the strangest moments like a tic. He glanced at Sanders and Christy, moving his eyes back and forth between them. "All right then. I guess you're all set."

"All set, Wayne," Christy said. "Thanks so much for stopping by." Poke. Poke. Poke.

"I'm out of here, my friends. Wicked cold out there!" Wayne blew another large puff of smoke into the



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*This story has characters so fully-realized that they feel more like memory than fiction.*

—Ron Rash

air then dropped the cigarette on the floor and stomped it out. Then he took a pen and a book of matches from his pocket and scratched a number on the back of it and handed it to Christy. "Call me anytime if you need anything."

Christy nodded and slipped the matches in her apron. What the fuck, was he hitting on her?

Mrs. Woods was an aging hippie from California who favored words like "self-actualization." She wore loose dresses with buttons made out of cork and wore her hair in one long silver braid. But despite her relaxed appearance she was known as a hard grader and had dramatic outbursts in class where she would rant at the class and assign more homework. She called these her "moments of clarity." Her students called them her "moments of insanity." It was during one of these "moments" that she abruptly switched the assignment for the weekend, which was supposed to be a paper on Jane Eyre.

"And one more thing," she announced as the students gathered their backpacks to leave. "I don't know about you but I think it's time we all switched gears for a bit. Let's all pause and put Ms. Bronte aside for the weekend, shall we?" She removed her glasses and set them down on her desk. She sighed, a long, troubling sigh, then brushed the air in front of her as if swatting a fly. "Yes," she said with a fresh air of authority, "this weekend we will read and write a three page response, to a prize-winning and highly anthologized story by Joyce Carol Oates." She smiled knowingly, obviously pleased with herself as she scratched her chin. "That ought to stir things a bit!" Then she began handing out photocopies. "Have it on my desk Monday morning." If Christy nailed this paper she'd end up with an A for the semester and her parents would add an extra hour to her 11 pm curfew.

As soon as Wayne was gone Sanders was back at the stereo, shuffling songs.

"What about Floyd? You like Floyd?" Sanders asked.

She grinned. "Not so much. I better get back to setting up."

"Floyd's what it's all about. Mind-blowing."

"Yeah, well, maybe my mind is OK as is," she said and brushed a loose curl over her shoulder. Jeremy used to say that Pink Floyd was a cerebral band. Like sitting in the eye of a storm.

Sanders laughed and shook his head back and forth. She couldn't tell if he was making fun of her or not. Then he got serious and started working again, picking up the chef knife and making small incisions in the skin of the chicken he had pounded earlier and stripping it into long, thin pieces. He guided the knife along with

gestures that were grander than they needed to be, like he was a master chef instead of a line cook at a place that was barely one step up from Friendly's. He set the breadcrumbs in a metal pan, poured oil into the frialator behind him and turned up the heat. He was focused. Didn't take a break. Nothing like the boys from school.

Wayne had to show the last guy the door one Saturday night after he imprinted a row of rectangular bars on his forearm with a scalding hot spatula. Melissa had walked in to the smell of singed skin, saw Smitty in the act and fainted. Afterwards, she told Wayne that he had been grinning, like it was some kind of joke, had started jerking his head back and forth like he was having a seizure and then everything went dark.

Later that night after Smitty was gone, Melissa told Wayne that Smitty had been snorting coke in the bathroom on his breaks. When he asked Melissa how she knew she hugged him, then looked him straight in the eye and told him he had a nice smile. After that night, Melissa started calling in sick.

Christy arranged her freshly cleaned saltshakers on a tray while she watched Sanders fry the chicken. She had never seen a cook check the oil so often. Every few seconds he'd spoon out a couple drops and taste it, then he'd adjust the temperature. She didn't know if he was nervous, pretentious, or both. Towards the end of their shift, Sanders started wire brushing the oven using both hands and leaning into the burners for traction. The kitchen was somehow more quiet than usual. Smitty had been a loud guy. Always clattering pots and pans, banging lids, talking to anyone that would listen. Sanders didn't even notice other people, didn't matter to him one way or another, kept his head down while he worked which made it all the more alarming when he stopped what he was doing and looked at her. Staring. The ketchup bottle slid from her grip. Glass and sauce splattered everywhere. He told her to step back, and reached over and touched her arm. A sharp pain rippled through her as he plucked a shard of glass from her skin. He held it up to the light, inspecting its size. Her wound was surprisingly tender where he had touched her and was beginning to bleed. He put his arm out in front of the spill to block her and immediately grabbed the bucket and mop from the corner while she stood watching him, her face flushed. When he finished mopping, he took a rag and wiped up the remaining glass. She thought the least she could do was offer him a ride. He looked genuinely surprised when she said it. "Great," he said, "thanks," and squeezed out the mop over the bucket.

After Christy broke up with Jeremy, she turned on MTV and lay on the couch with her feet up. Her mother sat down next to her. She was wearing a lilac blouse. There was never a shortage of pastels in her wardrobe. "Such a nice boy." Her mother was always good at stating the obvious during a low moment.

Christy turned up the volume to *Start Me Up* and ignored her mother.

"You think you'll get back together?"

Christy frowned. The question didn't deserve a response.

"Well I for one, think it's a shame you two parted ways." Her mother stared at Mick Jagger who was wearing tight white jeans, shaking his ass, and puckering his lips in front of the camera. "How can you watch this?"

"Sylvia, it's OK. Really." She liked to invoke her name as a way to illuminate her mother's powerlessness. She might as well have been her father talking.

"That boy kept you out of trouble. Now what are you going to do?" Her mother sighed and then grabbed a handful of Sno-Caps from the bowl next to the sofa and popped them in her mouth. Christy resisted the urge to respond. Instead she turned off the TV and reached her hand in the bowl and ate the last of Sno-Caps before her mother had a chance.

After closing, Christy looked for Sanders in the kitchen but he wasn't there. She thought maybe he had changed his mind about the ride but when she opened the back door of the restaurant, he was there underneath the exit sign in the glow of the red light. He had combed his hair; she wondered if that meant something. It appeared shiny and darker now- if that was even possible - and he had put on a cheap blue sports coat, which made him look even older than he was. When he saw her, he pulled the ends of the jacket down with his fingers to straighten it. The air was cold and she felt the muscles in her legs constrict.

"My car's over there," she said. He nodded and lit a cigarette.

"Where do you live again?" she asked.

"Out by the railroad off of Route One on the Maine side," he said.

Christy knew this road well; it crossed from Maine into New Hampshire. She had spent summers traveling on this road to the beach with her parents. His house, she calculated, was probably fifteen minutes away.

"Sounds good," he said and followed her to her car. The air was cold and dark. Sanders opened the car door and picked up a manila folder on the seat. "What's this?"

"It's a story for my English class."

"Is it any good?"

"Probably. Mrs. Woods is very cool. But I haven't read it yet."

Sanders smiled and nodded. "You seem older than seventeen. The way you talk."

"I get to practice at home. I have a child for a mother." She laughed and started the engine and cranked up the heat to full blast and waited for the window to defrost. She studied him, careful not to stare. He smelled like ketchup and cooking oil. His legs were long and stretched to the very front of the car.

"You can move the seat back if you want," she said.

"I'm good." He rubbed a circle on the windshield to have a look outside. "You know how to drive in snow?"

"Does the Pope shit in the woods? Yes, I live here you know. In Maine."

"Such a mouth." He bit the nail of his thumb and spit it on the floor. "How long have you known Wayne?"

"Long time. Since we were kids."

He nodded and looked out the window.

Route One was covered in a thin layer of ice.

The tall pines leaned to one side from a week's worth of snow, and hovered over the winding road that grew darker as she drove further from the border and past the small, isolated towns along the coast. She had dreamed of leaving someday. Maybe somewhere out west, past the Rockies. Somewhere with wide open spaces where she could think, and no one she knew could tell her what to do. *Running on Empty*, was playing on the radio. Sanders reached over and switched the station.

"What are you doing?"

"What? You like that shit?"

"Sort of."

He shook his head and rested his palms on the dashboard. "Don't tell me that."

"What?"

"Here. I'll find you some real music."

"Fine with me." She glanced at the clock in the car. It was 9 pm. Two hours until her curfew.

Sanders had found Boston on the radio and was awkwardly shuffling his body to *More Than a Feeling*. She looked over at him craning his neck and playing air guitar and wondered if offering him a ride was a mistake. Maybe in the end they were all the same. Little boys pretending to be men. They passed the old gas station; its one fluorescent light flickered and buzzed like an insect caught in a trap. The place where they used to fill up Jeremy's old Volkswagen last summer before it closed for good. They'd pick up a dozen jelly donuts on the way to Lake Winnepesaukee where they'd lie for hours on the shore basking in the sunlight as they ate their donuts. Now, the light from the station turned into a distant glimmer in her rearview mirror.

Sanders had become quiet and still, his hands were folded in his lap. They were full of little nicks like small bites or cuts. It was hard to tell what they were in the dark.

"Have you lived out here long?" she asked.

"Six months."

"Where were you before that?" The road narrowed as they approached a four-way stop.

"Turn here," he said. "It's a couple miles down this dirt road."

The road suddenly dipped downward and she felt a strange euphoria mixed with dread as she pushed harder on the gas pedal and began to descend, the road dipping and sloping and then all at once bumpy and uneven and slippery with snow. The road was covered with debris, fallen branches and pine needles. The moon was full and shined between the clouds at random intervals and didn't help her see past the rocks and dust and snow in the headlights. She became uncertain whether she should brake when she began to slide or just

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let her foot off the gas and glide. A wild parade of snow seemed to be coming right at her, hitting the windshield with relentless fervor and the car began to slide, and without fully meaning to or even realizing it, she stepped on the gas.

"Don't turn the wheel," Sanders pitched forward in his seat and gripped the edge of the dashboard. "Take your foot off the gas and just let it go." The car's left side slid into a shallow ditch. The right side remained with its wheels on the road. Sanders looked at Christy with contempt.

"What? What the hell else was I supposed to do?" Christy bit her lip.

"I thought you said you could drive in snow?"

"I can." She wiped her forehead with her arm. "It's just more slippery than I realized."

"You shouldn't have been going so fast. You can't control the wheels at the higher speeds. Especially on ice."

"What are you, like, the storm expert?"

Sanders ignored her, which made her immediately regret saying anything. She knew he was right, that she had been going too fast, and that had she been thinking clearly and driving slower she might have avoided the slide altogether but she had been distracted and she'd lost her focus. She was surprised by how upset she was that he had pointed out her mistake.

"I'm going to get out and push. Do exactly what I say. When I tell you to give it gas, do it."

Christy rolled down her window. Sanders was behind the car with his hands on the fender. "Ok, give it gas," he yelled. Christy felt the wheels spin and then move forward with a jolt. She could see him in her rearview mirror with his hands on the back of the car pushing it as she stepped on the gas. When she was sure all four wheels were on the road she let her foot off the pedal and shifted into park. A burst of fresh, cold air blew in as Sanders opened the passenger car door. His sports coat was soaked and his boots and jeans were splattered with mud. His hair had a layer of ice on it and he was grinning.

"You want me to drive?"

"I can handle it." No way was she was going to let someone else drive her car. "Do you live alone?" she asked.

"Except for my dog, Bruno. It's right up here. You can drop me off here if you want."

As Christy pulled the car into a wide turnaround, a big shaggy-haired dog approached. He was barking with a slight growl until he spotted Sanders in the front seat. He began wagging his tail.

"Is he friendly?" Christy asked.

"Usually. Want to meet him?"

Christy nodded and stepped out of the car. She gave the dog a light pat on the head. The dog sniffed her hand and crotch, and then ran over to Sanders wagging his tail.

A simple white colonial with dark green shutters faced the driveway. The windows were covered with

shades. Next to it was a dirt path that led into a grove of pines. Sanders knelt down and let the dog lick his chin. "You want to come inside?"

Christy glanced at her watch. She knew she didn't have much time before her curfew but the thought of going home, especially to her mother who would be eyeing her with suspicion while her father slept peacefully, was enough to make her want to stay. "OK, but I can't stay long."

"This way," he said, and led her down the dirt path away from the house. Christy stopped walking and put her hands on her hips.

"That's not your house?" she asked, pointing to the colonial.

"No. My house is this way." He motioned with his hand for her to follow.

"You should have said that. I can barely see where I'm stepping."

"Yeah, it's pretty dark out here. It's right over here," he said.

They arrived in a clearing just as she unsuccessfully felt around in her purse for a flashlight. A few feet away was a modest wooden cabin. It was a shabby but somehow sturdy looking structure that had obviously seen its share of storms and survived.

Sanders opened the front door and turned on the light in the entryway that led into the kitchen. There was a small, round, wooden table in the corner next to a pair of work boots resting on a mat. A small radio with a cassette deck sat on the counter. Sanders took off his sports coat and draped it over the chair at the table.

"This is it," he said. He paused and looked around nervously. "Want a drink or something?" His eyes looked wide and expectant. She nodded and sat in one of the two chairs at the table. The kitchen was small and tidy and smelled like Lysol. Next to the sink was a dish rack with a large wooden spoon and an empty coffee pot. A black and white photo of a man sitting in front of a keyboard hung on the wall above the table. A broom and dustpan stood in the corner along with a large single stack of cassette tapes running along the baseboard of the wall. It must have been about ten feet long.

"I take it you're pretty into music."

"You could say that." He grabbed a tape from the middle of the stack and placed it in the tape deck on the counter. "This is good. It's Richard Manuel. Listen."

"Are they in some kind of order?"

"First they are categorized by type, then alphabetically by band, and then finally by the date of the recording. Anything before 1960 is in a separate collection."

"Wow. That must have taken some time."

He turned and stared coldly at her. "Time? Do you even know what that means?" He spread his palm out on the table and leaned towards her. "Time is the non-spatial continuum in which events occur in apparently irreversible succession from the past through the present to the future. Have you ever considered that? Ever really



listened to Pink Floyd? Think of what they created in the space of time." He paused and then seemed to gather his composure. "Yes, it took a lot of time."

"I can't say I'd ever thought about time like that." She was sure he must be a serious stoner. Possibly insane as well but definitely good looking. "Who's that?" She pointed to the photo on the wall.

"That's him. Richard Manuel."

She looked at the photo more closely. The man had a neutral, slightly dazed expression.

He set the cover of the tape on the counter. *Whispering Pines* was written in red ink on the label. "It's his solo album. A falsetto of sorts. Hard to believe he could do that with his voice. Pretty brutal. He died last year. I assume you know who The Band is?"

Christy had never heard of them and didn't recall seeing them on MTV. "That's the name? The Band?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Yes. The Band."

"Sort of obvious, don't you think? They didn't think too hard to come up with a name like that."

"You don't know much about music, do you?" He let out a sigh and didn't wait for her to answer. "There were other names like, Levon and the Hawks, but The Band was what other musicians like Dylan knew them as before they were officially The Band. It was who they were, before they even knew it themselves." He smiled. "You do know who Bob Dylan is?"

"Of course," she nodded truthfully. "I'd take some coffee," she said. "It's late and I have to drive."

"All right." He began filling the pot with water and scooping spoonfuls of Dunkin' Donuts coffee into the coffee maker.

"So where did you say you were before this?" Christy asked.

"Up in Warren. Near Bangor." He had his back to her, pouring water into the coffee maker.

"What were you doing up there?"

He turned and faced her, a sober look in his eyes. "Does it matter? It's got nothing to do with you." He took a small brush the size of a pen out of the drawer and began swiping the inside of the coffee container with pointed, deliberate strokes.

"I don't get it," She said. Which was a total lie. Everyone knew the state prison was in Warren.

"You wouldn't. Believe me." Sanders set the small brush on the counter and looked her up and down.

"OK. I'll take your word for it." She felt a sharpness in her chest. She knew she should turn right around and walk out the door, let this strange and possibly dangerous interlude play itself out without her so she could get on with her homework, her hours of MTV yet to be watched, her safe and predictable life, but she stood there unable to move, savoring the turns and flips she felt inside her.

Staring at the coffeepot, she somehow found herself thinking of her mother. Sylvia. An image of her in that awful nightgown, the yellow one with the generic

flowers run amok. Her private midnight freak show. In which Sylvia, the star, eats enough for an entire continent, in the dark, then vomits it out. Then repeats it the next night and the next. How she tries to cover her binging with a coat of lipstick. "Everyone's got secrets, even Sylvia!" she'd say referring to herself in the third person. No. No man, not even this one, could match her mother on the crazy scale.

He stood in front of his vast collection of cassettes and pulled one from the stack towards the end of the baseboard and handed it to her. "Here, this is good. You'll like it." *Pink Floyd* was written in black ink on the label along with the date of the recording. She looked at it skeptically and slipped the cassette into her purse. Adrenaline coursed through her veins but it didn't matter or even register in the normal way. By this time it was 10 pm. Her curfew was in an hour and there was the business of the still unwritten paper. The one thing she knew for sure was that as much as she loathed going home, she would not allow herself to be late. Never had, never would. Call it gaming the system or simply a line she refused to cross. Whatever it was, it kept her home life intact and she wasn't willing at this point to give that up.

Sanders had just poured the hot coffee into a mug and Bruno had lain down at the foot of the chair resting his head on the work boots. The light in the kitchen seemed dimmer now and she leaned back in the chair so that her sweater pressed up tight against the wooden slats. She rested her hand on the chair next to her and pulled Sanders' coat from it and spread it across her lap like a blanket.

"It's cold in here," she said.

"Put it on," Sanders said. He walked across the room and turned up the heat on the thermostat.

"I'm OK."

"You're cold."

"I know that." She stood up from the table and slipped her arms into his coat, which was warm and smooth inside. The sleeves were much too long and hung limply past her hands. She rested her elbows on the counter behind her. She felt smaller in the coat, like a little girl.

"That's better. Isn't it?"

She nodded and Sanders stepped close to her and pulled a joint and lighter out of the pocket of his jeans.

"Want to get high?"

Christy held her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I don't know."

"I think you do."

"What do you know about what I want?"

He grinned, and began tapping his foot on the floor. His smile was so wide and bright it hurt her eyes to look at it.

"Ladies first," he said and slid the joint slowly between her lips and lit the end. It was expertly rolled,

smooth and symmetrical like it had been run through a machine.

"Go ahead," he commanded and put his index finger right at the bottom of her rib cage.

She took a deep, generous hit, and held it in for as long as she could, aware of the pressure of his finger underneath her breastbone. It was a strange kind of pressure, like he was somehow, with that one finger, holding her in place. She let it out slowly, blowing a thin stream of smoke in his direction. His eyes became redder and she watched him blink a couple of times as the smoke lingered like a screen in the space between them.

"You're awfully pretty." His voice had gotten low and quiet. Her back felt cold up against the counter.

"I know," she said. "I am aware of that," she said slowly, enunciating much more clearly than usual. She put her hand over her mouth as she said it, as if her friends could hear her. She was definitely stoned.

He tilted his head to the side then looked down at the floor. "You have no idea," he said and pounded his fist on the counter. "You're so fucking pretty." His voice sounded surprised and forceful at the same time.

Her head felt light and hazy, and his voice was so close it felt like the room had shrunk in size and the smell of the coffee brewing had taken over.

"Did you hear what I said, Christy?"

"I heard you. So what?"

"No, you didn't."

He was so close now she could feel his breath, hot and dry on the inside of her ear. "You don't want to hear it. Or do you?" He ran a finger lightly across her breasts barely touching the tops of her nipples - "How pretty you are" - and across her ribs - "so fucking beautiful" - then upwards towards her neck until he reached the middle of it and drew her in and she felt her thoughts loosen and drift. He kissed her on the neck several times and her back began to arch, the sound of his voice hot in her ear, he held her like that, kissing her, his hands wrapped around her arms, now kissing her mouth and she felt her legs go soft, and the weight of his chest steady against hers, his eyes dark and focused, his lips open to her shoulder where the coat had slipped off and he pulled her sweater down, and he put his whole face there and breathed deeply like he'd found pure oxygen. "You have no idea, Christy." The steam from the pot was rising behind him and there was the sound of the drip from the pot like a distant alarm and she felt her hands and arms struggle to break free and then watched as if from a distance as she raised her hands in front of her.

"That's it," she said. She looked up and the room came rushing back and she pushed his chest hard, away from her. "I'm going now. I've got a curfew and homework to do."

"All right. I get it," he said, as if he expected this. "Not a problem." His voice was cold and flat. She felt her body ache as he took a step away from her, unsure of what she wanted as she handed him his coat.

Christy barely made her curfew on time. She told her mother who was awake, sitting in the living room with a box of Lucky Charms on her lap, that she had gone to see Prom Night at The View with Melissa, gave her a detailed recounting of the movie which she had already seen at least half a dozen times, pointing out that *those* girls never made it home at all, then kissed her mother softly on the cheek and said goodnight.

It snowed for hours that Sunday morning and the wind had picked up by the afternoon. The drive to work was slow and slippery and she was careful not to make any sudden turns of the wheel. Wayne took the evening off because of the weather, and had instructed Christy and Sanders to handle the shift alone. He even told the bartender not to come in and had left word to have them close up early if the weather got worse. Christy had put on a thin, silver necklace with an opal, the one her father had given her. She smacked her lips together to ensure the gloss she had applied would stick. She wore her hair down. Something she never did at work. She put the matches with Wayne's number on it on her bureau at home. She found it funny that Wayne gave it to her. It had never occurred to her that maybe he was trying to tell her something. But now, as she approached the door to the Nail, the opal dangling like a white crescent from her neck, she wondered if Wayne's behavior was his way of trying to make a move. Boys pretending to be men. She never understood how her father could love her mother. It made no sense.

Sanders was juicing lemons when she arrived. His hands were red and damp and he kept wiping them on his apron.

"No boss tonight," he said and walked over to the stereo and turned up the volume. She heard him mumble something about the music and then he sliced the last lemon in half. He sat down on a stool with his feet up on the counter. "Slow night," he said.

"Maybe we should close up."

"You want to?"

"Do you?"

"You decide." It was then that Christy heard the bells ringing on the door at the front of the restaurant.

The woman must have been about 50 and stood at the entrance wearing a winter parka, smoking a cigarette. She was vaguely attractive and hard looking at the same time. She scanned the empty diner intently as if she were zoning in on her seat in a room full of people but she was alone. Christy watched from the window of the swinging door as the woman blew a smoke ring, then another and another before stomping it out on the floor.

"Hi there. You can sit anywhere you like." It was darker than usual in the dining room and it made the woman look like she had shadows on her face.

Only one section towards the middle of the restaurant had lights on and they were dimmed to their lowest setting. The bar stood dark and empty, six stools lined up in a neat row.

The woman shook her head and then opened the front door, letting in a cold gust of wind. "Frank, what's taking you so long?" she called. "I'll just sit over there." She pointed to the section with lights.

Christy led her to a booth and set a menu down on the table.

The woman sat down and looked out the window. "Vodka tonic, no ice." The snow was coming down hard and the wind was blowing it sideways like debris coming off the freeway. The clouds had all but disappeared in the darkening sky. The cars and trucks parked in the lot looked like coffins covered in white dust.

"My husband's parking the car," she said while she peered at the menu. "Just order him a Jack and Coke. That'll do."

"Will you be eating as well?" Christy asked.

The woman raised an eyebrow at her. "Mmm," she said. "Just the drinks."

Christy prepared them at the bar, another code violation given her age. But who was checking? She knew where everything was by heart, having observed the bartender make hundreds of drinks. She filled the vodka to the rim of the metal shot measurer, dumped it in the drinking glass and added soda water from the nozzle. She stuck in an extra lime and a small straw.

The husband, a tall man, with a gentle face and a red cap, stood in the foyer and pointed to his wife. "I'm with her," he said. Christy nodded and led him to the booth with his wife and set the drinks on the table.

"Aren't you going to eat?" He said.

"Let's just get this over with, Frank. I'm not hungry." She looked out the window. "How long does it take to park a car?"

"It's a blizzard out there, Nancy." He looked at Christy for help. "You have many customers tonight?"

"You're the first."

"Never mind," the woman said. "I'll have another. And more vodka this time. I'm sure you can manage that, can't you?" Christy nodded. One more drink and then she'd cut the lady off. She'd seen these types before and they didn't go down without a fight. But before Christy could fetch the lady another, she grabbed Christy's arm.

"Is he here tonight? Is he in the kitchen?"

"I'm sorry?" Christy said.

Then Frank chimed in. "Nancy, please. Don't. Let's go home."

"What the hell, Frank? We're doing this for Terelyn, remember? God rest her soul."

"Don't forget whose idea this was, Nancy."

Sanders came out of the kitchen just as Frank stood up, apparently having made his decision to leave. At first Sanders didn't see the couple, as their booth was facing towards the window, but as he got closer to the table he slowed his pace and held on to his upper lip with

his front teeth. He looked like what Christy imagined was a much younger version of himself, the way he stood there, confused and expectant. A pale, uncertain gaze hovered like a ghost in his face. Sanders nodded at the couple in a formal, polite way like they might be his former teachers, or prison guards. Then he locked eyes with the woman.

"You shouldn't be here," Sanders said to her as if they were the only two people in the room.

"Yeah? Well. We're here." The woman said.

"I don't want to see you." Sanders glanced at the man then lowered his eyes.

"It isn't right. To pretend like what you did never happened. Like we don't even exist?" The woman put her hand over her husband's in solidarity.

Sanders stood his ground. "You don't. Not to me. Not anymore."

"Nancy," Frank again. "Let's just go. This won't end the way you want it to." Nancy removed her hand and stood up from the booth.

"Look at yourself, Frank." She was on a roll even without the second drink. "A loser. Just like your boy. Can't even stand to look at him, can you?" Then she turned towards Sanders. "You think your free now? Did your time and the world's going to look the other way?"

Sanders' bottom lip began to quiver. "You weren't there. You don't know what your saying. There was nothing I could do."

"That's not what the judge thought. Or was he wrong too?" His mother shook her head with disbelief. "That somebody else drove your car into a tree, and left your own sister to die? "Did you think you were escaping by hiding in the trees? Did you think they wouldn't find you? How could you leave her there to die? For Christ's sake she was your own flesh in blood."

Then something in Frank's face hardened. He snarled at Nancy to sit down. Then he took Sanders by the arms and he shook him. A violent shake that clearly took Sanders by surprise, his eyes wide with fear. "What's the matter with you? What? What the hell's the matter with you?" Frank's face was full of anguish and defeat, flush with color. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm. He looked like a man who had lost and was still paying the price. "Come on, Nancy, let's go." Frank put on his coat and took his wallet out. He looked at Christy who stood covering her mouth, and tried to smile. "What do I owe?"

"Nothing. It's OK. You should probably just go." Frank nodded set a \$20 on the table and put on his cap.

When they were outside, Sanders peered out from the window watching them like ghosts drifting through the snow that fell so hard it buried everything in sight.

"Those were your parents?" Christy couldn't think of anything else to say.

Sanders turned around and took a cigarette from his coat pocket and lit it. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave her a cold stare. He took a drag and flicked the



ash on the floor, grinding it in with his boot. "Yes." He said it with a definitiveness that made her heart ache. He took another drag, which seemed to calm him and handed the cigarette to her. She took a drag and then another, and another. She wanted to ask him more but she didn't. She took more drags of his cigarette until it was down to the filter and her chest was warm with nicotine and the heat from his hand on her shoulder was so palpable it was like blood rushing through her body. Now she could see it, the resemblance. She thought of her father then, how he was always off somewhere asleep, unable to be reached.

"How did he die?"

"Who?"

"Richard Manuel. The photo. On your wall."

"Hung himself with a leather belt. In the bathroom of his hotel room."

Christy's stomach tightened. "Did he have a family?"

"Yep. A wife. Lots of friends. A musical genius."

"Why? Why did he do it?"

Sanders raised his hands up in the air. "Why would someone like Richard Manuel, want to die? You tell me."

Christy didn't say anything. She pictured the long row of cassettes on the floor of Sanders' cabin. All that music filling the room and it was still empty.

"You got that tape? The one I gave you?"

She had forgotten about it. "It's in my purse."

"Stay here. I'll get it." Pink Floyd was blasting into the dining room when he returned. He grinned at her and then lay down on top of a bench in one of the booths. He reached his arm underneath the table and tapped the bench across from him, motioned with his hand for her to come over and lie down too. She hesitated and scanned the room just to make sure it was really empty and there was no way anyone would see her through the window. She switched off the main lights at the front of the restaurant and locked the front door with the keys that were inside the hostess station. The bench was just wide enough to fit her body lengthwise when she lay down. Sanders had his knees bent and was squirming around a little on the bench across from her until he was comfortable. She kept her legs straight out in front of her so that her heels rested at the edge.

Sanders let out a sigh. "You listening?" He peered underneath the table turning his head to the side.

"I'm listening. So what?" She could see the wood around the nails and screws that held the table together beginning to fray. There were several old pieces of chewing gum stuck like glue in the corners. The wood smelled musty and warm.

"Watch this." He pulled a metal razor out of his pocket and twirled it between his thumb and index finger while he beamed like a schoolboy at the ceiling. Then he brought it to his lips and kissed it as if it held something precious. He ran it along the middle of his chin, lengthwise two or three times to the rhythm of the music, until little pinpricks of blood trickled from his skin. He

dug deeper and deeper, making more and more incisions into the soft tissue, until his face was bloody and serene.

"You're crazy. Totally nuts." Christy watched, unable to take her eyes off of him.

"Am I?" he said. "Come here." He motioned with his hand. She slid off the bench and sat crouched on the floor next to him. "Events occur in apparently irreversible succession..." he wiped a drop of blood from his chin, "from the past through the present to the future." There were streaks of blood all over his face. "You and I, we are moving through time, leaving the past behind. Are you afraid?"

"No," she said and moved closer to where he was lying down and knelt there beside him. She didn't know what she was anymore. Only that she recognized something in him that was in her too, and that when his hands brushed against her arm, she felt less alone.

He set the razor down on the floor and ran a finger down her neck, then pulled off his coat and handed it to her. She rested it on her lap and took off her apron, her blouse. Set the opal necklace out of reach, took the razor and cut a long jagged strip from one of the sleeves of his coat and tied it around the strap of her bra. She let it swing a few times back and forth feeling how light it was. Who found him on the bathroom floor? What was it like to want to die? Christy watched as Sanders pulled the piece of his torn coat so that the strap of her bra slid down her arm. He sat up and grabbed her hand and guided her to lie down on the bench where he had been. Then he knelt down beside her and removed the other strap of her bra, smearing his chin, his face, across the length of her belly so that her body was smeared with his blood. He moved his face in circles over her skin and breathed in deeply before moving down towards the snap on her jeans. She thought of her mother, alone in the dark, eating her sweets, her father upstairs asleep, of Mrs. Woods setting Ms. Bronte aside in favor of another, important story. She felt his teeth on her zipper and his mouth opening and she let him go further and further, while she closed her eyes and searched the darkness for words, but nothing came to her, nothing she wanted to say, nothing she wanted but this.

**Suzanne Jeschke** had primarily been a poet before she began writing fiction several years ago. She has a BA from the University of New Hampshire and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College. Her poems have appeared in *Calyx* and the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*. Suzanne is originally from New Hampshire and spent over a decade in San Francisco before relocating with her husband and two daughters to Salt Lake City, Utah. When she isn't writing and spending time with her family, Suzanne can be found running in the foothills of the Wasatch Mountains with her yellow Labrador Retriever, Emmylou.

Right after we got married, Craig and I bought an old farmhouse. My black cat, Rosie, moved in and caught the mice that crawled in through the kitchen wall. I fell in love with the pond out back, and with the Mallard ducks who nested in the reeds nearby. The chickens next door wandered into our yard, and lent our lives a bucolic, permanent air.

When our first spring arrived, I called my mom to tell her I'd found a thousand lilies of the valley beneath our maple tree, just like the ones she'd planted when I was a kid. And Craig, who had been a playful, sweet boyfriend, grew into a playful, sweet husband too, much to my relief.

There were bad times that first year, mostly my fault. I was jittery. Before Craig there had been a series of bad relationships. Like a cat from the pound, I flinched at phantoms, so convinced that Craig would cheat on me, or leave. I saw betrayal everywhere.

We fought about joint bank accounts (I didn't want one). I was furious at him, poor guy, when the first piece of mail arrived addressed to Mrs. Craig Lombardi. Not one piece of my name was on the envelope. I had been subsumed by his identity, or that's what I feared.

One morning as I was leaving for work, I sneezed, and instead of saying 'bless you,' Craig said, "Four."

"Four?" I asked.

"Four sneezes." He was tying his tie, looking in the hall mirror. "When you sneeze," he said, "you sneeze four times. I wait to say 'bless you' until you've finished. I thought you should know." It was such a delicate expression of surprising intimacy, of how closely he was watching. I felt like a thirsty flower, Craig's attention a jar of water soaking my roots.

At night, when I came to bed, even if I had just come from the bathroom at three in the morning, Craig held up the corner of the blanket for me to get under. Every single time. The tiny gesture hit me so hard, made me so suddenly forgive everyone who had ever hurt me, that I didn't tell him how much I liked it. Craig was afraid of jinxing Notre Dame football and so when they played, he wore his lucky underwear. It was for fear of jinxing my good luck that I never mentioned the lifted corner of the blanket to Craig.

By the end of that first year, as we set up a joint



*N. West  
Moss*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Essay



### *The Lifted Corner*

account (I kept my own as well), I began to relax. We settled into a peaceful rhythm of getting to know each other, and the sounds of the house at night, getting to know ourselves as these new people with titles that belonged, still, more to our parents than to us. Eventually, it became clear that we were okay at marriage, that the fears I had brought with me like bags from another life had nothing to do with us. Our happiness slowly piled on top of our sorrows and fears.

Then I got pregnant. We hadn't planned to have kids. I had no expectations about being a mom, thought it would be ok whether or not we had children. But getting pregnant changed that. The world celebrated. My body hummed. I called my best friend in Chicago and she was beside herself. "You're going to be a great mom," she said. I believed her.

When Craig got home from work that day, we sat there, staring at the little stick. We laughed and then we panicked. "When are the adults coming home?" he asked.

"Hell if I know."

My family was happy, too. Mom said she'd come help, if I wanted her to. Dad, who liked to burst into song anyway, couldn't stop singing songs with the word "baby" in the lyrics. Because his hearing aids were never turned on, he sang loudly.

Their joy, and my hormones, made me suddenly and deeply invested. I wandered through the baby department at Target looking at the tiny outfits the color of candy. Friends advised me what strollers to buy, and parties they'd throw for us. It was exciting.

Craig was level-headed and baby-proofed the kitchen. He took personal days to come with me to doctor appointments. He framed the sonogram that confirmed the baby's heartbeat and put it on his desk, where it still sits even now. At night I read to him from pregnancy books. When I gave up wine, he gave up beer, and we steered well into the second trimester.

Then, like that, I started to "spot," which sounds harmless, like "spotting" a Snowy Egret. When I called, Dr. Abramowitz said, "Wait twenty-four hours. It'll probably stop on its own." But it didn't stop, so Craig took the day

off and we went for another sonogram.

I had learned sonogram technician etiquette. When the news was good, she turned the monitor to show us the peanut-sized fetus, and then later, to let us hear the thrum of its heartbeat, like a handful of lightning bugs buzzing in a jelly jar.

When we went in this time though, the technician wouldn't look at me, and said, "I'm not supposed to interpret the sonogram for you. You'll have to speak with your doctor." Well, I knew what that meant, and when the technician left the room, I told Craig that the pregnancy was over.

"We don't know that," he said. He was looking out the window at the bare branches of a birch tree against the sky. There were crows there, irritating one another. One landed on a branch and bent it slowly down. When he lifted off, the branch lifted up under him. "Everything's fine," Craig said. "Everything's fine."

We waited under fluorescent lights for Dr. Abramowitz, who opened the door, looked me in the eyes and hesitated, his hand still on the doorknob. "You can say it," I said, trying to be kind. "It's ok. I already know, anyway."

"There's no heartbeat," he said, closing the door. Craig, who had been rubbing the same spot on my shoulder for five minutes, sighed and his hand dropped to his side.

We made an appointment for the next morning for a DNC at the Wayne Surgical Center behind Trader Joe's. They would dilate my cervix, Dr. Abramowitz said, and scrape out whatever was left so I wouldn't get an infection. I would be uncomfortable tonight, he warned. "Get Kotex on your way home."

When we neared the house, I was beginning to cramp. "I'm getting into bed," I told Craig, the persistence of what was happening to me physically pushed the emotion off. Craig let me out, and as I stood, I felt the blood soak the pad I was wearing. "Get me the biggest Kotex you can find, OK?" I supported myself on the car door. "Are you crying?" I asked him. His eyes looked red.

"No," he told me, "I just have dust in my eyes."

I was going to feed Rosie, who was circling my feet inside the front door, but the cramps were changing to something I couldn't recognize, and I wanted to get into bed while I still could. The coming night seemed ominous as I walked up the last few steps bent over.

I lay in bed then, cramps coming in waves, and called my parents. Dad answered the phone. "I'm having a miscarriage," I told him.

"Wait," he said, "I don't have my hearing aids in," and he handed the phone to my mom.

"We just got back from the doctor," I told her, pausing so that she could repeat each sentence for my Dad. "We're having a miscarriage. No heartbeat." I could

*The title of "The Lifted Corner" is an image that draws a unforced thread through a quietly frightening, delicately bloody, unschmaltzily tender story of a marriage. The writing is clean, felt, precise. It shares plenty but not too much. The romance is believable. There's no joke in the lifted corner, but there is a smile.*

—Roy Blount, Jr.

hear my sister say, "Oh no." I wished I was home. I wanted my mom.

As I hung up, the cramps got stronger, weird -- like there was a hallway yawning open inside of me. I called Craig's cell and said to his voice mail, "Forget the pads. Just come home."

I felt the warmth, then, of a lot of blood soaking the pad and maybe the mattress beneath me. I couldn't stand, so I slid onto the floor and yelled Craig's name as I crawled to the bathroom, the cell phone in my hand in case I needed an ambulance, continuing to shout.

Rosie ran up to me, first by the bed, then as I crawled down the hallway and finally in the bathroom. She meowed in my face as I shouted Craig's name, and then ran back a few feet to wait and then run back to me. I thought about childbirth in movies, how people run around and tear up sheets, and I thought, "Rosie would boil water for me if she could." I remember being grateful to have a witness.

I climbed from the floor onto the toilet and called Craig's cell phone over and over. Once I yelled, "Hurry home!" and once I asked "Where are you?" and once I just said "Please." How long had he been gone? As the cramps subsided, I called Dr. Abramowitz who said, "We can get you an ambulance if you want, but you're miscarrying right now. By the time we get you here, it'll be over. Do you want to be at home for this or in the hospital?"

There was a lot of blood. "Am I dying?" I asked.

"No," he said, "You're going to be alright. It just feels like you're dying. Your body is doing what it's supposed to do, expelling the dead tissue." He gave me his home and cell numbers, which I wrote in eye liner on the back of an ESPN magazine next to the toilet. Once I knew I'd survive, I wanted to be home for this, and in our bed when it was over.

I allowed my body to take over, petting the cat when my body was still, and shouting for Craig when the waves resurfaced. I called him one last time, and said, "It's happening right now." It was hard to separate out the emotion from fear, and the fear from the actual miscarriage. I wasn't able to think beyond the next second.

Finally, the inside of my body, from up under my ribcage down to the bottom of my spine heaved and

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shivered, and out slipped something, that when I looked in the toilet, was like a crescent moon carved from soft opal. My body relaxed.

I cleaned the bathroom and myself, then crawled back to bed. Rosie climbed onto the pillow next to my head. I half-realized, as I drifted off, that I had been in labor.

By the time Craig rustled in with plastic grocery bags full of supplies the room was dark. "How long have you been gone?" I asked.

"I don't know, half an hour?"

He sat on the bed. "I think it's over," I said, sleepy, sorrow creeping into the space left by the retreating fear. "I think I had the miscarriage already."

"I got your message," he said, lying down on the bed and petting my hair. "You called seventeen times. I listened to the first one in the driveway and then just ran up." He lay there and listened to all the messages then. He saved them too, for a while, before he deleted them. He said he couldn't listen to them without his heart racing.

I thought that when tragedy struck that I'd lie in bed, unable to move forever. But it wasn't like that. "I'm cold," I said, so Craig pulled the blankets up, "and Rosie needs food."

Later, Craig said, "I found some old videos I made of an **Odd Couple** marathon. Let's have ice cream for dinner and watch **The Odd Couple**. How does that sound?"

"Sure," I said, taking a plastic bag with me into the bathroom. "That sounds fine."

He brought me up his Notre Dame ski cap. "To keep you warm," he said. We watched **The Odd Couple** and ate bowls of chocolate ice cream, and we laughed, just like that. I didn't expect to laugh, to feel okay for even a second, to notice how good the ice cream tasted.

"I'm sleepy," I said, "but leave the tape on, ok?" I wanted to listen to Oscar and Felix argue, wanted to hear the laugh-track from 1972 as I fell asleep.

We went for the DNC in the morning. They put me on a table, my arms strapped out in a cross, and clipped a plastic hose to my nose. The gas smelled bitter. I winced and then nothingness. At home, later, I watched five video tapes of **The Odd Couple** and ate ice cream all day. Craig put Rosie's dish by the bed so she would eat.

By the next morning I was sick of **The Odd Couple** and even of the ice cream. My sister was visiting so I made a pot of rosemary stew, like Mom used to make. There was old snow on the ground. I wanted meat and carrots, wanted to fill up my belly with something that would heal me. By the time she arrived, the house was steamy from the stew. I had the ski cap on, would keep it on all weekend. My sister made the calls that had to be made. I couldn't do it, wasn't ready to tell people the bad news, over and over, and console them for my loss.

We got pregnant again twice, but never told anyone, never made the mistake of telling people and then being forced to break their hearts. It made

subsequent losses easier on us.

Our pond has a willow tree growing nearby, and Rosie is buried there now. There's one window in the house high enough to look down on the pond. In summer I can't see the water at all, hidden behind the willow's pale green leaves. But in winter, I can see through the bare branches of the willow to where Craig skates slowly, using his hockey stick to push a tiny black puck back and forth. The way I feel about Craig when I look down at him, so far away from me, brings me to my knees. It's a love made up of the things we couldn't give to one another, but also full of how hard we tried.

Marriage, it turns out, gets stronger in winter. I thought Craig would eventually stop holding up the edge of the blanket for me, that it was a courtship thing, but it has been years now, and he still does it. He lifts the corner of the blanket up for me at night and reveals the heartbeat of our small world, lets the cold air rush under the covers for a moment while I climb into that one spot on earth that is mine.

*N. West Moss has deep connections to New Orleans. Her entire family is buried up in Metairie Cemetery now, and she plans to join them there one day in the distant future. Moss has finished a draft of her first novel, which is set in uptown New Orleans in 1878, shortly.*

## Essay: OTHER FINALISTS:

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*Environmental Injustice*, Linda Bui, Baton Rouge, LA  
*Epitaph in Thirty-One Characters*, Ellis Anderson, Bay St. Louis, MS  
*Pixie Dust Sprinkles a Jew in Turkey*, Cynthia Levy, Baton Rouge, LA  
*Layers of a Painted Life*, Janet Taylor-Perry, Ridgeland, MS  
*My Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, Yukihisa Yorker Kageyama, New York, NY  
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*The Future*, Frank Cox, Atlanta, GA  
*Walk It Off*, Jonathan Irpino, New Orleans, LA  
*What is Fear?*, Peter Tattersall, New Orleans, LA



*Petra Perkins*  
*2013*  
*Essay Runner-Up*



## **Airborne**

**Escape Velocity:** *the minimum speed at which an object must travel to escape a planet's gravity and move on into space.*

"You have fear of flying, right?"  
"Yes, sir, that's why I'm here."  
"Takeoffs? Landings? Which?"  
"Yes."

I couldn't see his eyes crinkle beyond the aviator shades but his smile was reassuring. "Ahh... aviophobia."

Captain Bob, former Air Force captain, looked more like Captain America – solid, wings on his epaulets, no-nonsense. A clipboard for a shield. I could go up with him.

"Ready to go?"

I shook my head. "Sure."

I didn't tell Captain Bob the story. In 1988 my husband, Terry, a pilot, had kept his homebuilt airplane, a Sidewinder, hangared here at Centennial, a busy general aviation airport near Denver, Colorado. I'd not yet ridden in it. He and our son, Rod, almost 18, took off together from one of these runways, for the last time. They didn't come back. The Sidewinder crashed from a sheared propeller.

Never did I envision -- in a million years or twelve -- returning to this place.

*Here I am. Now what?* Bob led me across familiar tarmac to one of his flying club's trainers. There were mostly high-wing Cessnas, but I recognized some low-wing Pipers, too. I walked my bravado to the small white plane, a Cessna 172... me, your ordinary aviophobe, on a leisurely Sunday ride.

I was forty-nine and needed to overcome this dread. My job required frequent airline travel to cities across the country. Never a calm passenger before the accident, I was worse after, fighting wild heart palpitations and hyperventilating during takeoffs and landings. Bob didn't ask me but I'd asked myself: What exactly was I afraid of? Crashing, of course... crashing and dying. Maybe crashing and living. Maybe, just living. I'd lost my innate fearlessness; I'd become hesitant to try new things, even some old things, afraid

to 'take off' in any direction and pick a landing spot. After losing half my family, I stalled, went into a spin and then into limbo.

Inside, I buckled my harness. Bob examined the plane, checked items on a list, cranked the engine. We taxied to the 'run-up area' for final checks then moved to a runway and queued up. As we awaited clearance I watched the movements of other aircraft and listened to pilots via headphones, remembering the one other time I'd been in a small plane. It was a surprise, remembering. I thought I'd suppressed all those memories...

... I was strapped into the passenger seat of a rented Piper when Terry flew us to our twentieth high school reunion in Wyoming. We'd met in senior year and by the time he'd been voted "Most Likely to Fly" I was ready to go with him. Our first kiss was in his teenage-boy bedroom under a canopy of model airplanes hanging from the ceiling. Now two decades later he wanted to show his buddies that he'd finally earned his wings. Terry was thirty-eight, a natural fit in the pilot's seat, plotting flight paths, coordinating with distant voices in his headset. He was an aerospace engineer and a member of EAA, Experimental Aircraft Association. Over eight years he had built the sleek aerobatic plane in our garage, with Rod's help, but he'd only recently gotten his pilot's license. I wasn't afraid to fly then. We'd just returned from a thrilling New Zealand adventure where a ski-plane landed us on a glacier near the pointy top of the Southern Alps. Later we bravely, or crazily, jumped out of helicopters to ski those icy mountains. Our flight across Wyoming was exciting, too. I rarely thought about gravity.

We were risk-takers... just beginning to calculate the best risks.

At first I sat on my shaking hands, until we started to roll and gather speed. Then I white-knuckled the takeoff, gripping a door handle. We were still over the runway when I realized the tires had quit roaring. Bob pulled back the steering wheel -- the yoke -- and waved to the control tower.

"Are we going higher soon?"

"Soon as we get more lift."

*Well... get some.*

I felt we would clear that building straight ahead, but wasn't confident about the potted tree on top. Then

we were sideways. “Three Niner Whiskey east” said ATC (Air Traffic Control). *Whiskey? Oh, I’d love one but I didn’t eat breakfast.* My brain was mush; my neck, a stick; my heart, a drum. After the radio chatter dribbled off, Captain Bob got me talking so I’d breathe. I wondered if he appreciated this impossible feat, defying gravity.

The last dozen years of my life had been about gravity. The dead weight of fear pulled me down whenever I tried to venture up and out. I was living a safe, uneventful life, no longer escaping into the unknown. Still, I was lost. It seemed high time to find some remnant of me, my old spirit – that was one reason I was here.

“We’ll stay low for a bit, just like the bigger planes,” he said, soothingly, unlike his radio voice. *Could this be safe, flying so low... so slow?* We followed a truck on I-25 northbound. “Wyoming license plate; I can see the horse,” I remarked. Bob laughed.

We flew higher, skirting Denver’s skyscrapers, then west, edging autumn-streaked foothills, and southeast, spotting sailboats at Chatfield Dam. *I’m relaxing, kind of.* Bob invited me to steer. He made an impressive landing on the heels of another’s hilarious zigzag touchdown. And then it was over.

“I want to take lessons.”

*Me? Flying lessons??*

“Great, we can arrange that.”

I didn’t change my mind and the next week I showed up. Bob didn’t. A last-minute instructor switch gave me Randy, with his crushed cowboy hat, boots and plaid shirt. Randy was in a hurry. He pointed to a mountain range of clouds. “See that that hole up there?” Turning knobs and switches on the panel, he took off in a flash, ascending like a rocket. “We’re gonna punch right through it!”

My dropped jaw didn’t protest once during this (w)hole episode. *Was cloud-busting FAA legal?* We disappeared through a keyhole and reappeared inside blue outer space, skimming white heavenly puffs. “Heehaaaw!” Randy whooped. “How ya doin’ shweet-haht?” he said, mimicking Bogart in *The African Queen*.

“Oh, fine. Hunky dory.” *Got one of those bags?*

“Approaching escape velocity!”

“What’s that?” I tightened my seatbelt.

“That’s when you leave gravity behind, kid.”

Burrowing down through the abyss was equally heart-stopping and soon we arrived at Destination Practice Area, over quiet eastern plains.

“Just push the yoke forward, like this.” Randy demonstrated. The nose went down. “See your speed? Faster.” Pulling back on the yoke raised the nose, so we slowed. “Don’t pull back *much*,” he warned, “or the wing’ll stall.”

“Meaning...?”

“The plane would stop flying. I’ll show you later.” I must have blanched. “Today let’s get the feel of turning. Simple wide turns.”

My foot mashed the right rudder. We turned right.

“That was easy.”

“Jes’ like ridin’ a horse.”

Altimeter above ground: 1200 feet. “Perfect,” he said. “Maintain this altitude while turning.” I made a gradual turn but lost height. “Okay, go back up.” Ten times later I nailed it.

The lesson was over too fast. I *liked* the feel of ‘pulling G’s’. By the end of the second lesson I was swaggering and bought a leather jacket. Who would have guessed? A face-off with my worst fear. No one, including my grandson, was more shocked than I.

For weeks I practiced steep turns, 180s, 360s, tight turns, swift altitude changes, and slow flight where it seemed we’d drop from the sky. One skill difficult for me to master was the foreign language of the radio. I learned precise ways to communicate with control towers, quickly enunciating minimal words, also sharing traffic and weather warnings with other pilots when not in a tower’s vicinity.

Lucky to have excellent eyesight, I could detect power lines, people, and praying mantis in the far distance. Once, we were behind a Mooney, both preparing to land at the isolated Front Range airstrip near Denver International Airport, when I spotted a deer near the runway. Excited, I punched the radio button and warned the Mooney pilot, “Deer, it’s five o’clock, heading south.” Silence and then a male voice: “Yes, dear... I know, dear... I’m coming straight home, dear.” I found that, sometimes, air jockeys cautiously risked radio jocularity.

I was cautious, too... overly cautious about landing. I couldn’t get my nerve up. It paralyzed me. “See that band-aid way down there? You have to land on it.” *I’d rather rip a band-aid off a fresh scab.*

Repeatedly, Randy would have to take over the controls after I’d flown the entire lesson. Or I would *try* to land and then, at the last second, chicken out. I’d managed takeoffs, why not landings? Sometimes I felt like crying in frustration but stowed those unseemly tears. I could sense my instructor’s frustration as well. One day he said, kindly, “Know what, shweet-haht? If ya wanna be a pilot, ya gotta point this baby down *sometime*.” I went home thinking hard about his message. Did I have “the right stuff” to be a pilot? I wasn’t sure but I had to find out soon.

“Cessnas are tough workhorses,” said Randy, as he guided me down to my first bucking bronco touchdown. *How embarrassing.* Afterward I practiced descents and touch-and-go’s, one after another, hard-bumping on concrete, fingers crossed I wouldn’t fracture the wheels. Finally, right out of the blue, so to speak, I made a smooth, perfect landing. I zoomed up to the traffic pattern and did it again. And again. Three, in a half hour. *I want a cold beer.*

Randy: “O-kay, you’re PIC now!”



*“Airborne” is about fearfully, protractedly trying (no spoiler here) to learn to fly a plane. The essayist brings the reader into both the learning process and the fear, and deftly, movingly brings the enterprise into context. —Roy Blount, Jr.*

Me: “Yayyyy! What’s PIC?”

Randy: “You *know*... FAA for Pilot-in-Command.”

He didn’t dwell on soloing. Nor did I. I wasn’t ready. Weeks later I had a substitute teacher who asked how many hours I’d accumulated. “About 35,” I said, sheepishly. I knew most students earned their licenses in 30 to 40. He said, “You should’ve soloed by now. Let’s see what’s going on.” He gave some flight directions. I executed all his commands, though sluggishly. The instructor frowned. “Here’s the problem: the plane is flying *you*; you’re not flying the plane.”

I wanted Randy back. Randy had sour breath most days, but he wasn’t sour grapes. Yet, I knew the man was right. The next week Randy headed me to the Practice Area, leveling at 3,000 feet. I’d radioed ATC permission to use that airspace. My assignment? Create an intentional stall, a.k.a., make the plane stop flying.

Slowly I raised the nose. Up, up, until the wings lost air. With zero lift we began dropping and buffeting. A stall horn blasted. *Can’t-Do-This! Can’t-Do-This!* Using all my skills, I tried stabilizing the plane’s ‘degrees of freedom’ – yaw, pitch, roll. *Is this my showstopper?* Buffeting frightened me. Randy took the controls.

I repeated; I stalled; I recovered. Success. I gulped a sip from my water bottle. I repeated; I stalled; I recovered. Again. Again. “Woo hoo! Ride ‘em, kid!” Randy seemed amazed.

Finally, I was flying the airplane instead of it flying me.

I religiously practiced engine failure maneuvers: 1) turn off engine; 2) begin glide; 3) scout for/identify unobstructed landing site; 4) lose altitude slowly; 5) radio position to ATC. 6,7,8) *Don’t panic, Don’t panic, Don’t panic.*

Winter days were often bone-freezing. After snowfalls I perched on a ladder to scrape ice off wings, struts, fuselage, nose, tail, and propeller for 6:30 a.m. lessons. In spring I plowed through sudden wind shears. On sweaty summer days, with fully-loaded fuel, I ran prolonged takeoffs in Colorado’s ‘high density altitude’. I refined short-field takeoffs, mid-field landings and completed pilot ground school in ten weeks, scoring 98 percent on the test. I became fluent in ATC lingo and achieved navigation proficiency. I drilled ‘slipped’ landings, where I descended at a slant, dropping like an elevator exactly on the big white numbers that indicate runway direction, e.g., Runway 1-7 for 170 degrees. I

channeled Chuck Yeager’s “right stuff” on every landing, flaps or no. I turned fifty.

The ATCs all knew me (*You again? Over*) -- my voice, my call signs, my special problems. One problem was maintaining constant altitude. I would sink from 1000 to 900 feet in the pattern. I wouldn’t notice losing 100 feet since my attention was locked on keeping up critical airspeed. ATCs sometimes positioned me, helpfully, interleaving touch-and-go’s with jets to learn needs of different aircrafts. I met new ATCs, beyond my locale, on extended lessons which included two evening flights spanning the north-south jeweled nightlights of Denver.

The big day came when Randy said I was “ready for the rodeo.” The week before, he’d announced I was close to soloing so I’d spent endless days of anticipation.

“Wish me luck.” I climbed into the PIC seat and initiated the checklist.

Randy climbed stairs to the control tower in case he needed to speak with me on radio. I taxied into position. ATC: “Three Niner Whiskey. Cleared for takeoff. Good luck.” I sucked in a lungful and exhaled as I rolled. The plane was lighter with just one person so we launched like a bird, popping up fast. I guided 39W into the pattern.

Six months of Randy’s voice commands spoke in my mind. *Watch airspeed. 70 knots. Check altitude. 900.* I pulled back, gaining 100 feet, made three square turns and set up for final approach. I pointed down, extended flaps. I felt the exhilaration of instant drag, of earth’s welcoming tug. Rear tires down, I flared the nose, eased the front wheel onto the tarmac. *Textbook.* Traversing the taxiway, I felt something crack. It was my big smile, at Randy waving his cowboy hat. I braked in front of him and scrambled out for a hug. He cut off the bottom half of my shirt – a solo tradition. I was half a pilot!

In weeks I completed three solo journeys -- to Pueblo, Colorado, to Kansas, to Nebraska. When I’d logged 65 hours, twice as many as the ‘average student’ (a male, in his 30s), Randy called the FAA for my final test.

“Perfect Rocky Mountain day,” said the FAA test conductor, checking my logbook.

I was scared from headset to toes. Not of flying, but failing.

Here’s the upshot: I shot up from Runway 1-7 a student, and one hour later I returned a licensed private pilot. “You got it, Grandma. You did good.”

Mr. FAA went inside to do paperwork while I stayed in the cockpit. Randy came to sit with me and I thanked him. I told him about Terry and Rod, and how I learned, by flying, that Terry could never have recovered the abrupt change in the Sidewinder’s center-of-gravity, the incipient stall, the spin he went into.

Then we both liberated those tears.



*Gail Waldstein*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Poetry



### **Rapid**

*This incredibly ambitious poem is an extended meditation on free will, responsibility, and death. Two competing narrative strands are skillfully developed--in one, an oncologist rafts the Grand Canyon, and in the other, he recalls a young female patient. This patient, on whom he operated, seems to recover, eventually getting married and giving birth--but he learns otherwise. Her rapid decline and the rapids the speaker rides are tied to each other in powerful ways. This is a moving, accomplished, astute poem.*

—Beth Ann Fennelly

### rapid

silk light slants over  
mauve granite  
in this grand expanse of  
canyon

stone groaning hot  
the desert weight like  
memories  
of that girl I diagnosed

years ago taking steps  
two-at-a time from the  
OR  
biopsy in hand fleshy  
pink tissue

granular grey bone  
flecks  
mica in stone  
hoping the bone won't  
knick the knife

as I spin the microtome  
wheel  
close to her frozen  
block  
cold as this river water  
fifty degrees

air arcs to one-twenty  
here  
Arizona's desert  
slices breath like I  
slice  
eight micra sections

peel tumor off the blade  
with a  
fine, sable brush lift each  
piece  
delicate as lingerie

in pediatric pathology the  
tint of tissue  
pink or blue means  
everything  
her slides a blue  
wash

dense populations  
explode

osteosarcoma

in the canyon black *Vishnu shist*  
rivulets up from earthcore  
like a  
slippery dark umbilicus

or the ropes which cord rafts  
each night against river  
waves  
days blend below bends  
and beveled

ledges sandstone  
*Zoroastrian granite*  
*angelbrite shale* names  
sage-scented

her knee pain  
danced her dreams for  
weeks  
stopped soccer practice two  
months

then doctors x-rays

amputation at sixteen,  
sweetgod

wheel chair prosthesis  
grief

at the tongue of each rapid  
water speeds  
oarsmen shout *stay down*  
*hang on*  
I kneel two knees face the  
froth

grasp the guy rope tight  
knowing only hope and  
water  
survive

years after surgery  
love runnels her  
marriage, a baby

her resurrection radiance  
accompanies them to clinics  
check-ups  
all clear silence  
after

the canyon wren's  
decrescendo  
breaks each morning

the baby two, then three  
husband solid

her igneous life  
her life of  
time until one day  
she  
doesn't feel well

five years back then *is*  
cured  
and all she is is a little  
short of breath no pain

like day's end on the river  
the way sand gives way  
beneath insteps  
forces labored  
breathing

like giving birth or  
coming

her desire an imperative  
and in fairness more time  
with  
her daughter

her eyes glaze dull  
at the word the radiologist  
shows her lungs

not laddered rib-rungs  
but galactic explosions  
white against black as she  
waifs blue

withdraws to her chest cave

time dwindles at warp-  
speed  
her disease cascades

raw as this river oarsmen  
chant  
*the river won't hurt you rapids*  
*spit you out*  
*ten seconds, max even big*  
*holes*

her sky scream-blue

you float past millennia of  
stone  
purple rose greige  
beauty holds danger oarsmen  
warn



it's rocks that drown yet  
 you know  
 no one drowns in  
 stone  
 she does

and on the river the  
 water's  
 two-stories high  
 grade ten rapid  
 your oarsman is  
 suddenly  
 outside

the raft you yank her  
 back in  
 we do not breathe  
 water  
 we've lost that simplicity

the young mother  
 hungers  
 for air for her child's hair  
 auburn, curling

like currents when  
 water  
 furls under, flows upstream  
 eddies  
 languid still cold as  
 dry ice

her tumors grow  
 drugs futile as  
 oarsman's  
 strength in that  
 whirlpool

the mother's breath a rasp

unfathomable as  
 geologic time

our river time runs  
 down porta-potties  
 full  
 as lungs  
 the way we let this canyon  
 seduce us  
 thinking

the ride is all the water  
 the rhythm  
 the world outside  
 unchanged

like her life laying her  
 child down

that last time  
 the utter horror of  
 that

long embrace

wheezing and  
 fighting until she comes  
 to me one hot August  
 afternoon  
 twenty-one

closeted in the old basement  
 morgue

head and foot at bitter  
 ends of the  
 table  
 chest locked in tumors  
 hard as

riverwalls I open her  
 so young then I  
 climb the  
 steel table  
 wrestle her stone lungs up  
 Stryker saw

her chest as if  
 to free

her heart

**Gail Waldstein, M.D.** practiced pediatric pathology for more than thirty-five years, writing medical articles, book chapters, teaching residents, fellows, and medical students while single parenting three children fifteen of those years. She began serious creative writing in the mid-90s, winning awards in poetry, short story and essay. Her work appears in *Nimrod*, *New Letters*, *The MacGuffin*, *Carve*, *Bayou*, *The Potomac Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Denver Post*, *5280*, *The Examined Life*, *Pearl*, *Zone 3*, *The Iowa Review*, and numerous other journals and anthologies. She received the Rocky Mountain Women's Foundation 1997/98; the Colorado Council for Arts, 2001; and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation Grant, 2002. Two essays were nominated for the Pushcart. *To Quit this Calling*, *Firsthand Tales of a Pediatric Pathologist*, was a *Bakeless* finalist, 2005; published by Ghost Road Press, 2006. *AfterImage*, a poetry chapbook, was a finalist and published by Plan B Press, 2006. In 2013 an excerpt from her book *Mind Riot* was published in *Solstice Literary Review*. Her novella, *Picaflores*, was a finalist in *Iron Horse Review* and a semi-finalist in the Faulkner competition.



Petra Perkins  
2013  
Poetry Runner-Up



## Chili in Winter

*What a romp this sexy, silly, joyous poem this is. The speaker and her “lusty illicit professor of English Lit’rature” take a break from a weekend spent deep in the joys of carnal knowledge to cook up some green pork chili and the results are magical. I delight in the writer’s sound play, shifts of diction, and puns--the writer is having a great time, and so are we lucky readers. —Beth Ann Fennelly*

### Chili in Winter

Students of carnal knowledge need a break now and then,  
share a good meal, besides, we’d wearied reciting Great  
Books

two seasons of weekends in bed and bath,  
my lusty illicit professor of English Lit’rature,  
canned-cream-of-bland-mushroom-soup hotdish maker,  
he,

I, naïve high priestess of the cardboard frozen lean  
cuisine,

slide the banister, *au naturel*, to his kitchen, to his  
declaration:

“Today we raise slothful asses, take stock, do some *rrreal*  
cookin’,”

*rrreeling* me in, I say, “O-kay, good lookin’, heat this  
place up,

*brrr*, light the stove burner, gaze at it, Dr. XXX -- it will  
turn on”

whence he ropes my Godiva hair (*Will we ever eat?*)

“Make haste,”

I urge, “my appetite’s tameless on just a hunka hunka  
burnin’ love”

and know, O world, we, heretofore gourmets steeping  
under toasty covers,

vis-à-vis my skinny-dip into *Remembrance of Things Past*,  
my lover’s foreplay

ranging from Lady Chatterley to Papa Hemingway, what  
rapture,

we, blissfully unaware that Proust could change our lives,

rather

our catalyst turns out to be the unforeseen and silly, green  
pork chili,

panning out the hottest stuff ever to strut a food  
wasteland,

igniting record heights of ardor this afternoon, *ahem*,  
impossible

given our smug certainty we’d invented Nirvana, achieved  
by reading/fucking, alternately, on knees, straining life’s  
expectancy

of mattress springs, a relief, you see, when he suggests we  
haul our bums

to kitchen, a certain path for redeeming sloth with  
domesticity,

surprising me -- his inner child of New Mexico where chili  
is legion and religion --

his pile of secret ingredients, my heart swells, worries  
unfounded

re hints of idolizing macho Papa (who shot his own safari  
banquets)

– a literary infatuation! – now a soft sensitivity unleashes,  
out-of-context,

he ties cherry-red-pepper aprons over our penis, with  
slipknots,

and around our neck, draping our breasts, slow-kissing  
each, breathless,

is this pre-marital bliss we’re testing, or a chili recipe?  
Holy Toledo,

(that’s where *I’m* from, btw, where love is rarified, food not  
sanctified)

I am *impressed*; OMG, forgive, I am aroused *again*  
therefore what to do

before slicing, measuring, weighing, braising...  
our union erases frost on blinds; icicles, lining window  
ledges, drop dead;

smoke seeps from four ears, we’re smo-oh-oh-ldering  
on aqua countertops cracked, scorched from age, but,  
young and fresh,

we can’t help it, burning itsy bitsy kitschy boobos on our  
tooshies, ahh,

dudes... much panting occurs *avant* dicings, simmerings,  
boilings

of those lewd Big Jim roasted peppers, yet we focus on  
the Big part,

y’ know, Bobby Flay would be proud, we are hot human

chipotles  
 flaming, though we were taught in school never say "Fire"  
 unless there was one, here *is* one, we can't taste without  
 saying it  
 --"Holy Shit, these fire-roasted chilies are awesome" – but  
 we are mute,  
 charred aroma takes us hostage in apron nudity, locks us  
 in heavy olfactory trance,  
 libidos sparring on front burners, we park seasonings on  
 the rear  
 as we chop those hard little jalapenos and onions into  
 shape, rolled in sugar  
 he points, cheeky, "Plant another sublime smackeroo  
 here, ohhh *ye-ah*, sweet Jesus  
 Halleluiah, keep that pork glistening in grease, add  
 minced dabs of garlic  
 while browning... *Brown...* conjures daydreams of your  
 thighs in summer  
 burnished by sun, while our peppers grow high as  
 weeds in N.M.  
 getting serious in late August, surging into real big Big  
 Jim chilies, mm mmm,  
 ready to-die-for-our-sins in sunny orange pots, alas, we  
 didn't even *know* Jim then,  
 chili-innocent as babes in woods, now foraging the snowy  
 winter stores  
 blending earthy cumin (*cumin, cumin*, does sound nice)  
 cilantro, celery salt, oregano, cinnamon spice, swirl into  
 savory salsa  
 let *simmer, glimmer...*" (weeping) "I beg... lick right  
 here on my bare tongue, *Yi*,  
*Yi*, you *taste* like New Mexico *smells*, woman, your body  
 feeds my famished passion  
 ahh, epicurean delight... savor our succulent moveable  
 feast..."  
 "Whoa!" I slap his salty tears and drool, "Yo, Dr. XXX, I'm  
 over the moon,  
 I'm burning up on re-entry, I'm either dying or taking you  
 home  
 such a slut for hot pepper sex  
 gone my desire to linger in the sweet spot, in warm beds  
 with Marcel  
 sipping tea and eating madeleines, remembering only  
 what I need  
 Now I'm taught to cook and dance and savor and prance,  
 yes, I'm hooked  
 on you and your chili, your kitchen capers which will ever  
 inspire this shiver I'm in,  
 so yes, I'll marry you, and not just because we're  
 possibly two hours into pregnancy"  
 (our fingers too lethal, stained with blistering chili juice,  
 to don our condom).

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**Petra Perkins** has lived and worked in Louisiana, California, Colorado, and her favorite city, Seattle -- but now she writes passionately about being held prisoner in Denver. She tried to write a bit during her career in the aerospace industry as an engineer then manager, and recently as a STEM education volunteer and mentor. But now Petra is a full-time author of fiction, poetry, memoir, creative non-fiction and essay, winning an award in the Denver Woman's Press Club 2011 Contest for Unknown Writers in Fiction.



The Poetry Prize is funded annually by **David Speights** in memory of **Marti Speights** (pictured at Juleps In June).





*Cassie Pruyn  
2013  
Poetry Runner-Up*



## **Two Places**

*The lyrical, evocative poem is a meditation on place, and how landscape influences psychology. The speaker considers her current life, by the Mississippi River, with that of her younger self, by the Hudson River. Also evoked are early settlers who used the rivers, and the poem is enlivened by historical references and detailed images which haunt and entrance.*

*—Beth Ann Fennelly*

All night long, in hollow tones, boat replies to train.  
They ring through my body like Atlantic  
foghorns used to, as I lie in bed, south-facing.

2.

It's the Hudson I answer to, however.  
As I write one thousand miles south, she stirs.  
Gouges through rocks, dirt, wayward wood,  
sturgeon, roots and all things  
mellifluous in her darkest floor.

## **Two Places**

I.

I live on the Mississippi now.  
Trains let out mournful cries, sustained above the land's  
wet flatness.  
Towboats, paddle wheelers, boats with pile drivers affixed  
to their decks

startle me as I round the corner—  
hulls slipping along spines of rooftops—  
because boats are not meant to fly.

(The river here flows higher than the land.  
The land was once river too.  
Listen with your toes: a declivitous floodplain;  
layers of clay, contracting.)

In the afternoon, barges—slabs of hot rust, fresh from the  
sea—  
slink along the English Turn, detectable only  
in their parting of the air.

Today, along this river,  
in a slender house flanked lengthwise  
by more slender houses,  
we open windows to let air through,  
grateful for breezes and dry-ish things  
before the grand lethargy, viscous burning, incessant  
wetness nearly here already—

Today this shotgun is a houseboat  
and I sleep, with dream-pen, in its belly.  
Columns of water stroke  
our sap-veined underparts.  
Do I dare dream in the gut of a boat,  
which is only a house, of my river-other?  
The river of mountains, the *Noort-Rivier*,  
with the Mississippi (can she hear me?) just a stone's throw,  
known to flood whole forests and cities when dammed,  
mammoth-dragging down the country,  
unraveling to delta.

I'm not the only one who resides in two places.  
Remember the house like a ship

in Red Hook, with portholes  
for windows and a kitchen, like an afterthought,  
of uncertain elevation?  
I never knew why this house was a ship.  
It was just a bodily conviction.  
The walls were covered with dingy prints  
of harbor scenes, lighthouses, breakers...  
And those sleek white whales the colonists spotted  
swimming north, past the tide-line,  
past Fort Orange to the fords and back again,  
like the house, were always ocean-bound.

Or stray Nantucketers who sailed  
past Manhattan's glinting profile,  
past the palisades and the Highlands,  
past fledgling river towns and glaciated granite  
where Reformed Churches pepper the hills,  
and kills crumble down from the mountains,  
to Claverack, finally, with its natural port,  
less riverine than oceanic.  
They brought their island houses with them  
in frames propped up on the ship's deck.  
They dug streets and plugged ravines,  
wheeled their houses onto new flatland;  
wove rope, ironed sails; built schooners and sloops.  
At the docks they unloaded half-processed spermaceti.  
And so river inhales ocean, too,  
all bone of ship and sailor—

I could travel even further back:  
we have never found a river by first finding its source.  
It's only later that the source defines us.  
(We set off to follow flimsy trickles  
and after much debate, proclaim it, name it, map it—  
*source*.)  
Needles, currents, astral charts, we come upon them  
always *mouth*-first; crave enclosure, and so turn in.

This morning, a small fan in the window  
confuses the room into New York spring.  
Sun through cloud through curtain, the whirl  
of neutral air *displaces* me  
and I am alone—without, for a moment, Louisiana smells,  
swamp, jasmine, shellfish—fooled into  
that other place of rock and sycamore.  
Nostalgia undoes fact now,  
at least until the heat comes, until I am forced  
to shut the window, unplug the fan,  
and if I do not speak the name of that nearby  
river-in-reality, perhaps  
she won't know (so I won't know)  
that I am really here.

**Cassie Pruyn** is a New Orleans poet, originally hailing from Portland, Maine. She's lived in New Orleans for three years, volunteering, teaching, nannying and generally reveling in what the city has to offer. She is currently working toward her MFA through the Bennington Writing Seminars in Bennington, VT. Her first book-length manuscript will include free-verse, formal, and prose poems all centering on the mysterious fusion of history and landscape. She is a member of the Peauxdunque Writer's Alliance under the auspices of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society. She was also a finalist for the 2013 Indiana Review 1/2K Prize.

## Poetry: OTHER FINALISTS:

*Aspiring to Magic*, James Bourey, Dover, DE  
*Back/Strokes*, Reggie Young, Lafayette, LA  
*By Chance*, Pat Gallant, New York, NY  
*Candy Andy or Cougar Bait*, Irene Mosvold,  
Louisville, Ky  
*Collapse*, Amy Wilder, Columbia, MO  
*Confederate Jasmine: New World Elegy*,  
Brad Richard, New Orleans, LA  
*Conway, AR*, Caroline Rash, New Orleans, LA  
*Cubicle of Heaven*, Marie Louise Guste Nix,  
Mandeville, LA  
*Fragile Things*, Craig Black, Darrow, LA  
*Infallible Politics Uncrowned*,  
Manfred Pollard, New Orleans, LA  
*In the Light of Early Morning*,  
Robert Desmarais, New Orleans, LA  
*Love's Upside Down Crown: Last Rush to First  
Blush*, Phyllis Hudson, New Orleans, LA  
*Mammy Dearest*, Candace Wiley, York, SC  
*Of Midnight*, Ken Mask, Lafayette, LA  
*Racing on a Carousel*, Larkin Edwin Greer,  
New York, NY  
*Sideshow*, Judith White, Chevy Chase, MD  
*Steel on Wood*, J. Ed Marston, Chattanooga,  
TN  
*String Theories*, Paulette Bane, Conway, AR  
*The Ghosts of Thunder Road*, Ned Balbo,  
Baltimore, MD  
*The Paper Church*, Vickie Dailey, Taylors, SC  
*The Past Lingers*, Craig Black, Darrow, LA  
*The Theology of Popcorn*, Reggie Young,  
Lafayette, LA  
*This Starry Night*, Jennifer Bartell,  
Johnsonville, SC

The new steel kid walks into the shop class and sits at the farthest table away from the other normal students. He thumps his thick metallic fingers against the wood like a rhythmic mechanical clock. He's made of steel and wears a long sleeved grey shirt that says *Science Bowl Finalist*. He would not stand out, but the reflected sunlight off his shiny grey face catches my eyes. He has a dent on his cheek and two on the back of his neck. The dents are about the size of a ballpoint hammer.

When the teacher asks the students to help bring in a twelve foot long boat in the shop, the steel kid pulls out a bright orange Calculus book instead. He brushes off the scrap metal lying on the table like blown sawdust scattering on the ground. He makes room for his notebook and busily starts writing in it. He is a cold math machine, steadily churning out math answers into his notebook. He doesn't notice that I have been looking at him all period. He doesn't notice the students tearing away off the rotten algae smelling wood off the boat at the teacher's command. He doesn't notice the advance trading system set by the students who pay for Honeybuns in Pringles. He doesn't hear the steady hum of the welding machine or the other natural groans in the shop. No one pays attention to the steel kid, but I do.

The next day, the teacher announces that he needs help tearing the floorboards off his small fishing boat that got ruined during Hurricane Isaac. Since it doesn't take a barrel full of monkeys, he says, only people he chooses will work on repairs and the rest will have to weld a trivet. If we aren't chosen to work on the boat, we don't move. If the teacher gives us two weeks for a project, we wait a week and a half before starting except for Timmy, a loud mouth who always brags about the eight point buck he shot two years ago.

The steel kid looks up from his textbook when he hears the teacher say, "It will be for a grade." He closes his book and hurries to the back of the shop. His metal shoulder clanks against the cracked boat and a piece of the stern falls to the ground like a pencil during an exam. Everyone notices and stop playing on their iPhones to see the steel kid looking guilty next the fall piece of the boat. The teacher, seeing a piece of his precious boat



*Jackson Meirl*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best High School Short Story



### **Welding Wounds Shut**

I watch the steel kid. Little progress is made after ten minutes of intense filing from the steel kid, channeling his anger onto a tiny ring.

"You're doing it wrong." Damn, probably not the best way to start a conversation. I can't help but point it out to him. It would be worse if I didn't say anything. I try to be friendlier, "Timmy gave you wrong advice."

"I got it." He doesn't look up. He continues his short strokes.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Why won't he hear me out? He shouldn't be prideful to me.

broken, shouts to the steel kid, "Dam gummit, boy! Why you messin' up my baby! Get away from her." The steel kid shows no emotion in his face. He doesn't say a word. I don't think it's the right time for him to be acting defiant against these the teachers or the students. He tries to avoid the glaring eyes by slipping to the back of the shop class. He looks dumbfounded at the different tools and material.

The steel kid makes sure to avoid the boat for the rest of the week. The next day I see him already near the metal cutting saw holding four crude looking rings from a steel pipe. The rings blend with his fingers. The edges are jagged. It looks as if he held the machine slanted and sneezed while cutting. Someone didn't tell the steel kid how to properly use the power tool. Timmy strolls towards the steel kid. He says, smacking his lips on a Honeybun, "That's the shittiest lookin' rings I ever seen. Use that filer to grind that even, kid. You better put your liver in a quiver already 'cause my trivet is going to smoke yours."

I don't like Timmy. He can shove his figure eight welds that he calls "inventive" up his pudgy pig nose. His welds aren't good. He's not good. The steel kid looks unfazed, his face unmoving. His stiff face holds an intense stare with an iron grip of his clenched teeth. He picks up a metal filer and scraps the jagged edges of his rings. Each stroke is forceful; the metal screeching together sends short pangs ringing in my ear. Screech. Screech. Screech. The steel kid never falters once, and the strokes sound timed like a metronome. I cut my own steel rings off the dinky pipe that the teacher supplies us with when given busy work projects.



*This story is a wonderful blend of acute observation and imaginative freedom. In its opening paragraph, a boy made out of steel walks into a high-school shop class, and we're told nothing about how he got that way even after the narrator compassionately decides to mentor him in welding. The premise is intriguingly surreal, but we accept it largely because of the author's vivid, intricate, and precise rendition of the tale's everyday backdrop: the noise, the slovenly teacher, the other students jockeying for favor, the shop's array of tools and work stations and the narrator's offhand expertise about them. This persuasive atmosphere is what makes the emerging connection between the two central characters convincing and ultimately moving. It shows rare confidence in a young writer to grasp that the power of accurate descriptions and credibly rendered human behavior -- yes, even when the human in question is made of steel -- can turn explanations of a story's inner meaning unnecessary. —Tom Carson*

"I'm grinding."

"Really? With a metal file? Yea that shouldn't take you more than four hours. You'll be done in no time," I pause for minute and let the message sink in. He needs to take my damn help. "You should be using the Grinder over there. It'll take you three minutes per ring. I could help you how to use it."

He doesn't answer. He doesn't look up. He continues his short strokes against the steel rings.

He can take up the whole damn nine weeks filing those rings for all I care. I take my rings to the grinder and hear the familiar whirl of the blade on the grinder. It sounds like an air conditioning machine turning on. When the blade hits the steel rings, a waterfall of bright orange sparks spew out and flood all vision around me. It sprays upward in the air and falls gently to the shop fall like a fine mist. The loud high pitch churn of blade eating metal is music to my ears. I can't hear the students yelling across the room. I can't hear how a Honeybun was at least worth two bags of chips. I only hear metals dancing against one another.

Grinding the metal reminds me of being back in dad's garage. When I was eight, he showed me how to use different tools. He started with a hammer, but as I spent more time with him I learned to use power tools. He taught me how to weld when I was twelve. He set down his beer and guided my shaky hands so the electrode rod made steady contact on the base metal. I

haven't seen him in three years. The memory is sweet and feels good like smooth cool metal. I don't want it to end. There's a tap on my shoulder.

"Can you help me?" The steel kid holds the steel rings in his hands to show me what he means. The jagged edges look like it could cut someone by just lightly touching it. I nod, telling him to let me grind his rings down first.

We spend the rest of the two weeks working on his project together. Cutting all the pieces of the metal is fairly easy. We scourge up a metal rod deep in the depths of the shop class's scrap pile to make our handle. It's forging in the jungle; everyone is on his own. No surprise, it's only Timmy, the steel kid, and me working on our trivets. The teacher sits every day holding his gut up and eats Little Debbie Swiss Roll as he watches his pets cutting out wood for his boat. None of them know what they are doing and are constantly distracted by the Honeybuns. Their attention spans are worn to the thinnest line as if they've been grinded too long.

I try to tell the steel kid basically how to weld using the 6011 electrode rods on the AC machines. I know he won't be good the first time so I hand him a sheet of scrap metal to weld on. Timmy tries to interject his opinion of different patterns to use when making a weld, but I tell him to shut up. I tell the steel kid that it's okay if you mess up but you have to just get in there. He doesn't need to wear gloves or a long sleeve shirt since the hot sparks won't sting him. I tell him to be careful not to let the electrode rod make contact with his metal fingers.

I give an encouraging pat on the back and push him in Welding Booth One, a dark black box where the welding machine purrs quietly and only a thin drape blocks you off from the rest of the shop. The electrode rod sticks to the base metal at least three times and the rod looks like a thin extension of the flat iron. The steel kid wiggles and yanks it loose with strenuous effort. Finally, he creates a spark. White light emits from the metals fusing together. He comes out with the metal plate with welds, still steaming. He doesn't wear gloves. Smoke rises from his hands when he sets down the plate. I give the steel kid a metal brush to scrap the slag off. He has long strokes against the single bead weld. It's constant; he puts the same pressure on the weld every time and the sound is consistent. Scrap. Scrap. Scrap. I notice his steel arms for the first time today now that he wears a short sleeve shirt. There are slits scattered across his forearm. Neat small slits lined up along his left forearm. The sharp ends peel like bananas. I'm worried, but I know I shouldn't ask.

The weld comes out awful. The beads are inconsistent. It looks like the steel kid held the electrode rod too long in one area so that there's a big awkward bulge on the weld looking like ink spots. When I gently brush my finger across the weld, I feel like I'm brushing against gravel. There is only a small part, maybe only a quarter of an inch long, where the weld feels sort of consistent and had the proper width. I tell him about the good part of the weld. He deserves to know that much. I don't want to discourage him. He musters a small smile

# 2013 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

but it's hard for his steel face to form an expression. It creaks and I see the tension in his mouth as it expands. He hasn't said a lot since I started helping him, let alone make an expression to me. I pat the steel kid on the back, saying good work.

Timmy strolls by, squeezing a Honeybun out of a sticky plastic wrapper in his hand. He sees the steel kid's awful weld. He says, "Did you do this crappy weld steel kid? I know it ain't your new friend 'cause he know how to weld good. Shit, you should just quit right now and go back to learning about pie or whatever it is in your advanced math class."

I stand up to Timmy and meet him eye to eye. I can see the icing sticking on the sides of his mouth as he smacks his lips. He breaths out of his nose like a horse and I can hear every time he exhales. "Shut up. I'm teaching him how to weld."

Timmy scratches his head and his mouth is half open. "Aye Chris, you happen to have some food I can have? And I don't be liking the hate on me."

Did he not understand me? I say plainly, "No, why don't you stuff your face with the rest of that crap and leave us alone."

He walks away but not without snorting his nose and spitting a loogie near the steel kid's weld. The steel kid stops brushing his splotchy welds and says, "Thanks. That guy can be kind of an ass."

"No problem. He smells like he uses shit as a blanket when he sleeps."

The steel kid laughs. I haven't heard him laugh before. It's hoarse and he coughs right after to clear his throat. When did he last laugh? I chuckle too. The steel kid says, "Okay, so I don't know how to weld. Can you show me?"

I look at the slits on his arms. They look uncomfortable. I say, "Sure, but do you mind if I mend those cuts on your arm?"

The steel kid's smile vanishes and his face turns flat and dead. He realizes that he's exposed his cuts and quickly covers them with his other hand. He avoids eye contact and stutters. "Oh, you noticed. They really aren't a big deal. Besides they don't hurt."

"I don't want to know how you got them," I say keeping my voice down, "I just want to fix them. Will you let me?"

He nods. I put on my gloves and welding helmet. We head back to Welding Booth One, a dank cave separating us from the rest of the jungle.

I've been welding for five years now. When I bring the electrode rod close to the steel kid's cut, the metal sticks and a small red dot slowly forms on the steel kid's arm. He winces; I yank the rod off before it melts a small hole, the size of a cigarette butt. I try again. The rod fizzes like the fuse of a firework and sparks explode off the tip. The white light is blinding. I don't pay attention to the sparks but watch the pool of hot metal forming on the cut. With precision, I use a steady hand to layer the liquid metal like a stack of dimes, how my father always taught me. The rod shortens but the sizzling is constant

and blends in the surrounding until I hear nothing. I see nothing except the pool of metal and the electrode rod.

As I work on the cuts, my hands get shaky and I lose my rhythm for a second. I'm back at my father's garage. I'm fourteen. He hangs near the corner wearing welding goggles. His beer cans are lined up, and he smokes a cigarette as he watches me weld part of the frame on his '57 Thunderbird. He tells me I'm experienced enough, that I can handle it. I'm not sure, but I don't say no. I learn that it's bad to say no to my father. As I weld part of the frame, I sneeze. Somehow, the electrode rod keeps contact with the metal. I don't realize this as the heat of the rod melts a hole through the vintage car. My father yanks me by my shoulder and tears me away from his baby. The hole fizzes as there is a red ring sizzling from too much pressure of the electrode rod. Thump. Thump. Thump. His tightened fist pounds at my sides as I use my hands to cover my face. His raunchy beer breath burns my nose as he shouts at me for screwing up his car. Stupid. Fuck up. He shoves his cigarette deep down my forearm, which I use to cover my face from his rage. When he stumbles off and slams the door behind him, I press my hand over the burning flesh. I pinch my nose to cover the stench. I try not to cry but the tears roll off my eyes. I let them fall on the burn. It's soothing.

I finish the last weld on the steel kid's arm and turn off the AC machine. When I take the welding helmet off, there are four red streaks about two inches long a piece contrasting his grey arm. I touch his shoulder. It's hot too. His left arm sizzles as the smoke seeps out of the welds as if from a cigarette. I grab a pail of water and pour it over the steel kid's arm. Water vapor erupts in a sudden reaction as a cloud of steam emits from the steel kid. He says it tingles and chuckles. I hear a faint cracking sound coming from the steel kid's arm ask him if his arm feels weird; he says it's fine. The welds are small bulges on his flat steel arm. The grooves are consistent. "It looks like your sketching with a pencil," says the steel kid examining the weld. I shrug it off, saying it is nothing. He doesn't realize how much his compliment means to me.

The steel kid picks up how to weld quickly. The next two days he is already at the welding booth practicing his stringer beads. Stringer beads are practice welds made on sheet metal. If done correctly, they look like a stack of dimes laid across the metal. That's what my father used to say before my mother divorced him. With each one he shows me, he get closer to the consistent groove as I look for the stack of dimes. I notice another dent on his arm about the size of a ballpoint hammer.

The cave of Welding Booth One becomes our private sanctuary where we don't have to hear the rambling nonsense from the students or hear the teacher getting on everyone's case about not starting their trivets yet. He even yells at his pet workers and tells them to get off the boat for a few days; he changes his mind. They scrounge around looking for scrap metal since the teacher hardly cuts the students any metal to weld with, but the steel kid and I already have the best ones. With two days before the project due, the steel kid shows me

a series of single stringer bead welds that he did in a record time. I brush my finger over the weld. I brush over it again just to make sure I feel it right. Smooth like a stack of dimes. I look at the welds. The little layers from the pool of metal are consistent. A near perfect weld. I'm proud of him; the progress he has made over the past two days is phenomenal. Only someone with talent can pull that off. I slap the steel kid on the arm telling him he did great. His arm creaks and I notice that his left arm is stiffer than his right arm. I tell him that it's time to weld his trivet together.

He says he might need a little more practice, but I reassure him that he is fine and he only has a few days left. At the beginning of class the next day, there is no wasting time as the steel kid walks past the ripped boat to get to Welding Booth One.

He is in the booth for thirty minutes. He wears through electrode sticks faster than a pencil sharpener chewing lead. The other students are just finishing cutting their rings and some go to the other welding booths. Timmy comes out of Welding Booth Three and slams his trivet down. It looks musty. Parts of the rings have melted off. The welds are bulges that stand out like zits. The cross is crooked and the rings stick out past the handle metal. Timmy says, "Looks pretty darn good to me." He takes a chipping hammer and slams obviously at the trivet to knock the slag off. Usually light taps do the trick, but Timmy doesn't know what he's doing with his hammer. The clanks ring in my ear and I tell him to stop slamming the trivet so goddamn hard.

The steel kid comes out holding his trivet carefully. Steam seeps out of the bright red spots of conjunction. His left arm sizzles too as well as the trivet. I grab a pail of water and he puts his arm in it. I hear the cracking sound again. Vapor poofs out from his arm as it rapidly cools down. The steel kid takes the chipping hammer from Timmy and lightly knocks the slag off the welds. Tap. Tap. Tap. He sounds like someone who knows what he's doing.

When he brushes the slag off, we check the trivet. The welds are smooth and the bulge is only slightly sticking out. No rings are malformed and all the rings are in line with the cross for the trivet. I'm not surprised that his trivet came out nearly perfect. I'm happy for him. I don't even have to say words but I see the steel kid smiling.

I tell him, "It looks awesome. All you have to do is grind it down."

The students that aren't in the welding booths look at what the steel kid made. Their eyes are locked and their mouths are half open. They murmur to each other, wondering how the steel kid made a great trivet. Timmy walks up to the steel kid and his nostrils flare. "Aye kid, you made that great lookin' weld. How the hell?" I laugh in my head at how stunned Timmy looks.

The steel kid doesn't give Timmy a response. He picks up the trivet and walks towards the grinder. The teacher compliments the steel kid on a good looking weld. The steel kid is so absorbed by the compliment that

he doesn't notice one of the student's backpacks near the rotten boat. His leg trips over the strap and he crashes down towards the floor. A horrendous sound of metal snapping apart. The steel kid moans. He clinches his jaw and tries not to cry. None of the students move. Not even the teacher budges. They are all too shocked to see the forearm of the steel kid severed from the rest of his body. The steel kid presses his attached hand over his jagged nub. His severed hand lies by itself and clinches onto the trivet.

I rush over to the steel kid and hold his severed arm in front of him. I tell him that he can weld his arm back together in no time. He shakes his head as he sucks air in through his teeth. His hand is shaking. He doesn't think he could focus enough to weld his broken arm together.

I tell him calmly, "Don't be unsure of yourself. I'll coach you through this."

The steel kid looks up from his hunched position to validate my words. He looks not at me, but through me. He trusts and believes me. I see it through his grey eyes and I believe my own words.

I pull the trivet out of the steel kid's broken arm as we head back to Welding Booth One. My welding helmet is heavy on me and I can hear my own breath. It's dark with the mask on and I can barely see the steel kid's face. I hold his heavy broken arm in place as he turns on the machine. I hear the faint hum so familiar to me. I keep my hands steady when the steel kid begins to fuse the pieces of his arm. The electrode rod lights up against his metal and sizzles. It's blinding. I have to look away. I can't imagine seeing the steel kid messing up his arm. Why didn't I do it for him? But I remember that it's important that he welds his arm back himself.

I turn my head away and look at the steel kid's lifeless hand protruding upward. The fingers are stiff. As he continues welding, I see a finger twitch. A slight twitch, but then it bends. With each electrode rod used, there is more mobility in his fingers. One by one each finger twitches, bends, until finally the hand clinches together as if it's squeezing a ball.

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*Jackson's favorite authors are Flannery O'Connor, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Richard Yates. Jackson thanks his current instructors at NOCCA who have been influential in his current works.*





*William Maloney*  
*2013*  
*High School Short*  
*Story Runner-Up*



## **Coffin**

I open my eyes to find that I am trapped inside a coffin. I kick the bottom of the coffin in, and the earth around me replies by rushing inside. I start to panic, my mind racing to think of a way out before I run out of air. I quickly realize there is no escape, and so I settle myself with death.

There are a great many reasons why I could be buried here. Maybe the mafia has caught on to the fact that I killed their leader, but that isn't likely. It is a group of simpletons whose only wish is to get a little power over a common man by pointing a gun at his head. Surely they reach their goal, but at what cost? Their lives are endangered, and I can't see how any of them would be able to talk at family dinners. I bet they dread the moment that a relative asks about work. One might just look down at his lap in shame, while another might make a scene by going into a burning rage: yelling, throwing chairs, all the standard actions that would ruin any Thanksgiving.

But what if the families accept this unlawful state that each and every one of them is in? A grandmother might smile, being bribed with pearls that remind her of her youth. A brother could be low on money, and be happy that his sibling is doing so well, well enough to lend at least a few thousand dollars that they both know will never find its way back into the mobster's pocket. Either way, the mobster will be satisfied because he will have helped his family, no matter the means.

But then again, what if the family is wholeheartedly against what is happening? They might offer an intervention, pleading that the mobster leave his evil ways and get an office job. The mobster will obviously be against this, cherishing the little power he gets when he holds a gun. Everyone will have already come to the conclusion that the mobster thirsts for power, and can barely live without it. A single person will offer the idea to the mobster, a bad idea, resulting in the mobster shooting the man and causing a dreadful scene.

Now I'm not completely negative on the subject of mobsters. Surely there are some that have cats and when their family asks about work, they smile and say they work at a bank. This is as true as it is ironic, seeing as this discussion will have happened exactly one week after the mobster and a few friends will have robbed a bank. I can

surmise that the mobster will not bring the cat to dinner, seeing as that's not socially acceptable, but he will be missing the cat the entire time. The two have a very close relationship, seeing as the cat is one of the few that the mobster can confess his deeds to.

The mobster goes home to his cat every day and confesses the latest crimes he's committed. If this cat could speak, it would be a terrific witness against the mobster, but cats cannot speak. The crimes the mobster confesses to the cat get worse as time goes on. Eventually, the cat will be filled to the brim with these confessions, and will walk to the nearest police station and list everything the mobster has done. The police will be unsure whether to trust the cat, so they will attach a voice recorder to the cat's collar. It will be a spy, something that it is completely alright with, given the fact that it is tired of the endless confessions of murder and arson.

The mobster will come home drunk with many friends. Their latest robbery will have obtained them more money than usual, and so it will be spent on alcohol. As the mobsters stumble inside, the cat will try to hide, fearful of so many people. The owner will quickly grab the cat before it can escape, an action that is purely muscle memory, and so it can be accomplished even when the owner is in an intoxicated state. He will hold the cat and begin to pet it until his friend will see the audio receiver. His friend will exclaim "Wait a minute, that cat's wearing a wire!" and take his gun out. The owner will be horrified, but he will be too slow to stop his friend. A bullet will fly and dismember the cat, and the owner will scream.

Or then again, maybe my wife buried me here. Our marriage was just an impulsive act. I've also made a few decisions in our past that I'm not particularly proud of, and so I can see why she would do this. I, in a drunken lapse of judgment, slept with her sister. After that, she stopped trusting me. To return the favor, I didn't trust her, and now I'm buried in a coffin. After the little problem we had between each other, I wrote letters. Hundreds, thousands, I spent days writing about my love for her and my agony over what I had done. I never sent a single one because I was afraid of what might happen. Maybe she would hate me even more for my thinking that she could still love me, and leave forever because I had written her

beautiful letters. Those letters are still in a desk in my study, one that she has never opened.

She didn't take the news about her sister and me too well. She screamed, broke things, and almost lit the house on fire. I eventually calmed her down to the point where she wasn't doing damage to the house or objects in it, which turned out to be a terrible decision. The objects were an easy way of getting her anger out, and removing them and replacing them with cushions on the floor did not help at all. Luckily, for the cushions at least, she did not think to tear them with a sharp object. Instead, she and I decided to talk, or rather, she would shout accusations at me that I would try my best to deny and sound sincere. I was serious about the situation, but the slightest inflection could send her into a rage that could be compared to a tornado. This was not one of those docile tornadoes that stays along the coast and then flies into some state no one cares about, no, this hit me full force. I grabbed a cushion to stop the wind tearing at my skin, and I was successful at blocking it momentarily. The wind quickly tore the cushion out of my hand and resumed attacking me. With nothing else to defend myself, I ran out the house, screaming as the tornado followed me.

I've recently started running to slim down a bit. I think it's a good way to get exercise, and it's great fun in these chilly months. I've been trying to push myself more than normal as I am not feeling challenged with the current distances I'm running. I finish my run in a pleasant state, whereas my friends' experiences have resulted in them panting and then sleeping afterwards. I ran my longest distance so far the last day I can remember before being in this coffin. It was wonderful. My heart was pounding, I was sweating, and the best part was that my wife was running with me! She was trying to kill me, but in this day and age, can that really be called a crime? With news of civilians being killed in the Middle East coming in so frequently, who am I to say my life is more valuable than theirs?

We ran all the way to the riverbank, and I got a beautiful view of it during sunset. My wife probably wasn't paying attention to the river, as she was focused on chasing me and breathing so she wouldn't collapse. She eventually did drop onto the grass while panting, and I sat down next to her. We watched the sun fall together, and when it had reached night, we went back home, hand in hand.

She cooked for me that night, something she rarely does. She said it was a special occasion, and so I just sat and waited for her to finish. We sat down to a beautifully dressed table, and ate our meal while talking to each other about the things that has happened during the day. When I mentioned killing the leader of the mafia, my wife was shocked and happy at the same time. She touched my sleeve "Good for you for finally getting back at him, you described him as a real jerk in high school."

High school seems so long ago it's strange to

*This story is, first and foremost, hilariously funny. That's never something to dismiss, because humor is harder to manage successfully than solemnity. But the story's considerable artfulness is all in the narrator's unsurprised, deceptively bland tone as he describes not only his outrageous predicament but the even more outrageous possible provocations for it. —Tom Carson*

think I'm still carrying out murders on the people I disliked. The man in question, my most recent name to cross off my list, bumped me in the hall and didn't apologize for it. I watched him walk for a good minute, waiting for him to turn around and beg for forgiveness. He turned around, but only to look confused when he spotted me watching him. He was not a big man at the time, I probably could've dealt with him there if I wanted to, but I waited. I bided my time, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Yes, would let him live a full life, full of friends and children, and then I would get my revenge.

I killed him early in the morning, just as he was waking up. I was wearing the same Death costume I had worn the previous Halloween. I loved the scythe that accompanied that costume, though the robe was somewhat hot. I was jealous of his beautiful room with a balcony that overlooked his pool and garden. One could probably even threaten a gardener and get free plants just because he would be afraid of waking up eight feet underground in a coffin. The pool was probably just a big purchase, but it was worth it. The bricks around the pool were yellow, and got progressively lighter as they came closer to the edge. The pool itself looked to be about ten feet deep at the deepest and three feet at the shallowest. The bottom of the pool was covered in sand, probably about a foot deep. The shallow end quickly slanted down into the deep end half way through the pool. The early morning light was beautiful on the water. I stood and just looked at the pool for a good twelve minutes before turning around and walking towards the sleeping mafia boss.

I stood at the foot of his bed as he opened his eyes. It was lovely to see him paralyzed by fear, trying to shout for his guards. They were having breakfast on the other side of his palace, and realized their boss was not eating with them a bit too late. They, of course, just assumed that he was sleeping a little late. He tried to reach over to his bedside table to hit a button that I assumed called his guards, but I whipped my scythe over to it so that it was just in front of his hand. He was shaking now, feeling the cold, polished metal of my scythe, and so I started to turn it slowly. I started moving the tip of it until it was facing his head. He chose that moment to edge away from my scythe and run to his porch. He opened

the door and rushed out of it as I walked towards him. He chose to jump off of the porch, about an eight foot drop, into his pool. He, while a good swimmer, was somewhat large, and so he could not propel himself very quickly. I walked down the stairs at the back of his balcony, and then ran to his pool. He was almost across the entire length of it when I arrived in front of him. He dove down into the deep end, hoping to get away. I simply removed my robe, revealing the bathing suit I had worn just for this situation, and jumped in. I dove to the bottom and pulled back my scythe, ready to release it and kill him, until he threw sand at me. It clouded the water, and I had to swim to the surface in order to see. I got out of the pool and waited for him to resurface. He popped up for a second and then popped back underwater before I could strike. He repeated that, and we played a deranged game of whack-a-mole until he grew tired. I pulled back my scythe, getting ready for the moment he would resurface and not have the energy to dodge, and swung at the first thing I saw. This was not him, but his sleeping shirt. He was already getting out on the other side of the pool. I ran around the pool and followed him as he ran back up onto his porch. He went back into his room and dashed for the door that led to the rest of the house. I threw my scythe at him with a perfect spin on it. It flew through his stomach and pinned him to the door. I walked up to his bleeding, nearly dead body, and uttered the line I had spent months planning out. "I'm sorry, did my scythe bump you while you were walking? I apologize."

As I lie in this coffin, I begin to cherish these memories. They were so much fun at the time, and they would be good stories to tell to friends. As I wait for my air to run out, I know I've lived a happy life. I suddenly hear a noise. It's a steady sound, and it's getting louder and louder. I know I've heard the sound before, but I can't describe it. Finally, when the sound is at its loudest, I hear something hitting the top of my coffin. It opens up to reveal two men in suits with my wife, the night in the background. I get up, stretch a little, and climb out of the pit of dirt I'm in. As I get to the surface, I realize I'm in my backyard. I turn to my wife, "What is going on?"

"Oh, well, I'm somewhat embarrassed about it," she said, blushing. "You see, after our little fight, I wasn't really calmed down. I put a little something into the food to knock you out, and these wonderful gentlemen," she gestured to the men in suits, "owed us a favor. They worked for that awful mob boss that you killed, and his dying liberated them from a job that they had been forced into. They were quite timely with the burial, and you were under the ground in less than an hour."

Both men smiled.

"Anyway, I went to your study to see if you had hidden anything about my sister in there, and I find your poems! They were so beautiful that I called the men and had them dig you up on the spot. I was a little worried about you dying from lack of air, but it seems everything has turned out well."

"Indeed," I said, staring up at the stars. I look back on that moment as the time I knew our marriage was saved.

## High School Short Story OTHER FINALISTS:

*Another Me*, Felicity Lartigue, Marrero, LA  
*Bones*, Hannah Sarco, New Orleans, LA  
*Bull Riding*, Josie Benson, Bowling Green, OH  
*Cardboard*, Skey Dashner, New Orleans, LA  
*Flowers*, Frida Gurewitz, Los Angeles, CA  
*Formicarium*, Siobhan Kelly, New Orleans, LA  
*God is Ambidextrous*, Esben Klarlund, Chatham, NJ  
*Haunt*, Peyton Brunet, New Orleans, LA  
*Hearts*, Josephine Kihui, Fairfax, VA  
*Leap*, Madeleine Granovetter, Glen Ridge, NJ  
*Marked*, James Niffenegger, Sarasota, FL  
*Nightmare*, Luis Eduardo Bermudez Ham, Idyllwild, CA  
*Redemption Ridge*, Lottie Brent Boggan, Jackson, MS  
*Route 305: Paris to Toulouse*, Sophia Derbes, New Orleans, LA  
*Temporal Redemption*, Hannah Dent, Terrell, NC  
*The Beach Home*, Elliott, Frilett, New Orleans, LA  
*The Boy Who Stole the Stars*, Leah Griffin, Sherrill's Ford, NC  
*The Healing Tea*, Alex Gracen, Mandeville, LA  
*The Power of Flight*, Claudia Leger, Slidell, LA  
*The Smothered Candle*, J. J. Cronin, Rye, NY  
*The Unremitting Staircase*, Leah Bordlee, New Orleans, LA  
**Trance, Mississippi**, Tyler Despenza, New Orleans, LA  
*Two Lonesome Lemons and the Jester Child*, Genevieve Lovern, Abita Springs, LA  
*Wings*, Ian Urrea, New Orleans, LA





*Julian Lombard*  
*2013*  
*High School Short*  
*Story Runner-Up*



## ***Her Cycle***

I met her through the fog. I was walking alone, watching the street disappear and reappear again. I thought she was the fog herself at first, but she wasn't. She was a part of it. I noticed her when she wrapped around me like a scarf, frightened that all of a sudden my neck felt a bit heavier and damp with cold mist. I shivered and closed my eyes when I heard her sweet, feminine voice against my neck. She was a cloud.

She didn't have a name. She never recalled, nor felt there was a reason for one, so I kept it that way.

The cloud blended in traveling through the fog beside me. I was neither coming nor going anywhere in particular, but I knew my mother would be upset when I would come home too late on a school night. I tucked my hands deeper into my jacket pockets as the wind shoved me and the light of day descended while the streetlights flickered on. We navigated through the turns of the city for a while without saying a word, until we arrived by the river.

I sat down on the bench that overlooked the body of water, some of the water reflecting the bit of sunlight the day had left, the water rolling until it crashed onto the rocks fizzling with foam. The wind determined where the sea gulls would fly, the sea gulls gliding stiffly in mid air looking for a place to rest as the night crept onto them like shadows. The cloud floated beside me. She occupied the other side of the bench, stretching from my shoulders to the top of my head. I told her I wanted to be a cloud like her and leave humanity behind. I said what I said to break the silence. I wasn't really thinking how it would come out, but it sounded like the truth. She didn't say anything at first, but she then said, "I want to be a human and leave the sky." Her voice was like a bunny, hopping centimeters high through towering blades of grass, that rustle against its fur, or like a little girl, with blooming cheeks, smiling – as she tries a flower in her hair for the first time with small kissable fingers, giggling and blushing at her reflection of what was called cute and adorable by those older than her, but would soon be called beauty.

She told me how it was in the sky; being up there, always looking down at everything. She did not know how old she was. She felt she had been around for so long,

being in the sky, raining, turning into water, mixing with others. One time she stayed as a liquid longer than she thought she would. She told me that she blended in with the other unlucky raindrops, swishing and wafting into the sewer together. She splashed and circled through rusty pipes, and eventually ended up in a gigantic body of water. She evaporated soon after, returning to her mother who from then on made sure that this wouldn't happen to her again. One day in the sky felt like months to her. Apparently, she saw me a couple of times. I may have seen her before. I thought they all looked the same, but since I met her, she stood out. She was beautiful. I always thought of clouds as freedom, but maybe freedom wasn't what it was cracked up to be. Her mother, the sky, made sure she never left her sight. The cloud rained whenever it was time, but always formed a small puddle and would be evaporated back to her mother soon as the sun's light beamed through the gloominess of the clouds. That day, she saw the clouds coming down for the ground and she joined them.

The fog around us started to dissolve and she became more noticeable. Her body looked like pale white baby cheeks, delicate and almost chubby. The cloud knew she was supposed to return to the sky with the others, but didn't want to. She liked me and knew her mother would be disappointed, but came with me anyway. The only place I felt like going was home, so that was where we went. She knew her mother was watching.

The next morning, I woke up to my mother screaming at me behind the locked door, abusing the wood and hinges, demanding me to unlock the door. The cloud was awake too, startled a bit in my arms. She was quiet, cold, smooth, and thin. I hid her under my thin comforter and she silently floated under there, and I hoped to God mom wouldn't notice that when I would unlock the door. My mother slid through the door as I slightly opened it and I just let her yell at me, slipping in and out of consciousness standing in the front of her. I apologized and she left my room with huffs and puffs. I heard the cloud's chuckles from underneath the sheets.

I closed the door and held my bare back towards it. I never slept shirtless, but I did for her. She watched me dress for school with wonder as she floated maybe

four feet atop the bed. I wasn't sure if she slept at all, but I knew we held each other and that she stayed in my arms until my eyes closed. She looked like she was meditating with the colors of daybreak forming behind her between the blinds: streaks of orange, pink, and purple.

She wanted to go to school with me, so I let her come along.

We tried to figure how certain things would work. I snuck her out of the house with ease, since mom and I weren't talking. Mom had locked herself in her room and did not open the door until I left. I explained how things would work at school. She wanted to walk me to class, and I blushed. No girl ever wanted to walk me to class before. Usually it was the other way around, but I thought it was cute that she did not think twice on how unusual that was. I stayed close to her during that walk, bright and early. It was foggy that morning.

Of course she shouldn't ride the bus with me. I just told her to look natural, following the bus. The ride felt the same as always, lonely, until I glanced out of the dirty window and saw her on the street, on the bridge, above the canal, then finally outside of school. She stayed outside of my class windows. She and I would have staring contests when I didn't feel like participating in class. I didn't know where she went when I went to the classes where the blinds were shut.

I saw her at lunch. She spotted me sitting alone outside, watching the trees move a bit while the wind grew stronger and leaves rolled dead on the sidewalk, some in the grass. That was what I usually did, ignoring the urge to eat. She approached me like she did when we first met and she told me she wanted to show me something. I checked to see if the coast was clear and followed her behind the dumpster. She lowered some and told me to get on top of her. I placed one knee on her, and then the other and she rose up yard after yard in the air. I tried to keep close to her and she tried her best for me not to fall through her. The cloud showed me her view of where I lived. I didn't know what to say, my head resting on the back of hers with comfort watching lawns getting smaller, and looking down on the roofs of buildings. I was almost frightened as I breathed harder. She told me to trust her. The height of our elevation made me dizzy for a bit, but after a while I got used to it, especially when we got to the place she wanted to take me. We stopped over the river. Cars rolled by on the bridge, and I wondered if they saw us. I saw our reflection, and all I saw was perfection in it. My cheek was against hers through the deep ripples of the river, and the rest of the sky was grey.

A month passed by fast. We learned what to do and what not to do at school and all we ever did on the weekends was fly. Sometimes we watched sun sets from there, gazing at the colors blend with each other, creating art. We never went too high though. She still kept away from her mother and wanted to keep it that way. Her relatives, the fog, sometimes tried to pull her back home when she was outside during foggy days, dragging her through the atmosphere until she finally broke free and

*The author makes something excitingly new out of an old theme -- a heroine with an imaginary friend -- by paying exquisite, often witty attention to not only the psychological and sexual ambiguities but the meteorological practicalities involved in adopting a literal raincloud as your new BFF.*

—Tom Carson

rushed back to me. The wind occasionally tried to carry her away. The cloud knew these were all orders from her mother to get her to come back. I still had to hide the cloud away from my mother. She grew suspicious at my door always being locked, so she put a wooden door stop under it. The stop always paused the door closing and I always kicked it out of the way with frustration. I felt like a toddler, but I still kept the door locked and she just grew tired of trying. Every morning she would wake me up by banging on the door a couple of times with a faint voice that said, "Get up." The cloud would leak more nights than others, but it wasn't a problem for her. It just looked like weight loss in the morning and she would gain it back later. I asked her how she did that, and she said, "It just happens." I let her stay in the sky during lunch. She would rain like the others, as I sat by myself picking out the raindrops I thought was hers. At home, when all of the clouds outside would rain, she would do it too. I didn't want her to rain in my house, so I snuck her in the shower and let her rinse me off. I put the hot water on so I could warm up because she was cold. Steam surrounded us. It covered the light bulb, the mirror like plague, and the tiling a bit. She connected with the steam, stirring around me, touched me, hugged me with warmth. She was structure, not form, and affected me to the point that I too was structure, and became one with her.

She was mine; my mother, the sister I never had, my grandmother, the aunts I never met, and the best friend I always wanted.

One morning, my mother couldn't take it anymore. She demanded me to open the door again and with tears in her eyes, she barged in looking more exhausted than ever. She kept her booming voice, despite its cracks from her sadness, crying, "Why do you want to do this to me, baby? Why, why, why? Lord knows I love you and you keep—" she stomped on the floor, and spoke with her hands. Letting go of my fear like balloons to taste the sky, I shoved the comforter off of the bed and unveiled the cloud. She floated up in the air, as I sat down on the bed. My mother stepped back once with silence and curiosity, asking, "What is that?" "It's a cloud mom." "Why is it in here?" "Her." "What?" "She's a girl, mom." She grinned. I told the cloud to go to the living room for a bit. She floated around mom, and mom smiled with amazement as she watched her leave. "What's her name?" "She doesn't have one." She nodded. "She must be special." "She is."

That night, my mother made dinner for the three



*The Student Short Story Prize is sponsored annually by **Nancy and Hartwig Moss, III**, in memory of his mother **Betty** (Moss family pictured above).*

of us. She didn't know what the cloud would eat, so she just gave her flavored water. My mother got to know the cloud and instantly liked her. I ate, washed dishes, swept, mopped, took out the trash and they were still talking. My mother came up to me while I was washing my hands, the suds not rinsed off yet, as I watched her in the mirror. She told me, "I'm glad you have someone special. I really do. You should meet her mother. We don't like secrets." I nodded and murmured an "okay" but gulped the uncertainty of meeting the cloud's mother and it felt like swallowing a pill. I reached for the towel to dry my hands. "Oh, and y'all can't sleep in the same bed anymore."

I thought about it for days, but wasn't sure if it was a good idea to meet her mother. I don't think the cloud told my mother how she felt about her mother, but then again she probably did.

One day, I told the cloud I wanted to see her mother. Throughout the whole relationship, she had never been that mad. She may not have been mad at me, but was taking out her frustration towards her mother at me. She turned grey as the rest of the clouds had been that month, pacing violently in my room. The windows busted open, letting the stirring wind come in. The shadows shuffled on the floor and the corners of the walls. Papers flew and I was against the wall while she rapidly turned to different shapes and became darker and darker. The only thing she said was, "I hate you," but still agreed to let me

see her.

The cloud knew it was about to storm, but didn't think it was going to be that bad. She took me up into the sky, where the planes were scared to pass through, and I started to regret asking her. We went up higher than we had ever gone, which was where the storm was rumbling. Her mother was furious. The clouds looked angry, blackening, as the sky looked warm, yet electric from its illuminating yellow. Lightening struck and slightly blinded me for a second, almost burning my skin from its heat, as it reached down to the city like flash photography. Thunder erupted and it felt like an earthquake in midair. The cloud tried her best to keep me from harm, and to control herself because it was in her nature to do as the others were doing. The clouds looked like they were committing suicide; their bodies violently subtracting into raindrops and losing their shape until they were completely gone; lifeless droplets of them racing to plop onto the concrete. I was trying my best to keep calm and handle my breathing, watching and gathering every sight until my right hand slipped through her and I almost fell. She was raining just like everyone else. I wanted to call out her name, a name. Raindrops camouflaged my tears. She looked like she was in so much pain. I had to scoot to the corner of her. *Trust me*. Then my legs were gone, arms pushed in, chest, neck then head and I was falling drenched. I was her raindrop. I just became water, freefalling until I splashed onto the street. I then opened my eyes to see other raindrops falling on me. I looked for her, but couldn't recognize her anywhere. That was it between us. I loved her, but I knew she would not be the same. She would evaporate and not be the cloud I fell in love with. I threw off her natural cycle. I was on the other side of town, but I knew my way home.

***Julian Lombard** is an 18 year old senior from New Orleans, Louisiana attending John Ehret High School and New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA) for creative writing. Julian enjoys writing poetry, flash fiction, and fiction. Writers who influence Julian include Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Sylvia Plath, Ralph Ellison, and Luigi Pirandello. Julian is very grateful for the NOCCA instructors who have guided his work into a direction he never knew existed. He is thankful for his English teachers from middle school who sparked his interest in poetry starting in 7th grade. He participates in his school's STARS program, which is meant for seniors at his school to be role models and mentor troubled freshmen onto the right path. Julian wants to continue his studies with creative writing in college.*





*Sydney Thomas*  
*2013*  
*High School Short*  
*Story Runner-Up*



## **Laundry**

It's my junior year in high school and I'm still stuck with this screeching alarm clock that my mother found at a garage sale with the most backwards snooze button. Unlike the average snooze button that soothes your ears, my button believes that when it is pressed, the sleeper would want to hear more of it's "beautiful" music for another hour or so. The clock didn't even have the same slightly annoying ring as normal clocks; the sound resembles more of the loud obnoxious sirens you hear when someone's car goes off.

I, still halfway in dreamland, usually forget this piece of knowledge every morning. My hand is now crawling from under the safety of my blanket and grabbing the rusty clock to throw it across my room. My expectation is for it to hit my wall, crack into a million places and finally shut the hell up. But of course that doesn't happen. The clock doesn't even make it off of my bed; it lands on the pillow on the other side of my head, on top of the snooze button, and still shrieking. I try convincing myself that I'm not that weak, and all I need to do is a little more pushups. I had thrown it with my left hand, if it was my right, it would have definitely gone somewhere. I hope.

After I realize that the clock is simply an unbeatable force, I roll off my bed onto the roughness of my carpet. Lying face down on the floor I get a whiff of pepperoni. I slide my arm back and forth underneath my bed until it hits a Styrofoam plate.

I grab it in pull it toward me to find a half eaten slice of pizza on it. It doesn't look quite fresh, yet it doesn't look like it would kill me either. And if I leave it untouched, somehow it would affect the kids in Africa, so I have to eat it. My hands haven't been washed yet, so I bring my head closer to the plate and sink my top set of teeth into it. Well I try to at least, but they can't tear through the surface. After a minute of attempting to chop through it, I give up and slide it back under the bed for another time.

I push up off the floor (my exercise for the day) to start getting ready for school. I drag my feet to my dresser to pick out some boxers, but find the drawer empty. It has only been one day so the ones I have on shouldn't be that bad. I check my shirt and pants drawers

and find it in the same condition as the underwear's. It's been a month and I have finally run out of clothes.

It was in July when my mom decided to stop doing my laundry. She use to do once a week on a Friday, but one day she randomly stopped. I thought that maybe she forgot or didn't have time that day, but nope. The whole weekend passed, and I never found nicely folded clothes on top of my bed.

My clothes were starting to overpower my hamper and I needed to put a stop to the madness, so the Monday after that weekend I decided to approach her about the situation. All this woman had to say to me was that she was preparing me for the "real world". She didn't even have the decency to elaborate on what she meant by "real". What world was I living in before? Then she went on to say, "Shanté started washing her clothes when she was even younger than you." Yeah, because Shanté's an overachiever. And plus she's a girl, so she automatically knows how to do that stuff.

I actually attempted to wash my clothes that day, but when I went down to the laundry room, I was at complete loss. It took me a minute just to decipher which one were the washer and not the dryer. There were so many buttons, too many options. I looked at the tag of one my t-shirts, but that did not help at all. The first thing it said was "machine wash cold," but apparently my washing machine has three different types of cold: hot cold, warm cold, and cold cold. Which made no sense to me because I thought there was only one type of cold, and if you had hot water and cold water it would simply be warm. I guess temperatures change in the "real" world. The next line on the tag said "gentle cycle" which happened to be one, and probably the only, words the machine didn't display. Instead it had more complicated cycles like permanent, delicate, and of all things "hand wash". Since when can a machine hand wash something?

I then took more time out of my day to observe my sister's way of doing laundry, and realized that you can't just place all of the clothes in the washer at one time. She separates them into precise piles of like five piles. One of the pile consisted only of her towels and washcloths she used that week (Shanté believes that a person should use new washing materials every other day because of

*This story hews an uncommon understanding of how easily first-person narrators can fool you into thinking they're sympathetic people, which isn't always the case. The story's breezy, ingratiating surface hides a deft portrait of a born user who'd rather be clever than man up.*  
—Tom Carson

“germs”) After awhile, I decided to just give up and hope that I had enough clothes to last me some time.

Of course today, when I should be devoting my time to God to give him thanks for finally ending this horrendous, hardworking week like most people do on Friday mornings, I'm forced to go to my hamper and search through it to see which items smell the cleanest and look the freshest. Why should I waste time on a stupid machine anyway? Wouldn't some spray of cologne do the same job? Well, at least something close to it. And plus I'm helping out the environment by saving water from not using the washer.

After getting dressed, I creak my way down the icy wooden stairs and let the delightful aroma of breakfast guide me to the kitchen. I walk to the kitchen's island and sat down across from my father who is perusing the newspaper, probably for coupons.

“Oh, so you think you're a big shot now that you're a senior?” he says without taking his eyes away from the paper.

“Um, no.” I try not to ponder too much over his question. My dad was never a morning person, so I try not to bother or understand him before at least 9 a.m.

“Well you walk in here all high and mighty, without uttering a single word towards me.”

“Dad, I just sat down like thirty seconds ago,”

“Which was ample amount of time for a simple ‘Good morning, dad,’”

Before I can protest my sister prances in, as if on cue, and jovially says “Good morning daddy!” and kisses him on the tip of his baldhead.

He puts the paper down and gives her a hug. “See, Shanté knows how to make her dad feel loved, unlike some people I know,” I can feel his eyes staring at me, but I can care less. My focus is now on my precut pancakes and sausage. Ah, so my mom does not trust me with a knife to cut up my breakfast, yet she thinks I am completely capable of working the monstrous washing machine. I'll have to talk to her about her logic after school, right now my food deserves all of my attention.

I grab the bottled body of Mrs. Butterworth, squeezing it until the pancakes are nice and soggy, and allow my taste buds to experience ecstasy. My mom only fixes breakfast on school days. This past summer I spent most of my mornings teaching myself how to fix the perfect omelet to show my mother that I can actually do something in the kitchen. This ended up backfiring because I messed up and made the omelets a little bit too

perfect and she expected me to cook breakfast for the whole family at least once a week. Eight days out of my glorious summer that I was suppose to be sleeping until noon, I had to get up an hour early just so that my family's bellies could be satisfied. I started purposely burning them and putting ingredients like mayonnaise inside calling it my “special sauce”. Eventually my mother prevented me from using the stove anymore.

I look down at my plate to see my lonely chopped up sausages just begging to tag along with the pancakes and slide down my esophagus into the pool of acid in my stomach, but before I can touch them my sister begins to jingle her keys right in my ear. For her straight ‘A's she was awarded a new car; for my straight ‘B's I received a turtle who chewed a hole in my backpack last night.

I scoop my sausages up and stick them in a Ziploc bag to finish them in the car. I slip on my shoes and grab a pen and a sheet of loose leaf from our office, and met up with my sister in the foyer.

“That's all you're bringing?” she says with a voice that I detect has a hint of annoyance in it.

“Um, yeah. My backpack is broken. Is there a problem?”

“Dude it's only a small rip that you can hardly see. That's not what you called ‘broken’. Are you serious right now?”

“Dead,” I don't understand why she's all of the sudden concern about what I do. She has hardly talked to me since the beginning of the summer when she found someone else better than her “baby” brother to associate with. The only time we really converse is on the ride to school where she does most of the talking. She's always been a little socially awkward, but now she's a social caterpillar. I wouldn't say butterfly just yet since she still has difficulty with talking our next-door neighbor who we've lived by our entire life, so she's still in the beginning.

“And you think a pen and a piece of paper is going to get you through seven and a half hours of classes?”

I carelessly shrug one shoulder. I look at her book bag to see that it's almost about to burst. Okay I'm pretty sure that a senior year at our trifling school does not require a person to pack their bag like they are to go on a three-day camping trip, but Shanté has to be prepared for anything that could possibly happened. The items in her bag vary from a first-aid kit to bug spray.

She shakes her head and we exit out to her car. If it was up to me I would be riding the bus like I usually do each year, but my mom believes that Shanté and I need a stronger relationship and she thinks that riding together in the mornings would help. I hardly have a problem with riding with her; it's the car that's my biggest issue. It looks like it was order straight from a *Barbie* magazine. A Volkswagen Beetle is pretty girly by itself, but to make it even worse she had to have it painted a light pink. I avoided entering a car this entire summer. I didn't know which one was worse, having my mom drive me places in her old, battered, green minivan, or having my sister do it

# 2013 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

in her Barbie mobile. I stuck to walking and now I my legs are more tone than they have ever been.

I attempt to stuff myself into the beetle with little success. Shanté is petit in fits in perfectly like Cinderella's foot into the glass slipper, while I more like biscuits crammed into the container ready to pop. As soon as I pull my door shut, my sister opens her mouth to talk about her favorite subject and just about the only thing that has been on her mind lately. Rowan Kingston.

I've never actually had a real conversation with Rowan Kingston, yet I know his whole life story. I know what he had for breakfast each morning, how many cousins he has, and what type of gum he chews. This is all thanks to Shanté. Ever since they "fell in love", he should've been paying half of the electricity bill. There is not a day when I don't see Rowan's nicely shaven head or hear his smooth deep voice through her laptop screen as they video chat. They talk for hours, and she tells me every little detail of their discussions when they're done, like I care. She wants me to know the *truth* about him, and why he's the *perfect* guy for her.

I've never met Rowan and neither had she. He had added her through one of those little social networking programs that are oh so "trustworthy". If it was not for Skype, I would be skeptical about whether this "boy" is actually who he say he is. But still Skype isn't enough proof.

One day, being the responsible brother that I am, I decided to do a little research on this Rowan Kingston. Well, actually it was a day where we forgot to pay the cable bill and they turned off our service, so I couldn't watch television, and it was raining outside so my parents wouldn't let me walk anywhere, so the only thing I could do was talk on the phone or go on the computer. I was bored with all of my computer games, and I hate talking on the phone without having a good reason. I was going to hang out with Shanté, but she was too busy talking on the phone with Mr. Kingston, so then I decided to learn a little bit more about the guy that always has my sister occupied.

I put his name in on a search engine on the computer, and found out that he used to go to the same school we are at now, but had been expelled. I called up my friend Lance, who had graduated two years ago, to see if he knew anything about the guy. The first thing he told me was to not to trust him. Rowan tried to sell him drugs once and almost got him kicked off the football team.

I brought up this situation to Shanté the next after finding out about it and she denied it. She told me that he never sold marijuana. Sure he smokes it, but he never dealt it. He told her that the only reason he smokes is because of his "health problems". He looks perfectly fine to me, but whatever. She said that Lance probably spread the disingenuous lie just because Rowan never gave *him* any, and he was probably jealous of Rowan. I know Lance enough to believe that he's not the type of person to slander an innocent person. Well, the only time we truly

talked was when he tutored me once in math, but he was nice and patient with me, so he's trustworthy in my book.

We slowly pull up to a parking space at the school and I am immediately pulled back into our conversation when I hear my name in the exact same sentence with the words "Rowan" and "our house".

"Wait! What did you say?"

"Oh so now you want to listen too me? This whole ride you haven't mutter a single word or showed any type of response. But once you heard you precious little name, you suddenly gained an interest on what I got to say huh?" she snaps and with each word she said, the volume of her voice increased.

"I've been listening,"

"Oh really? What did I say then?"

It isn't hard to figure out what might have been saying. It is usually all the same. So I trust my mouth to release the words she would want to hear. "Basically you talked about *him* and how he treats you like a princess. And then my name popped up and something about the house, but I couldn't hear it because of the raucous kids passing by," I mentally pat myself on the back for remembering the word "raucous" from a vocabulary lesson last year.

She rolls her eyes and doesn't even compliment my vocabulary. "Mhm. I was saying that today we'll finally be seeing Rowan in person,"

"How? And what do you mean by 'we'?"

She sighs. "Try to keep up. He is coming to our house."

"Do mom and dad know that he's coming?"

"Um, yeah. Of course. You have soccer practice after school today right?" Something in her voice doesn't sound right and I know I should say something to encourage her to not let this stranger into our house, and tell her how dangerous this could be, but hey it is her life and I tried enough to warn her about this guy. Nagging her about boys is mom's job, not mine. Mother has already pushed her job of laundry on me, and I refuse to take up another one of her motherly tasks. I just nod my head.

We are at the school five minutes to my dismay. Several people greet me at once and I am forced to use my formerly relaxed vocal cords with a few of them who won't go away. I did not choose popularity, it just happened. It's all because of my killer looks, my "charming" ways, and how adroit I am in being a goalie. It's a hard job being the guy people look up to and want to be friends with. It requires too much interaction with other people. As I try retrieve the books from my locker for my classes a couple of freshmen start bothering me and asks me about my plans for the weekend. They think that since we are on the same soccer team, we could potentially become friends. Nope. Not today. I get my books and walk to my first class.

My school day pretty much sucked. I ran out of room on my paper by the time my second period rolled by. I was criticized by most of my teachers for not being



as organized as my sister. My math teacher actually forced us to do some pretty complex math problems. My pen ran out of ink in my fourth period and I was forced to ask to borrow a pen from Madison Anderson

I became friends with Madison Anderson after I found out that her older sister also dated Rowan Kingston once. I tried seizing some information out of her, but she didn't have any.

We've been "friends" for about a month, and I can't stand the existence of this girl. She says "like" and "frikin" in every breath that she takes. "Do you like know what like the frikin time is?" was a legit question she asked me once. That didn't pissed me off as much as how she was also holding a phone *in* her hand that moment.

That's another problem with that chick. She is forever texting. Her thumbs do not leave the surface of that keyboard. We already have been kicked out of the movie theater twice for her texting addiction. I'm afraid that if I confront her about it she'll just bark out oodles of furious "likes" and "frikins". I don't like listening to her in the first place, so I swear listening to her yell at me would most likely make me rip her throat out.

She would purposely leave something at my house just so she can come over the next morning to get it, but then she ends up staying until after dark. She is trying to convince everybody that we are a "thing", and every girl that steps up to me she attempts to start a fight with. Sometimes I think about calling our whole "friendship" off, but then I remember she is a pro at wrestling and has one plenty of competitions, and I, on the other hand, have never even won a thumb wrestling match.

When I asked for the pen she made a dramatic scene out of it. She held it high in the air saying that she is lending me her pen because she trusts me with it just like she trusts me with her heart. She then proceeded to blow kisses at me.

After a slow, painful hour and a half of listening to my English teacher discuss the first act of **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead**, where like the first ten pages of the act is spent entirely on two guys flipping one coin, the bell finally rings and I begin to walk to the boy's locker room to change for practice. Before I can enter the room, the coach stops me.

"Ay. Goalie Boy," I'm convinced that coach of three years does not know my name. I've never in my life heard him call me by it. "No practice today son," he says and then walks away without even giving a reason why. The school has an intercom for a reason coach, next time try to give the information before I walk all the way over to the locker room. Now I have to run to catch my bus because my sister already left since the seniors got to be released during fourth period.

I'm okay with riding the bus in the morning, but in the evening I'm always the second to last stop, so I have to sit on the uncomfortable springy seats for at least thirty minutes. As I climb the bus's stairs, I realize that

most of my friends have cars now. Great. I have to endure an entire bus rides with petty freshmen and sophomores. The bus is almost completely full, so now I have to sit by one of them too.

I walk down an aisle and see one kid who is in my math class. I think his name is Franklin. Or maybe Matthew. He's a little on the nerdy side, so hopefully once I sit by him we can become acquaintances, and later on I can get him to let me copy math or tutor me, but most likely copy.

As soon as I sit down, I recognize that I might have made a mistake. He scoots close to me and starts breathing obnoxiously through his nose. When I separate my lips to utter a polite "hello", he starts talking way too fast for me to comprehend a word that he is saying. I notice he has an annoyingly high nasal voice, and a retainer in his mouth, so with each word saliva sprints out of his mouth.

I must have somehow gone to sleep with all of the confusion because all of the sudden he starts to pinch my exposed elbow with his nails whispering, "You're here. You're here," when the bus stops at my house.

I jump up and run out the slowly opening doors. I will just accept my 'C' in math for now because there is no way I am going to take a risk into talking to that guy again.

I walk up my driveway, pass the Barbie mobile, and open the front door knowing it would be unlocked because Shanté never remembers that we try our best not to get robbed.

I step into the living room to see my sister on the couch with *the boy*. If I recall correctly, I do not remember seeing my mom's van or my dad's macho man truck outside. She lied about our parent's knowing. They would never leave her alone with a boy.

She jolts up when she sees me. Her hair is a little messed up. I wonder what they have been doing. "I-I can explain," she mumbles.

The boy, who is wearing raggedy sneakers on our nice wooden floors, walks towards me. We are about the same height; I can take him down if I need to. He extends his bony hand with a sheepish smile and says, "Hey sport! I'm Rowan. It's a pleasure to meet you," Sport? Do I look like someone to play with? Plus, I'm only a little bit younger than you. I examine his hand that's been floating in the air for about a minute now. His nails are yellowish and chipped. He probably doesn't even wash his hands; there is no way that I'm going to shake one of them.

He awkwardly puts his hand down. "I guess I better go now," he walks over to my sister and places his crusty lips on top of her forehead. Gross.

I expected my sister to rip my head off once he left, but she doesn't. Instead her head hangs down and she looks ashamed like a dog caught digging in the trash. "Please don't tell them," she whispers.

"On one condition," I say with a smirk.

She looks up and says skeptically, "And what's that?"

"You do my laundry."



*Helene Lovett*  
*2013*  
*High School Short*  
*Story Runner-Up*



## ***What They Did To Me***

Years ago, I entered the room of a pretty girl I'd been watching and she didn't even see me. The room had flowered wall paper with crinkles, as if it had been pasted on hastily. It was peeling and there was dark blue paint underneath. The girl was sitting at a wooden desk, in a straight-backed chair, her body imitating the chair in stiffness and stillness. I'd always thought this girl was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, and ignored all the other girls to watch her grow up. I spoke out to this young woman, I answered her prayers, the first time I'd answered anyone's prayers, ever, and she didn't respond. She didn't hear me. I told her that I'd try to keep her dad alive, as she'd asked, even though I couldn't actually, and I promised that I'd listen to her forever. I thought she'd like to hear the consolation, even if I couldn't do much for her. But she showed no sign of noticing. I screamed and cried for her, I made the wind howl, and she just sat at her desk, her voice silent and her mind silent. Her chin sank into her hands and she looked straight ahead. She was ignoring me. I wanted to strip her down to her underwear and throw her clothes to the wind like I used to do with girls when I was young but when I tried to I saw that I could not even alter a fold. She fell asleep and I tried to enter her through her dreams. But not even those were accessible to me anymore. Outraged, I made it rain harder, harder, and the water seeped through her door. I made the room come off of her small, rustic house, and as I hurled myself out into my wind at an incredible force, I overturned the entire structure, and left the house on its side. I took the roof with me and hoped that she was miserable and trapped underneath her house, still alive, her clothes compressed to her skin in a way that I hoped would make her feel naked and cold.

It used to be that the first thing girls did at night was talk to me, ask me questions, beg for things, and I never answered because I found all the whining repulsive. I couldn't stop their diseases, and I couldn't make them reproduce any more than their own miserable bodies could handle.

Now I go back to that overturned house on the field, and find it gone. Forty years swept it away. In its place is a supermarket, a few small shops, and roads that squirm around the buildings, that curve out from the

cluster in all directions. The buildings are so ugly that I can't believe I let all that time pass while grieving over the girl --I had allowed such wretched structures to be developed. I would have knocked them down while they were being erected to make them think that they were faulty, because now they're resistant to my rain, ice, and heat. I bang on their walls with every force I have and not even a flake of plaster or grain of cement comes falling down.

After the first attempt I collapse and stretch myself over the horizon, exhausted. But the next day I approach the grocery in the late afternoon, before closing time, and seal the doors with the wind. Then I go at it until dawn, as loud as I was in my early days, crafting a thrashing ocean above them. After an hour I finally get what I want: their voices, crystallized, trickling all over my body, weak and lumpy. I hear them from inside the walls, calling out to me --

Please, please let this be over. Let it end. We need to get home. Come on.

I'm euphoric. I make the storm harsher, I thrash louder, and in my joy I hear more voices, which is more pleasure, and I go harder again. Then for a moment I pause, and realize that the inside of my head is silent. Then I listen to the sounds outside of me, and I can hear



*The Student Short Story category was judged by **Tom Carson**, author of *Daisy Buchanan's Daughter*, and *GQ's "The Critic"*.*

*A story that is a wickedly smart and depressingly plausible guess about what the Big Guy -- or is that Gal? -- in The Sky really thinks of those who worship Him (or Her). Only when you reach the end do you realize how brilliant the story's title is, and that's how it's supposed to work. —Tom Carson*

the voices again.

Let it end. We need to get home.

I hadn't been hearing their thoughts, which is what I want, it's just their real, disgusting, wretched, slimy screams from inside the walls.

They repeat that all they want was for me to stop. So I do. I stop listening to everything and go back to the sky, the home they gave me. And then when no voices come to me, I realize that for a while now I have been seeking out their voices on my own, unintentionally extending my ears into the earth to make up for the sounds of thoughts that used to naturally come to me on their own, whenever they had something to ask of me.

Frantically I begin demolishing the clouds. I devour them and hurl the uneaten wisps away from me, only the way they slow when flung makes me angrier. I crave anything that will fill me up, fill me up until there is no room for my own thoughts. Once the clouds precipitate, fall to the bottom of my stomach, and slip out, I am anxious once more. I sit perched on the remaining clouds, gripping them in anger. But of course my fingers go through, and I continue to clench away my seat.

Not wanting to look down at the people down below, I reel back into memory of the old days once more. The days when there were fewer people on the planet but more voices, thoughts that came whizzing through the air to me, slipping inside my head on their own accord. I remember a day when an old man's voice came to me after his daughter's death, in thankfulness, for he was heartbroken about the death but glad I had taken over her before her boyfriend did. Little did he know I hadn't intentionally killed her. I'd just been fooling around with his daughter and her boyfriend, setting them up on roads that would intersect, seeing just how much damage I could do with placement and not realizing that the boy was a killer, a fact I missed because I could not hear his mind like her's. But once I watched the boy drag the body away and the father's voice came pleasantly drifting towards me, I laughed all into the night, and the father thought the storm I put on in my joy was a form of heavenly atonement for the the girl's death, which made me laugh more.

Everyone was so forgiving. Just like my parents, if I had parents, forgiving me no matter how frustrated I made them. All the people down below told me when my birthday was, too, in their thoughts. I have to believe them for the truthfulness of that date, because not one

of them even knows their own birth either. They rely on their parents to tell them their true birth date as well. But I don't understand why they like me so much. Almost every example of my power that they've documented has been a story of my bad temper, of my getting fed up with them. In fact I'm always mad. It's not something I tend to hide. The one story they all have is me drowning them all, the cruelest thing I've done to them, yet when they all divided and they all kept that one cruel story, and they all still loved me, revered me. Some called me father. Does a father enjoy drowning his children? Because I enjoyed drowning them. Even those who loved me out of fear at first began to genuinely admire me.

But I can no longer admire myself. Looking down at my arms dangling through the clouds, I examine my body for the first time in ages, and see that it resembles a bundle of thick, damp weeds. I remember when it used to be one unified, white hot skin. That was when I was a man with the sun tethered to my head. After that I remember a period of intense discomfort when my body was torn apart and I could no longer bear to look down at it, because though there was no physical pain, I was an ugly patchwork of skin, earth, moss, and lightning, and I have always valued beauty too much to watch ugly things.

But I drag myself back to the supermarket, where the people are still trapped inside, their voices now only whispers, raspy from thirst. They have food and chips and an assortment of fresh meat, but my storm tore up all the pipes and they lie leaking all around the building. Besides that, it is dry outside. I hear a beautiful voice with no body streaming:

Please, I just want to see my boyfriend. The voice cuts through air so tenderly that I imagine it belonging to the first girl I loved. But from this voice's pitch, I know she is a different girl, slightly younger. I picture her ugly and check to make sure that the stuck doors will stay that way for a few more days. It is dawn. Nobody has been able to reach those in the grocery through the storm, and those who I haven't hurled away in their cars when I was starting up are still curled in their houses. One by one, they awake, crawl out of their homes to their cars, and are tossed towards the sunrise by my nimble winds. As the people inside the supermarket die off, I watch chunks of dirt fall away from my body. But finally they are all dead and I am still here, a shadow on the clouds, biting at the floating forms to regain strength. It tastes awful but I picture their last dying moments and it gave me relish. I see that I am still a container for their trust.

***Helene Lovett is a student at Lusher Charter High School in New Orleans. She studies under poet Brad Richard, Director of Lushers' Creative Writing Program***

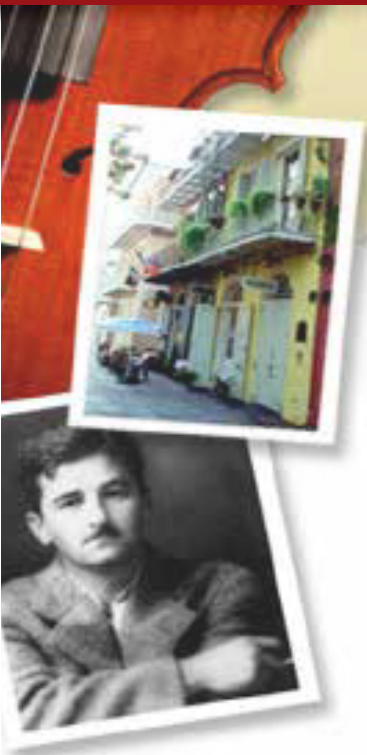


# 2012 Faulkner-Wisdom Competition Winners and Runners-up

**Novel \* Novella \***

**Novel In Progress \* Short Story \* Essay**

**Poetry \* High School Short Story**



*Marble Steps, photograph by Josephine Sacabo*

\_\_\_\_\_ 1993. Jerusalem. This is not a happy story, it does not end well, but it is my story, and I am here to tell it.

Allow me to introduce myself: Manya Zalinikov. Zalinikova, if I use the feminine form. Also, my husband, Yuri, my daughter, Galina. *Olim*, this is who we are, new Israelis. Since six months, we are here from our home in St. Petersburg, Russia for this reason: to live like Jews. This is what Yuri tells us. Learn to be Jewish, he says, after a lifetime of knowing that the less Jewish one is, the safer one is; after coming from a country where being Jewish is a birth defect.

The old Soviet Union is dead, the new Russia is a difficult place, but not as difficult as Israel. This country is like no other. It takes you in yet, you are never *in*, as a *sabra* – a native-born Jew -- is in. It takes you in, and then it breaks your heart.

Israelis are proud people -- chauvinists, my Hebrew language teacher called them. They want everyone who comes here from another country to love it. I have tried. I have passed dislike. I have passed distrust and confusion, without yet arriving at love.

In Russia I was a concert pianist, when I could find work; Yuri, a mathematician at The Academy, working with false identity papers one can buy for cash, papers with fancy gold stamps and a false religion: Christian. Galina was allowed to attend college, we were allowed a small *dacha* in a forest of pine trees. Here in Jerusalem I perform on the piano in a supper club, The White Nights, owned by a Russian with a murky background, meaning rich, and silent as to his history. Yuri studies how to be a Jew with a Reb, a teacher, who is brilliant, who knows he is brilliant, and considers me a creature who is beyond his powers of rescuing. Galina is at the university and, unless she marries, in danger of turning into a soldier, as happens with all

Israeli young people, except – and here there is irony – the fiercely religious.

I begin at the beginning, a day on which Amit, a clever young television director, of more than average good looks and intelligence, was rehearsing his people on the set of a not-yet-opened television show, **JSingles**,



Rochelle  
Distelheim

## 2012 Gold Medal for Best Novel Story



## Jerusalem as a Second Language

rehearsals, an absence of sleep, and from not knowing if the show would be a success. I was there with my friend, Ahuva, the Reb's wife -- a woman who is very much an un-Reb type of person, or how would we be friends -- following her with flash bulbs, film, cold water, as she used her camera. The Reb, in his satin robe, looked to me like a volcano draped in slippery white, on the tip of boiling over if one detail went wrong.

Everyone knew Amit was swept up with Jen, even the Reb, who had closed his lips to speaking about it. After

that matches young Israeli women with young Israeli men, everyone hoping for marriage. You may wonder why Galina did not put herself forward for this endeavor. My daughter requires hours to select a pair of shoes, a bracelet. the time she would require to select a husband.

The host of the show, Yuri's Reb Turrowtaub, who makes no secret of his ambition to be rich and famous, as well as holy. One month before, on a day of rehearsals for the show, appeared Jen, very beautiful, very Swedish, and pregnant, the father, a war hero, recently killed; hoping to honor her dead lover's religion by marrying a Jewish person. She met Amit, he met her, and they fell in love.

Consider this: geography, religion, sociology, psychology and, what in Russia we call *blood pull*, tell us that Jen and Amit would not meet. Having met, they should not have fallen in love. That they wished to marry, human beings being perverse, this country being complicated, was miraculous in its optimism.

To marry, to make a beginning, to say to the people you love, next year we will do such and such, and the year after we will do another such and such, in a country whose specialty is endings, is an act of courage, or, maybe a refusal to choose reality, when reality is too difficult. We Russians manufacture melancholy, we luxuriate in it. We export it. While Israelis, not yet my favorite persons, existing on a pinpoint of land surrounded by a sea of enemies, insist upon the normal; weddings, circumcisions, babies, concerts, museums, lectures, carnivals, zoos.

Let us return to the set of **JSingles**, on that day when the Reb's nerves were bitten off at the ends from long

the lunch hour, everyone standing around drinking coffee, I heard Amit tell Oze, his twin brother, also a director, that, before the summer was past, he'd marry with her.

"Does the Reb know?"

"He will, in five minutes."

The Reb's response was, "*Marry!*" His eyes bulging, veins purpling his neck. "I heard you correctly?" He wrung the neck of his plastic water bottle. "A Jew to a *non-Jew*?" Now his cheeks were a fierce red, but Amit — Amit was smoking, and looking calm.

"Marry with Jen-from-Sweden..." Three words, pronounced as one. "...who, if I am again correct, you met not one month ago?" Everyone on the set froze, silence came down like a heavy blanket. Ahuva brought a glass of cold water and two blood pressure pills, which the Reb swallowed without taking his eyes from the younger man.

"A crack in the foundation of the Jewish people," he continued. "One small crack, then a split, a split becomes a *meetmotet*." A cave-in. A wonderful word, I thought, writing it into my language notebook. It sounded exactly like what it meant.

"Ruth," Amit said, "think about Ruth, also a convert, also the Bible's most famous daughter-in-law and, let us not forget, a greatgrandmother."

From behind the musicians' stand, Oze whistled and applauded, calling out, "The kid grew up to be our very own King David, remember?"

The Reb asked, "Does your mother know what you are planning?"

His mother had recently died, said Amit, looking no more ruffled than did Rasputin, when accused of plotting against the Czar.

The Reb pounded onto a table. "Your mother," he hollered, "should be grateful she isn't here to see this." Ahuva reminded him of his health, and Amit said, "Go home, everybody, rehearsal is over."

The solution, reported to me by Ahuva, was sent down from the top. My fellow Russian, my employer, Dmitri Kanov, whose money, from nobody-knew-where, had bought for him the television station, was as lukewarm Jewish as I. Now he sent word that he loved controversy, audiences loved controversy.

Strong, opposite points of view made good publicity, which made good television shows, which, in turn, made good business.

Amit, he said, had the freedom to love anyone. From what Kanov knew of Jen, loving her made good sense. If she loved Amit back, well, then -- Ahuva and I puzzled over the missing end of his sentence. My interpretation was that it meant whatever anyone wanted it to mean, just do not make problems for **JSingles**. It also meant the Reb inviting us to coffee on Yehuda Mall to declare peace. Galina was included, because she was close to Jen's age and could possibly offer girl-to-girl friendship to sweeten the meeting.

And, so, on a blue and gold summer day, the birds slipping in and out of the budding trees, the perfect

example of a day never seen in St. Petersburg, we seven persons met on Ben Yehuda Mall, that lively pedestrian walkway with book stores and restaurants and shops selling everything from ice cream to t-shirts to jewelry and musical C.D.'s, one of my favorite happiness places in a city that is not often happy.

Jerusalem was not a city of street music; too anxious, poised always for something terrible to arrive. On most days nobody felt like music in their bones but, on that day, on the corner, a stringy-looking young man in need of a bath played his guitar, and a young girl with dark, tangled hair and a curious, oval-shaped scar across one cheek, in orange and red and gold silk somethings, shook a tambourine and collected coins from the crowd, which she slipped inside her brassiere, or what she wore instead of a brassiere. Neither of these young people looked Israeli, but who *does* look what is called Israeli?

We watched the musician and the gypsy for a long, silent time. Strangers, we couldn't jump in with, "So, your mother isn't well," or, "I saw your son at the mall yesterday, with what looked like a beautiful girl." Finally, the Reb, in his television voice, said, "Well, well, just imagine," and we all laughed in a hollow way, like smiling at the ceiling of an elevator to avoid making foolish talking with the other passengers.

The Reb led us down the mall to a sidewalk table at the Blue Bird Café, and I watched Galina watching Jen, with her bright yellow hair, like a silk waterfall, her big, wide-awake, yet dreamy eyes, and, over it all, a look of wise innocence.

My daughter said nothing, but I knew, by the way she focused her attention on the other young woman's hair, clothes, nails, that she found much to admire. Was she the smallest slice jealous, I wondered, that this girl, not Jewish, not Israeli, not Russian, had captured this splendid young man? Difficult to say from the outside. Galina was a talented actress.

Jen that day was like a shaft of light, wearing something white and gauzy. Galina's clothes leaned in the direction of the theatrical: orange knit blouse, a short but complicated skirt, flowered in red and yellow, a silk scarf tied around her throat. She and Jen, seated opposite one another, leaned across the table to talk, Galina doing most of the talking, since her Hebrew, as bumpy as it was, was better than Jen's. Two cell phones rang in the same second, at a nearby table. "Did you know that Israel is where cell phones were invented," Galina said, "which is why our babies get their first one in the hospital nursery?"

Jen laughed and took a fiery red instrument out of her bag, passing it among us. "A present," she said, patting Amit's arm. This very small machine fit into a palm, and was meant to make and receive telephone calls, but it made other, even more magical things. On a tiny pad on the front of the phone, Jen typed in Swedish the date and position of our café, pushed a button, and the words burst onto the screen in Hebrew. Push another button, the machine wrote in English, delighting everyone.

"Do you have a phone like this?" Jen asked Yuri, as if she knew he was a mathematician, and loved new



inventions.

Yuri's smile was tight, but friendly. Since the beginning of his new life in prayer, in which he thanked God every morning for not making him a woman, he was not at peace with ladies who appeared to be too technological. He shook his head. "This kind of miracle is expensive."

Jen laughed in her attractive, but careless way. Amit said something about what is money for, and kissed her shoulder. Galina scrutinized Jen, sending eye signals to me, announcing approval of what she saw.

Yuri looked away, his eye tic ticking his discomfort. The Reb's responsibility as host clicked into place. He jumped to his feet, raising his coffee cup. "To the happiness of the couple," he said, a hundred million miles away from his first response to Amit's marrying an un-Jew. A general murmuring agreement floating around the table, we clicked cups with one another. Amit hugged Jen, and looked at her as though, if he looked away, she might vanish. Galina took out a notebook and wrote, probably a reminder to herself to remind her current suitor, Asher, she would love to own Jen's miracle telephone.

Here now, the bitter coincidence in my story. In this city of one-half million persons, and an equal number of cafes, on that afternoon, at a table some meters beyond ours, but close enough for me to observe, sat a slender man with an ordinary face, not young, not old, wearing one of those stiff black hats that sit unnatural, high on the head, a black silk coat, the white fringe of his *tzitzis* swinging below his shirt. The *tzitzis* I did not see until he stood up but, seeing the hat, seeing the beard, I knew this was a case of *tzitzis*.

The beard: heavy, dark, not trimmed to a point and romantic-looking, like Yuri's, or even like Czar Nicolas' beard, but thick and squared and long, and side curls that bounced in a manner that was both comic and serious, and were, in a strange way, sweet-looking when he turned his head to call the waitress. All in all, an ordinary Orthodox look, in a place where this man was among his own.

And, yet, *something*. I whispered to Yuri, "Isn't that man too young to look so old?"

He frowned, and whispered back, "Manya, *please*."

Since his change from our family's un-Jewishness, *Manya, please*, has become his principal declaration to me when I remark in public upon anyone in black clothing. Or, in private, on why the monthly visit to the *mikvah* insulted women. Or, on why refusing to eat milk products and meat products together was accepting the medieval amidst the twentieth century.

"That man is fully Israeli," he said.

I leaned past Yuri, hoping to reach Galina. Still writing, her nose in her notebook, she hadn't noticed this man. She ignored all men in black. They were beyond her ability to understand, primitives, unfriendly to women,

why should she acknowledge them?

*Why?* Because they were there, and we were there, and every molecule occupying a single Israeli iota changed the emotional temperature of the country. Just as the beggars posted at the entrance to the central post office in St. Petersburg changed the way we entered and exited from that building, making certain to have coins to drop into their hands. Just as the *babushkas* seated in the corners of every gallery in the Hermitage Museum changed the way we'd enjoyed the art: *Do not touch, do not stand too close, do not sneeze, cough, sniff on any object other than another person.*

The man was now wearing sun glasses while reading his newspaper, shifting the paper every few moments, reading it upside down, as often as rightside up. Strange, but true, most Israelis' nerves were so jangled by everyday events, reading a paper upside down could be a result. Should I report him, like I'd report a suspicious package sitting in the post office, looking like it belonged to nobody? Report him for doing *what?* This man was not a package; he was an Orthodox.

I looked around for someone whose arm I might grab, someone where I could whisper, *Shhh, there, that man in black, does he look wrong to you?* Would an Israeli believe a Russian? Yuri fussed with his wristwatch, shaking it to assure that the time was correct, and Ahuva reminded the Reb to put only one sugar in his coffee, and Jen said, "Where, please, the bath-room?"

I said, "Me, too." Jen was the one, if my Hebrew could penetrate her Hebrew. She would understand.

When we stood up, Galina said, wait for her. In my mind even a small exodus from the table would put a cold towel on the party atmosphere, which was already teetering. I whispered that the bathroom was for one lady at a time, possibly the wrong information, but she nodded. On my side was the fact that public rest rooms in Russia were scarce, inconvenient, and dirty.

Jen slipped her arm through mine, as easily as she would with an old friend, smiling her sweet, radiant smile that so loudly announced her happiness. "Come, come, Missus Zalinikov..." She laughed. "I said it correctly?" I felt a warm wave of affection for this brave young woman, thousands of miles from her family, now eager to move on into a new version of her life, as though she, like Israel, refused to be beaten down. She struck me as having a wisdom I had not yet discovered. Maybe I never would. Maybe she'd be willing to tutor me, to infect me with her optimism.

We walked together to the restaurant building, not ten meters from our table, passing the man in black, who had a look of happy expectation on his face, or what I could see of his face, all that beard to hide in. Jen went inside, but I stopped at the entrance to look back at him. He stood up. I thought, *good, he's leaving*. But no. He didn't walk away.

I continued in the doorway, just inside the restaurant, holding the door open to see what he'd do next.

He called out to the waitress, "Please, a glass of water." In this same moment, a small bird with a shimmering blue head flew onto the tip of the umbrella shading his table. The waitress, a slender young girl with pale, silky curls all over her head, a starched white apron over her blue jeans and t-shirt, and a springy walk that announced good health, brought the water. To look at her was to know that somewhere, even if they lived in a far-away time zone, was a family that telephoned her often, just to inquire about her happiness, and to say, "Good night, we love you."

I continued holding the door open. The bird was pecking at the yellow umbrella as though someone had planted it with bird seed. The man drank the water, dropping the glass, or throwing it, a crash that caught everyone's attention, except the bird's. Then he said, very loud, to no one, to everyone, in Hebrew more poorly accented even than mine, "Goodbye. I will not see you again," before thrusting one hand inside his jacket, and throwing himself forward.

The sky shook, the earth rocked, birds flying over must also have rocked. Bright light shone everywhere, so much brightness, it lifted up the man in black, exploding him into bits and pieces of bone and flesh that splattered onto the tables and chairs, until there was no man left, only a body without a head or arms. All around him, or what was left of him, where people one second before were eating and laughing and telephoning and kissing, there was empty air above, bloody pools and body parts below.

Glasses, dishes, pitchers flew off the shelves at the waiter's station behind me, windows cracked, some blew away, along with the door, knocking me to the ground. A man hollered, "Everybody, be calm, sit." He didn't mean me. I had to go out. Yuri was out, Galina was out, but he pulled at me and screamed there would be more explosions, come back, stay inside. I went.

A man shouted, "*Pigua, pigua! Terrorist!*" Then an eerie silence, the earth holding its breath, followed by three shrieks of a siren, as sudden as a gunshot. Two shrieks were an everyday sound, announcing an everyday ambulance coming through, carrying someone with an everyday heart attack, a baby impatient to be born. Three blasts meant terror attack. Three blasts meant: once again.

A woman was crying; a sound beyond anything human, beyond pain, beyond grief, as if sorrow had been given its own voice. She wouldn't stop and wouldn't stop, until I called out, "No more, please!" and realized, as I

kicked something soft, a hand with four fingers, that the voice was me. Then bodies to step over, some without faces. My right eye felt stabbed. I touched it. My hand came away with blood.

Ahuva and Amit were slumped over our table, not moving; the Reb was underneath, murmuring something I didn't understand. Yuri, lying on his back, stared at the sky, his jacket and shirt shredded, blood running from an opening in his throat, splashing onto the bird lying next to him, now without its shimmering blue head. Galina, one minute lying flat down, the next, sitting up, looked at me with a face heavy with blood, her stunned eyes registering that she had never seen me before.

Down on my hands and knees, I begged Yuri, "Breathe in, out, in. Breathe." *Don't die before I tell you how much you are loved.* He struggled to take in air, I thumped on his chest, which did nothing except give me something to do. I wiped Galina's face with her silk scarf, tying the ruined fabric around her head so that only her eyes showed up. The wild bird trapped inside my chest beat its wings, trying to get out. In minutes, less than minutes, ambulances screamed onto the mall, as though all morning they had waited around the corner, knowing, with that sorrowful Israeli knowing, that, sooner or later, something terrible would happen. Why go home, why bother to take the ambulances into the garage? They will be needed again.

All around me, cell phones rang and rang and no one answered. News played on the radio and the television day and night in this country, a country smaller than Belarus or the Ukraine. Everyone listened. Everyone expected tragedy, and all the phones worked. A bomb gets exploded, and everyone called everyone they loved.

The everyones I loved, besides Yuri and Galina, were my friend, Nadia, who was that day in Eilat, and my American-turned-into-an-Israeli friend, Yael, in her office. Should I call? *We're fine, my eye bleeds and Yuri's throat is slit, Galina's face is in pieces, but we're able to move, there are no big pieces of shrapnel or nails in important parts of our bodies. If there are, they're lying quiet.* My cell phone was in my purse, and my purse blew out of my hand when I fell.

Now came the police and the fire people, and the experts in explosives to search for other bombs. Then the Zaka workers, who began at once the work of cleaning up. Israelis are efficient people.



*Jeff Kleinman with Rochelle Distelheim  
at Words & Music 2012*

Have you seen these *Zaka* men executing their dance without music? Men in yellow and black vests, skull caps, white gloves, carrying plastic bags, peeling scraps of flesh and bone from under the tables, the chairs, scraping from the few whole windows that remained, scooping from the bloody river running down the street, wading into the ankle-high sea of broken glass that surrounded everywhere, to pick, pick.

"Remnants," I heard these men say, "collect every remnant." Every pinpoint scrap of human being must be buried, with the body or without. Did you know intestines are yellow? Have you ever seen an arm or leg lying on the ground, attached to only air? And this: DNA. The DNA of a hand, even an ear, a finger, can connect a body part to a body, to a life that was, up to the moment of the explosion, busy at the business of living.

Men wearing masks to keep out the stench of burned flesh, a smell strangely like the smell of rotting food, carried out the people on stretchers. Bleeding bodies and ringing pockets. I saw a young girl in an apron smeared with blood, and blue jeans, a head of curls, passing too quickly for me to ask: Alive? Farther off, the ambulances waited. A man in a white coat made wild gestures with his arm, calling to the rescuing people, "Don't give me the dead ones, bring out the injured." A pair of wet brown boots stopped next to me. I looked up, into the face of a young girl medic person. "Are they alive?" she said. "We're taking out the living ones first."

The funeral was the following day, Jewish law requiring burial within twenty-four hours. Just as well. So many Jews being killed every day, this way the burial teams can keep up, the roads into and out of the cemeteries don't get clogged. Even in hell, details are important.

Amit's family owned an area in the small garden cemetery on the western edge of the city. Jen and I went. The ceremony was short and terrible, in Hebrew, Jen not a part of it, nothing. His mother, also red-haired, was not, as Amit had told the Reb, dead but, after burying her child, wished she could be. Jen wanted to say something to this woman, she didn't know what, some word of recognition, of alliance. They had, after all, both loved the same young man. Oze, looking like he couldn't remember where he was, or why, tried to help, but his mother looked at no one and said nothing, her face frozen into deep furrows of grief.

The Reb and Ahuva were minor miracles; serious scrapings, a broken wrist, a twisted neck, damaged ribs, singed hairs. My eye was bandaged; a good thing, because this way my tears spilled from only one side. I ran outside too fast, the doctor told me, didn't I know any better? "Doctor," I said, "please understand. This was my first suicide bombing. I'll do better the next time."

Two weeks later, Yuri and Galina were still in the hospital, his throat stapled together, living on blood from people we never met; light ones and dark ones, rich ones

and not-so rich, most of them speaking languages I didn't understand. So much blood, so many people, we'll never be able to thank everyone.

I played the what-if game in my mind, with Galina. What if we'd sat down at another café? What if we'd sat at another table, farther back, farther out? What if I'd said, yes, when she asked to go with me to the women's room? What if we'd never come to Israel?

Her room was down the hall from Yuri's. She had, in the first ten days, many times surgeries. To save her face, the surgeon said, also to pick out the nails from the bomb, and the flying metal and glass from everywhere. She'll have a scar, he said, running the nail of his pointing finger from the corner of his eye to his mouth. I asked, how deep, how wide, how bad? He shrugged. "It isn't fatal, so how could it be bad?"

*Only a face.* I imagined him thinking this, especially on a day when he perhaps sewed a finger back onto a hand, or stitched a kidney, a stomach, back into somebody's body. I did not say this to anyone but myself: one person's *only* is another person's *everything*.

Those first days, my bed was the floor of Yuri's room; the beep-beeps of his monitors, the squeak of the nurses' shoes moving down the hall, these were my lullabies. Lying alone, I thought terrible thoughts about not being able to go on, about why were we here – *why*? Israel was dying, I sobbed one night to Yuri, who blinked. He heard me. I wanted to go home, my real home. I'd never felt so alone, so sinned against, so angry.

Nadia came with a bottle of red wine. "To help you feel more human," she said, "especially when taken with music, possibly a nice view of the ocean."

"Where nearby is an ocean?" I said. "Do you see an ocean?"

She sniffed at the air: soap, disinfectant, floor wax. "The smells in here could kill you."

Yael came, with her uplifting outlook that usually rescued me; but not that day. She brought a pink flowering plant for Yuri, a book of Israeli poetry for Galina, plus a bag filled with the newest fashion and movie person magazines, "for her less intellectual moments."

"How are you holding up?" she asked me, in the hallway, away from Yuri's hearing.

"I'm not."

"These are terrible challenges."

*Challenges?* A psychology word, a word for people who don't know what it feels like to be blown up. "Challenge means something difficult to do, with the promise of a reward at the end. My reward is a husband living on borrowed blood and a daughter with a ruined face."

"Both alive, both recovering."

"I want to lay down on the floor and howl, I want to..."

"But there *is* a reward." She pulled me to her, an un-Yael thing to do. "Now you're one of us, more *sabra* than *olim*."

"You invite me into your exclusive club of



survivors of terrorist attacks?"

"You invited yourself, you went through the initiation."

"So, I uninvite myself. I was never one to join clubs."

Jen came to say goodbye, looking that day like a woman who had forgotten about details like lipstick, or making up her eyes. Even her hair, pulled back with a rubber twister, looked without life. "I could have saved him," she said. I didn't agree, but I didn't argue. She was going home to Stockholm, to reflect on how everyone she loved ended up dying.

"Not your baby," I said.

The doctors called Yuri's wounds superficial. Not true. Nothing about being blown up is superficial. I asked my husband if he knew what the Reb was saying under that table when the bomb went off. I stayed with minutiae, clinging to the ordinary. The *shema*, he said, the prayer for the dying carried by Jews into the gas chambers in the camps.

"Where did you learn these things? You have only just now become a Jew."

He smiled, a pale, melancholy kind of smile that left his eyes unsmiling; his birth gift from being born a Russian. I squeezed his hand to say what I couldn't say: All the talking we went through about his God not being my God, unimportant.

Now, the question that plagued me, still plagues me. What decides on a daily basis who is to go on living, who is to die? Luck decides. Good luck says: live. Bad luck says: die. As harsh and final and unfair as that. Don't tell me about the Book of Life. I like my answer better. If I could choose between being born with the gene for luck, or the gene for wealth, or power, or talent, or even intelligence, I would choose luck. I would choose the *mazel* gene.

My second question was this: The Jews have been chosen, the scholars say. We have an obligation to carry out God's commandments, to demonstrate that we choose Him, they say; to demonstrate that we honor our covenant with Him.

Chosen? *For this?*

If any of you out there speak with Him on a regular basis, please, the next time I want you to say, "Hey, Mr. Big Shot, I have a message from my friend, Manya Zalinikova. Take a minute from your important God work, look down, you'll see her, a dark-haired woman in her over-the-middle forties, usually wearing something red, now with an eye bandage."

Tell Him I appreciate His good intentions. He meant well, but ask Him to leave us alone to live our lives in whatever decent way is still possible, one day into the next, no special connections or special memberships with

special groups up there where He lives. Ask Him for me to unchoose us, please.

**Rochelle Distelheim's** novel, **Jerusalem As a Second Language**, won the Faulkner Society's Gold Medal for Novel-in-Progress in 2004. This year, it placed as First Runner Up in the Novel category. Her work has been published in numerous literary journals; among these: *The North American Review*, *Nimrod*, *Other Voices*, *Story Quarterly*, *Descant* and *Confrontation*, and has been widely anthologized. She has been awarded five Illinois Arts Council Fellowships in Fiction and her other literary awards include the Katharine Anne Porter Prize in Fiction. Her work has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In 2010 a chapter of **Song of Sol**, her current novel-in-progress, was a Finalist in *Press 53's* Open Awards Competition.

## Novel: OTHER FINALISTS

### **After the Octopus**

Mark Spitzer, Conway, AR

### **A Perfect Day for an Expat Exit**

Robert Raymer, Sarawak, Malaysia

### **A Summer's Lynching**

Juan Reyes, Tuscaloosa, AL

### **Flasher**

Susan Levi Wallach, Columbia, SC

### **Good Neighbors**

Helen Scully, New Orleans, LA

### **Little Egypt**

Susan Isaak Lolis, Atlanta, GA

### **Lords of An Empty Land**

Randy Denmon, Monroe, LA

### **Shriver**

Chris Belden, Ridgefield, CT

### **Thanksgiving**

Mary Arno, Clarence Center, NY

### **The Frog Surgeon**

Dean Pascal, MD, New Orleans, LA

### **The Garvis Papers**

Garic Barranger, Covington, LA

### **Travels in Vermeer**

Michael White, Wilmington, NC

### **Waking the Dead in Music City**

Dana Brantley-Sieders, Nashville, TN



*Anonymous*  
*2012*  
*Novel Runner-Up*

## **Mr. Jesus Cleanup**



(An excerpt from Chapter 14)

Donald said he would charge the estate if he sent a team from JesusCleanup over to empty out our mother's house. I told him never mind, that \$600 for a mop and a prayer was completely unnecessary when half of that money was mine. I thought it would be a lot more fun to ask the women who'd sat with Mama after the last stroke if they wanted to come join me while I worked, if they didn't have new jobs. They all had new jobs, and they all didn't care. Sitting was different, they said. They'd still come. Besides, I had to work in short shifts. There was a limit to how much of my past I could face in a day. I would work in the afternoon, after time in my studio. If I wanted to keep going after four hours, I would get Tizzy. I suggested that Donald not charge me for his wife's time. If he did, I would prorate what I earned for my work and charge him for my time. I told him he wouldn't want to live with knowing how much I was worth.

I was going slowly. Based on professional experience, Donald thought I should gut the house in two days.

"You may be a professional locust, but I'm not," I said. "This house is personal."

He was fuming because I said we couldn't sell anything. He wanted to sell everything. Never mind that the contents of the house were probably worth hundreds of thousands of dollars and should have been divided carefully between us for our houses. *After* being valued by an appraiser. It was all antiques, and Donald was waiting for cash so he could redecorate with sleek contemporary design pieces like the ones he saw featured in *Inside Out*. "I can't imagine one of those people at your half of the funeral liking that kind of house," I told him. We'd had separate ceremonies, an hour apart.

"I'm not inviting the people I serve to my house," he said. "Though those people would think Mother's antiques are hideous."

Donald wanted to live in two worlds. And he wouldn't

be the first. It was possible to make the society pages by selling vampires, Mercedes, and fried chicken, so why not mindless godliness? Of course, his kids would never have the pedigree that comes from a parent who practices law or real estate development, but his great-grandchildren would. In New Orleans money eventually got old.

His Gracie loved her Gammy's house. I'd seen her when she was a tiny girl walk through claiming she was a princess in a palace, begging my mother to give her the grandfather clock. I remembered the clock chiming on Cinderella. I'd thought it had eyes.

I worked at all the small things, the papers and the consumables. My mother hadn't expected to die. Whoever was helping me on a particular day took home whatever was in the pantry or in the cabinet or closet we attacked. "I'm giving away linens," I told Donald. "Are they used?" he said. I told him yes, whether they were or not. It was better that these women take them home and give them away than that Donald get a few dollars off his tax return. He would never use them himself, because linens were for women. As were canned goods and over-the-counter painkillers and unguents. I did the papers myself. One at a time, struggling when I threw away anything with her handwriting. I wondered if she knew when she wrote on those pages that one day I would have this trouble. I had a feeling that she did, and that she expected I would throw such pages away just as she had in life. I found an unopened packet of file folders, to me evidence that she planned to do what she'd left to me. I made categories. I tried to save as little as possible. My daughter Klea was going to have to throw all of this away one day. Mama saved a lot of sentimental stuff, clippings and notes. Not so much business; in fact very little business that ever needed tending to again. She would never need to balance her checkbook.

Each day when I went home, I took away everything that needed to go into recycling or trash. I left the house looking exactly as it had when my mother left it. I would empty out everything that was closed, clear off

all surfaces. Sheets and soup were easy. Then one day I made Tizzy come over to talk so I could figure out what to do about china and silver and paintings. I said this was the first time I needed her. She told me that Donald said it was all right, as long as he had dinner when he came home. I said I'd give her the number of Five Happiness Chinese Restaurant on Carrollton Avenue. They even had a reserved parking spot for pickup.

"What makes you think I have any say in what you do with all her good stuff?" Tizzy said when we had flopped back on Mama's French directoire sofa that was designed more for sitting with one's knees pressed together.

I opened my eyes wide at her. When we were young friends, that was all it took. The message I sent was that this wasn't the reason she was there.

"Oh!"

"Really, I don't want to screw around," I said. "Donald probably only wants a price tag on everything. Unless I've got the Holy Grail in the kitchen cabinet, he doesn't care what goes where. So no need for dividing up."

Tizzy was trying to give me a neutral look. But it wasn't working. She was slipping into a smile.

"So we can get down to real business?" I said.

The only way I can describe what came next is to say that Tizzy's face kind of popped open. "Okay, I'll spill it," she said. "I told you I'd tell you, so we're alone, so I'll tell you."

And then she told me what happened in the three minutes between my leaving their house with Donald having refused to have my mother taken off life support, and Donald calling my cell phone to tell me he'd changed his mind.

"I said to him, 'Goddammit,' yeah I said 'goddammit,' 'goddammit, you know you want your mother dead; you probably made her drop dead practically twice; the woman's got blood pressure out the wazoo; all it takes is a teaspoon of salt and a lot of screaming; and if you want all that money, you might as well get it now. You want to get really rich, you need to start out rich, and you know it.'"

"Holy shit," I said.

"I'm getting sick of all this, if you want to know the truth," Tizzy said.

"You know whose side I'm on."

She actually looked up at me to be sure I meant it. The poor woman had been messed around with for so long that she'd grown to believe Donald when he said he was her only true advocate. He had taken her away from me, and she'd come to believe I respected him for that. Part of his and my divided universe law. If she tried to break from him, she thought, I would say she was wrong, and he was right. But I would never be on his side unless he were running for office against a Nazi or maybe a Republican. Never.

The sofa definitely wasn't a seat for hugging, but I slid over and put my arms around Tizzy and held her for a long time.

We went through all the china and silver and decorative crystal and paintings. I told Tizzy that as executor I was acting on behalf of the grandchildren. I had no clue what was going to become of Klea and Levi, but it seemed to me that Gracie had all the makings of an aesthete who would one day cherish her grandmother's treasures. If her father sold all these carefully collected antiques of the future, just so he could be a little man with a lot of cash, he would be robbing his own child.

I would rent a climate-controlled storage locker for the grandchildren. I would get one on a high floor so no Katrina could destroy their legacy. I knew Donald would say the estate would be paying out storage fees instead of collecting interest, and I would counter that that was too bad, that some things didn't have a price tag. And besides, if his children and mine grew up to be craven fools like him and chose to sell everything, they would get a lot more money than he would get now, even allowing for inflation, so there.

Tizzy just shimmered with love for me that afternoon. She still loved her old Donald, and she wasn't going to do anything rash. All of this was unspoken, but I knew her so well, and I was satisfied. I might even tell her my secrets one day soon. Once I figured out exactly what my secrets were.

"The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays."

—Soren Kierkegaard





*David Samuel Levinson*  
*2012*  
*Novel Runner-Up*



## ***Antonia Lively Breaks the Silence***

We thought ourselves good people who lived good lives. Some of us had lived in the town for generations and had never considered leaving. Many of us, though, had relocated there from the city, in the process learning what it was like to desert the place we loved, longed for, and hated. Winslow wasn't a big town and couldn't offer the charms of Manhattan, nothing as remarkable as the rooftops at twilight or Central Park in the rain. While many of us had grown sick of the city's neon signs and glass towers, many others of us put up photos to remind ourselves daily of what we missed.

No one came to Winslow looking for variety: we had one museum, the Finch; a community theater, the Vortex; and only a handful of restaurants, outstanding though they were. Two blocks long, Broad Street consisted of Page Turners, the local bookstore; Mayfair Cinema; Custard's Last Stand; a barbershop; a laundrette; and Einstein's Video & Arcade. Not far from there—nothing was that far—was Breedlove Hardware; College Breads; Maddox Cafe; and Tint, the bar and restaurant connected to the historic Tweed & Twining Arms hotel. Then there was the heart of the town, Winslow College, giving reason to the place, the lure that had drawn many of us there, to teach and to study.

Some who came were either running from combative or cheating spouses, while others were just running. Some ended up staying; others gave it six months or less before the moving trucks arrived and took them away. We saw the trucks and shook our heads. "You haven't given it enough time," we said. "One more day!" One more day, though, might become one more year, and those who fled already had grown tired of the things they'd initially come for, the quiet, the cordial hellos in the morning and the good—evenings at night. Those who didn't last wanted what we didn't have and could never offer—invisibility.

I knew this only because, once, I had been one of them. I, too, had come there from the city but not to escape the barrage of sirens and chattering crowds—things I'd cherished, at least in memory. I came to Winslow out of love; I followed my heart.

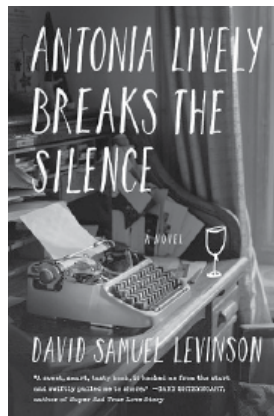
That was years ago now. For the first year, I hated our house and the town and my heart for luring me there. Yes, my life in the city might have been stressful and chaotic, but it had also been blessed. There was spontaneity, and there were friends and dancing and cocktail parties. I liked parties back then, when I was younger. It was an exciting time. I thought about myself as a writer, filled with promise. Promise, though, has a way of never happening, and much of what followed was painful, though not nearly as painful as this story I'm about to tell.

"The action of any good story," Wyatt used to say, "always begins in the middle."

This story, my story, however, began long before the events in Winslow, before I met Antonia Lively. It began long before Henry Swallow moved to town. Although it's my story, it began in 1968, set in motion by two brothers in a cabin in the woods. I didn't know any of this until later, though. I didn't know any of this until I'd read Antonia's novel and gradually wove each individual story together—the brothers Linwood and Royal's, Henry's, Antonia's, Wyatt's, Catherine's, mine—into this one, ours.

Wyatt also used to say there weren't any fixed rules in writing. I know now, though, that you have to learn the rules first before you can break them. Learn about voice, plot, and point of view. Learn about imagery, setting, and character. Learn all of these things—then let the story dictate how it wants to be told, and never get in the way, because it's not about you, the writer. It's about the relationship between the story and the reader. Give the reader a good story, and he'll forgive just about everything else.

I spent years reading through Henry's criticism and Wyatt's lectures, absorbing and learning these rules of theirs. This story is the result. If I am a writer, it is because I had no other choice. If I tell this story well, if it rings true, it's because all of our voices that summer and, over time, became one. The reader, though, will be the judge. For now, this story's as close to the truth as I can get, and that, I'm afraid, will simply have to do.



Charles, the cabdriver, pulled up to the main entrance of the LSU arena. He told Jacinto it was the largest hurricane shelter in Baton Rouge. Inside, families in dirty or ill-fitting clothes slumped against the walls and the aluminum doors of the concession stands, eating sandwiches and drinking bottled water. Jacinto considered asking about the registration area, but their empty stares, in addition to how comparatively clean and well-dressed he was, made him self-conscious. He searched for someone in a uniform. He circled the concession area completely and then followed a man out onto the court, where a few thousand people sat on cots and sleeping bags. A woman's voice droned announcements over a loudspeaker. He stopped at the edge of the court, under the basketball hoop. The febrile human stink, a smell he associated with El Salvador, caught him by surprise. The people appeared weak and tired and some were obviously sick. Most of the cots were reserved for the elderly, many of them attached to IVs. He had witnessed much worse in El Salvador, of course, but *here* the scene felt extraordinary. Until then, part of him had not fully believed the disaster, watching it as one might a bad Armageddon movie where the Statue of Liberty was certain to appear missing an arm.

He carefully made his way down a narrow aisle between rows of blankets and sleeping bags. A middle-aged brunette with varicose veins running starkly down her pale legs turned the pages of a celebrity magazine, the man lying next to her staring up at the ceiling of the arena with one hand behind his head. Old men sat in foldout chairs playing cards. A black woman man lay next to a little boy, slowly reading him a story, though the boy was already asleep. At the opposite end of the court, a group of girls jumped rope, their shouts rising sporadically over the din of murmurs. As he had entered the arena, Jacinto briefly fantasized about meeting Manuel in a place like this. He would be the sturdy older brother at last, here to carry out the swift rescue. Something Manuel and the rest of the family would never be able to forget: he, Jacinto, had come from El Salvador to help him in his great time of need. But now the possibility of actually finding Manuel



*Daniel Castro*

## 2012 Gold Medal for Best Novella



## Inspection

woman sitting at his feet methodically bit off the flesh of a bruised peach as she stared at him. She bore a slight resemblance to Patricia, the maid he'd been sleeping with. He wanted to speak, but no words came. The feeling made him uneasy; diplomacy was one thing, but with his own people he was not accustomed to hesitation.

Jacinto asked Charles to take him to every shelter he knew of, stopping at some of the downtown hotels in between. They criss-crossed Baton Rouge on backstreets to avoid the traffic, swollen with evacuees. They visited decaying high schools and community centers that

there, however unlikely, filled him with an anxious hope. What if, by some wild coincidence, he really was there? Imagining his niece and nephew, Alex a young man now, Katie almost a teenager, their voices changed, stung him briefly with regret.

He walked the entire length of the court, his faux leather, imitation Kenneth Coles clacking on the hardwood, attracting more of the empty, zombie-like stares. He had never seen so many Americans gathered together, and it surprised him how unremarkable they looked. The only tall blonde he spotted was haggard and bony with ugly tattoos on her arms, her eyes not even blue. He noticed as many blacks and Hispanics and Asians as whites. A large number of the men were overweight, a few even shorter than himself. They were bald and blemished and the hair on their backs poked out at the necklines of shirts emblazoned with the faded logos of professional sports teams. Children slid across the gym floor in dirty socks, shouting and viciously tagging each other.

Passing a group of Latinos huddled in a corner of the gym, he immediately identified their accents as Central American. He stopped, and they looked up at him. Small and dark-skinned, they had the impassive terracotta faces of *campesinos*, the kind that stood on the highway between Cojute and San Salvador selling fresh coconut and mango *en alguaishte*. Two families, Jacinto guessed. They wore ill-fitting clothes that had obviously belonged to gringos: shirts from senior proms and decathlons, a camouflage baseball cap with an insignia of deer antlers across the front. In El Salvador, the only time he would've interacted with them was on the highway or in the market. The

were not vastly superior, Jacinto thought, to those in San Salvador. Like the arena, the gymnasiums all shared the same rank human odor, the one that reminded him of home. The people drank water from plastic bottles and ate bologna sandwiches or MREs issued by the National Guard, and generally wore the same dazed look of waiting on their faces.

Jacinto started leaving messages for Manuel at the shelters. *I am in Baton Rouge*, he wrote in the first, *in order to represent the country in a matter of urgent government business. After years of service to the Republic, I was honored to be handpicked by the Attorney General himself for this diplomatic mission. I am concerned for you and the well-being of your family, and have neglected a few of my scheduled duties in order to search for you. If you need anything at all—money, shelter, food—or simply have an opportunity to let us know you are safe, please do not hesitate to contact me at this number or address.* He read over it several times and, satisfied with his magnanimity, signed it with the flourish he normally saved for official documents. The messages that followed were shorter: *Manuel, I am in Baton Rouge as an emissary of the Republic* and *Manuel, I am in Baton Rouge to further environmental cooperation between the U.S. and El Salvador.* At the last shelter, he wrote *I am* and stared at it on the Post-It the woman at the registration table had given him.

“You sure your friend is in Baton Rouge?” Charles asked, peering at him in the rearview mirror. It was nearly evening, Jacinto having agreed to hire him for the entire day.

“Where else?”

Charles let out a chuckle. “Where else? Anywhere. Houston, Atlanta, Memphis. They had buses taking people to Nebraska. American Airlines flying people to Washington for free. Washington state—way over there on the Pacific.”

The region containing the three cities Charles mentioned was tremendous enough, but for Jacinto to imagine Nebraska and Washington as possible destinations, and thus, Kansas and Maine, Montana, and Georgia, left him momentarily saddled with the kind of despair he had experienced while studying maps of the country before his trip, the insurmountable monstrosity of it, Florida and the Yucatan opening like jaws around the Gulf of Mexico, and made him acknowledge the ridiculousness of his odyssey.

Yet even as the idea passed through his mind, he kept his eyes on the sidewalks they passed, scrutinizing the faces of Hispanic men. He no longer cared where Charles took him, as long as it was not back to the motel. The thought of his silent room, the view of the parking lot and the motionless avenue from his window, made him consider not returning at all, finding another hotel and sending Charles to pick up his things, or simply leaving them there, going directly to the airport and finding the first flight out of that miserable city and the formless shadow of disaster permeating every corner of it. To be so close to a catastrophe that, had his brother not been involved, would not have mattered all that much to him

(indeed, that a secret part of him might have celebrated), was in some ways worse than actually being struck by it. But when he followed his imagination to the airport, the words *San Salvador* on his ticket did not provide the comfort he was expecting. They failed to call up any particular image or sensation, good or bad, as if they had suddenly lost meaning.

“It’s seven-thirty,” Charles said, stopping at a Rally’s. “Dinner time.”

He didn’t allow eating or drinking in the cab, so they sat at the outdoor table near the walk-up window. The rush hour traffic had subsided, the sun’s pallor yielding to the reddish hints of dusk. In addition to his own bacon cheeseburger and fries, Charles ordered four more combo meals to go.

“For the wife and kids,” he said.

Jacinto chewed a bite of his hamburger. He didn’t know how hungry he was until he started eating.

“Always try to bring her something,” said Charles. “One day it might be flowers. Another day it’s a Big Buford. You married?”

“Yes.”

“Kids?”

“I have a son and a daughter.”

“Kids will eat up your fucking life. Everything you have. No joke.”

Jacinto nodded. “It’s true.”

“Who are you looking for? If you don’t mind me asking. A woman?”

Jacinto shook his head. “My brother. We have not spoken in years.”

It may have been the unexpected calm of Charles’s face, after Jacinto had been staring at the back of his head for so long, that made the admission so easy. Little gray hairs sprung up at his hairline before the tight black plait of the cornrows, his eyes yellow and tired.

“I know how it is,” said Charles. “I’m the youngest of four. My oldest brother got shot down in New Orleans. Nine times. Pulling his garbage out to the curb. Same kind of thing—I hadn’t talked to him in ten, twelve years. Living one hour away.”

Charles took a bite of his burger.

“I am very sorry,” Jacinto said. “Why did they shoot him?”

“They said he was into something, I don’t know. Drugs and stuff. Nine times, you know, he must’ve pissed somebody off.”

“I see.”

“You believe that whole city is underwater right now?” Charles said. “That’s the kind of thing you always see happening somewhere else. Maybe down there around where you’re from. Asia. Africa. Places like that.”

**Daniel Castro** graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where he was the Dean’s Graduate Fellow in Fiction, and recently was awarded the CINTAS Foundation Award in Creative Writing.





*Gary Bollich*  
*2012*  
*Novella Runner-Up*



## ***Albert's Lark*** **(a concerto for** ***black holes***)

"Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.  
Death closes all; but something ere the end,"  
Tennyson

dedicated to my parents  
ruth and neil

"Are you sure? You really want me to turn off his respirator?"

"No, first I want you to run down to the nurse's station and find a death certificate *then* you can pull the plug."

"But shouldn't we contact his next of kin, check to see if he has a living will? Isn't there some procedure to all this?"

"Got you covered numb nuts. Last night after I made my rounds, I ran a search on the computer. This guy just plain doesn't exist except for this diary the paramedics found on him when they brought him three weeks ago. Funny thing is there isn't a name in the front or the back. See right here where it has the slot for the diarist's name. And here, in back, no signature, nothing."

"What about inside of the diary, you know, what he actually wrote? Maybe he mentions his name, a friend's or a family member's name somewhere. Jesus, this thing looks like it's a couple hundred pages long."

"What? Excuse me, am I getting this right? Do you really think I have the time or the inclination to read some wino's diary? Besides, we need the bed space. But don't get me wrong. From the looks of the suit he was wearing when they wheeled him in, the man must have had some real some money, some time in his life. That's why I ran a search on him. Figured if he was the relative of some wealthy family or what not, there might be something in it for me. No such luck. Nobody worth anything to spit at is missing a relative. Just an all around bad week for our Mr. John Doe."

"What was it he drank? Did you say grain alcohol, Stern-O and shoe polish all mixed up in a Martell bottle?"

"Yeah, a vintage year to boot: 1954. Guess he had his own private stock. Whew! Damn that crap must have

burned his stomach to a crisp before torching his brain. Why in the hell would a guy try and kill himself like that?"

"Do you think he can hear us, or knows we're talking about him?"

"Where did you say you went to Med. school? Junior, you see that monitor over there? You remember the one, the one with all the pretty bouncing electric lights and buttons, the one that measures brain waves. See anybody surfing over there, dude? Hurry up and get that form. There's a respiratory therapist that's got a set of lungs that this good doctor would just love to scope. She takes her break in five minutes. Shit, what am I talking about, I'm the attending, I've got some rank here. You fill it out Junior. Just put today's date January 30, 1997, cause and time of death, then beep the head nurse to find an aide to run the body down to the morgue. No, I don't care if you take his diary. Now Junior, are you sure you can handle this? Great! Take an early lunch if you like. See you during afternoon rounds, that is, if my therapist doesn't work out."

He looked down at the John Doe stretched out before him; tubes running in and out of every orifice, the mechanical ebb and flow of the respirator, the beep of the heart monitor and the long, thin yellow line that was now the sum total of his brain. He thought of the symposium in London over the weekend, the one in honor of Stephen Hawking. He still had the image of Hawking fresh and clear in his memory, the huge bright eyes, thick glasses, and smile; alone on the stage with his computer dutifully tapping out his electric voice, from his paralyzed body.

He felt like a little boy again, almost afraid, though fascinated as he watched and listened to the will of a man's mind turn science and astronomy into poetry. Hawking, some called him the Einstein of the late twentieth century, a sort of demigod of space, time and black holes; a man who in a perverse sort of irony was trapped in his own black hole, but was trying to make the rest of the world understand and see how limited "we" are in our perception of the universe. A man who could close his eyes, and simultaneously measure out, critique

and then record in his memory, the equivalent of an entire Mozart symphony. Still, just as this John Doe, he is frozen, chambered up in a body that will not respond.

'Hawking through his intellect has rendered his paralysis moot, but this, John Doe went in the other direction, turned a bottle of acid down his throat and . . . why?'

He studied the brain monitor, and wondered if it was possible for the mind to refuse to register an impulse, like a child playing possum. He wondered if the brain decided on its own if it could just simply turn itself off. Foolish to even think in that fashion, this *is* a hospital; that would be heresy to mix something so metaphysical into a patient's chart. We can't heal the soul or spirit here, can we? No.

Still, if a man like Hawking, through the force of his will, intellect and resilience, if he can, not just survive, but thrive as no other man, then maybe the opposite is possible. Maybe a perfectly sound body can be deserted, "switched off" by a disinterested brain.

'I don't know . . . maybe I should just get on with it, just do my job then leave.'

Picking up John Doe's diary, the resident thumbed quickly through it. 'Who is this guy,' he thought to himself. 'Why would he drink, no, poison himself. Is this going to be it? His whole life ending here, alone, flushed away in some cold, sterile medical school in the suburbs of Paris. Jesus, just look at how much he wrote. Christ he wrote in this thing every day for almost a year and a half. But where's his name? And this, next to his last entry February 9, 1995, is a number, a number with a note in the margin. A reminder to read a portion of the entry dated August 23, 1994.

"Stroking in a firm, even, rhythm the silhouette of the man and his tiny scull sliced open the water like the head of an endless zipper separating a giant black canvas. The ripples lengthening into long, thick feathers coaxed my eyes to the bow and his placid wake, where I finally understood or perhaps simply re-discovered the black, ragged whispers that he was leaving and I was, now, beginning to uncover. It was not envy that I felt, but a longing, a frightened reverence of sorts, like the burning a small boy feels the first time he discovers why he desires a nude woman. I'm drawn to him for what he seems to possess, for what I don't have. I'm drawn to him out of fear, afraid that this strong old man, and his leathery shadow will sweep over my brain and leave me in their wake. Drawn to him because I'll never love anything the way this man obviously loves the simple act of being alive, of existing. He must have everything, everything a man could possibly need.

Reaching up to the respirator, he paused, thinking, what of the other passage, the last one? Why did he make a note to himself to read this one, and pair it with his last?

February 9, 1995: "Or so that's how I saw him six months ago. But we stopped going to the lake. No. I guess I lost my diary. That's a good one, it's my safety

blanket. Or, maybe, yeah, I guess I just got bored. Oh, like you have so much to do in the shelters. After talking to that kid the bottom fell out. I couldn't go back after talking to him. About a month ago I was picking through a garbage can and I saw a filler story from an old newspaper, something about a man the police found, an old man in a wooden, racing scull. Said his hands were frozen solid around the oars. Seems rigor mortis set in fast, fastest they'd ever seen. Said it was as though he'd been rowing right up to the point his muscles began to freeze up. Strange, anyway, it's been six months since I wrote anything in this diary. I'd lost the urge about the same time I lost everything else. Maybe we lost each other. Well, it was that story. Shit, I don't know. Maybe, yeah admit it! I've been looking for him, but he found me.

Damn it, I never did get a chance to meet that old man. Figured I didn't need to, just like I figured wrong on a lot of things lately. I kept telling myself that I really didn't want to, kept telling myself he wasn't important. But, now, well I'm pretty sure I hate him. Hate him for being so old and fragile and lonely and strong. Hate him because he shouldn't have been happy, but damn if he didn't row like a god or something out of a dream."

Albert was not around enough to be offensive. In the short stretches of time that the world encountered him, his sour, acrid smell, and his yellowed, sweat stained T-shirt were tolerated. He appeared and disappeared at the open-air market every morning at a quarter to six, well before the heat, full light and the majority of the other customers. He appeared, and was left alone, to purchase his fruit, bread and occasionally a link of sausage.

Strange, he thought to himself, 'one time I was a part of all this and "them," just another ant in the swarm and rush, disappearing in and out of his hole, always trying to stay ahead of the day.

The boarded-up repair shop two blocks down the street was still his property. All had marveled at his gift with leather, his supple, steel-like hands molding and sewing stiff, cumbersome hides into soft delicate curves. Even, now, at seventy-three his shoulders remained taunt and his chin hard. Only the grate in his voice and the slight wheeze in his breathing spoke of the weakness brought on by fifty years of inhaling shoe polish, cleaning fluid and the asbestos dust that filtered down from the ceiling of his tiny shop. Only his lungs were weak and tired of living, the rest, or so it seemed to him, had changed very little. Roaming between the vegetable, fruit and cheese stands he appeared more like a warrior awaiting his next command, and not at all like a retired, disabled old man.

Returning to his room, Albert, as every morning, paused; wavered at the foot of his apartment house stairs to watch Paris awaken: . . . in the small park a block away, the sun, lemon colored and climbing was caged by a

stand of oak trees . . . jasmine, rose and sandalwood, the freshly perfumed, painted and manicured bodies, faces and hands of business people hailing taxis mixed with the brown and blue flatulence of the passing buses and delivery trucks. . . feet in boots, pumps and shining patent leather scraped and rasped the sidewalks . . . plate glass windows gleamed as they re-appeared out from under the soap wash and swipe of a squeegee. . . croissant and coffee, cigarette smoke and the clattering of Pernod glasses touching . . . and the windows, like flowers, first randomly folding outward, then in quick practiced order, the double-door panes guarding every apartment and business—opened.

In sixty years all that had really changed were the automobiles, and of course, Marie, thought Albert, as he watched. I'm too sleepy to stay any longer, and all ready the heat, the dust and the day . . . damn it . . . these lungs.

Looking up at the six flights his stomach knotted for a moment. All his days were beginning to form one continuous drone. Each morning, he felt as though he had just been seated at a symphony, then, as the first notes were being played—asked to leave. Albert took one more look, and then ducked into the alcove. Except for an occasional grunting board, the spiraling stairs that connected the floors were silent. It was still too early for the tenants of the regular apartments to be doing anything but eating breakfast. The doctor's office on the first floor would not be open until nine; the families on floors two through five had no children, all was quiet. Finally to the sixth, and the one room cubicles, what thirty years earlier had been designated as the servants' quarters: 'Shit!' Yes, the smell of feces filled the roof level hallway; someone had forgotten to close the door to the communal toilet—again.

Fumbling for his keys, he unlocked the door to his room. Ten by twelve, with a water stained ceiling and peeling wallpaper, a sink, a hot plate and a view of the interior court yard below and some rooftops. This was his home now, and well, for the remainder of his life. Throwing his sack on the bed he stopped to study his room and thought, 'Is this the prize, the lean cuts? After fifty years of working, saving and then selling it all back to the bank, to gain this?'

He remembered the disinterested banker's irritated tone, "Yes, yes I know it's tough, I'm sorry, but the apartment is all we can use, your shop? What? No! It would cost too much to clean, nasty stuff that asbestos. Just be glad we could get you one of these flats. Had to pull a few strings just to get this. Tough break about the missus. Nasty cough you got there. Better let a doctor have a look-see, hope the money holds out. Good day."

**Gary Bolick** was born and raised in the W/S-Clemmons area of NC Studied in Paris between high school and college. Graduated from Wake Forest. Married to a wonderful woman named Jill. Two sons Clint and Ryan. My latest novel: ANGEL'S ORACLE is

## **Novella: OTHER FINALISTS**

### **A Good Listener**

James McEnteer, Quito, Ecuador

### **A Missing Life**

Wendy Simons, Stevensville, MI

### **Sister Carrie**

William Coles, Salt Lake City, UT

### **The First Line**

Jacqueline Guidry, Kansas City, MO

### **The Lion's Requiem**

Yoon-Ji Han, Tai Tam, Hong Kong

### **Theopraxis**

Robert Ferrell, La Vernia, TX

### **The Shopkeeper, The Thief and his Horse**

Julie Chagi, Scotts Valley, AZ

### **The Wayside**

Maria Adelman, Charlottesville, VA

### **Trigger**

Joyce Miller, Cincinnati, OH

### **TripTik**

Marilyn Moriarity, Roanoke, VA

### **You Got a Hundred?**

Russell Simon, Elwood, Victoria, Australia

set in Mississippi Easter weekend in 1959. The story was influenced by my profound love of Faulkner. It was an honor to be a part of the competition. My warmest thanks.





Petra Perkins  
2012  
Novella Runner Up



## The Odd Sea

It was clear who was *not* being interviewed here: Don Hill was wearing his Captain's hat and his pre-eminence. Don and his wife, Ruth, had obviously delighted Mr. Sy Schmidt. The jovial three were toasting and tipping their glasses by the fireplace when Charles and Ellen arrived at Loveland's ski lodge. "A get-to-know-you," Sy had told Charles on the telephone. Charles knew it was more like a compatibility test, or an interview. He had seen the advertisement while flipping through a boating magazine as he stole a moment from the tedium of his work.

**Wanted:** two adventuresome couples to sail the romantic Greek islands of the Ionian Sea. Follow your dreams. Experienced guide. Departing May '92

The words tantalized Charles Boyd, Certified Public Accountant, at the height of a grueling income tax season. He called Ellen and said he had something he wanted to discuss with her that night.

Sailing had become his mid-life passion, but Ellen, although she enjoyed it, sailed for Charles. Charles was her passion. She much preferred to sail the vast, smooth seas of his body and mind. They weren't married but had tied other knots together. She could tie the bowline, the clove hitch, and the slipknot, though not fast or tidy enough for Charles; however, he had been encouraging. He lavished praise on her navigation skills for she had excelled -- even surpassed his own efforts -- in learning to use the sextant in their winter ground-school class and could navigate by stellar configurations if she had to. (She attributed this natural ability to having been born with stars in her eyes.) Most of all, she liked basking in the warmth of an afternoon sun and breathing in the fresh mist of a breeze as the boat parted its way through sinuous waters. She would raise, lower, and trim the sails according to Charles' directions but if it became blustery or rainy, she would just as soon forget the whole thing. It was foolhardy to set out into a sea of rough whitecaps, she maintained, so Charles would not insist because he didn't want her to be frightened or uncomfortable. Though if a situation forced them into it, Charles believed, Ellen

would find it liberating to be faced with survival by wits and skill.

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*The sea (like a woman) is unpredictable except for this: the tides always turn.*

- Donald Theodore Hill, Captain, ret., U.S.C.G.

On the sixth day -- the day they would finally arrive on Ithaca! -- Charles awoke with a renewed energy and an abandon that he'd not summoned since a boy. The seeds had been invested in him by a night of dreams which were more gripping than those he'd had before the trip began. He stuck his head through the hatch that morning to see a full, faceless moon lingering in the sky like a harbinger. Cirrus clouds sailed across it like writing on the wall. His ears awakened to the tinkling in the rigging from a zephyr blowing constant and pure: the storm had passed. As the sleepy *Circe* gently rocked and lilted, something grew inside Charles -- a wantonness he was not familiar with but that he liked very much. During those minutes when his dreams fortified him, he knew that Zeus could only strike him dead if he gave up this perfect day to a casual stinkpot ride.

Charles brewed the coffee and then rang *Circe's* bell. "Anchors aweigh or asses away!" he heralded. He wasn't about to waste any time launching this *coups d'etat*. By 7:00 a.m, the four members of his crew had dressed and stumbled on deck. First he declared that Sy would take a much-needed furlough today; Charles himself would lead them to Kioni on Ithaca. Everyone was either too dazed or amazed to object and so followed orders like ensigns. He told Don to boost and secure the anchor, and with that done, Charles signaled Ellen to raise the sails. They were shipshape and underway by 7:15. Ithaca's king and chief executive warrior, as if stunned by an ambush, seemed hollowed in his inability to find an immediate escape. Captain Don began his inspection of the seas with exceptional concentration. Ruth took up her needlepoint but missed some stitches and had to

rip out. Charles switched off the engine and snapped the mainsheet to rid the sail of its remaining slack. As if commanded by her master, *Circe* curtsied, far over, washing her leeward windows in a salty bath. (Charles permitted her to heel much more than required.) The three senior citizens, huddled side-by-side, gripped the gunwales with whitened fists. Atheni faded fast behind them.

Ellen, up front, knew exactly what kind of ride this was to be: the sea churned its waves into spuming whitecaps. "*Hoo, hah!*" whooped Charles.

The boat rocketed at eight knots now, on its side, beating in a twenty-knot header. "Feel it!" he cried. The farther he ventured out into the sea the more he cajoled the wind; he cinched the downhaul to flatten the luff, the outhaul to stiffen the foot, and then he eased up the leech. Perfect!

The tweaking netted another half knot of speed and additional heel. Unbattered objects slammed in the cabin below. Charles hailed Ellen to harden the jib halyard. It was nearly impossible for her to stand now, but she lashed herself to the mast and responded to Charles' requests, for that was the most memorable of lessons learned in their Florida sailing class: one answered the skipper's demands with only the swiftest of actions. She remembered "the big blow" they'd encountered, when Charles had instructed her -- shouting at her from the cockpit -- not to ask why! but just do it and do it now. *Circe* performed posthaste, as well, and lay down obediently. Cold water splashed over her bow and beam, soaking both captain and crew.

Charles was not distressed to see Sy languishing, panicked as if he might upchuck in his coffee cup. The new skipper's nemesis tried unsuccessfully to go below for coats, but was back in a flash, having turned as green as seaweed. Donsy, of course, wasn't seasick. And it was to his credit that, though befuddled by this change in command, he never once abandoned his surveillance post. Ruth was frozen speechless. She sat as high as possible on the windward side and clung to her canvas anchor.

Blazing masterfully through the captured seas, Charles vibrated as if in a rapture. He wanted to remember this moment for the rest of his life, as if somehow containing the exaltation would carry him through another decade of tax seasons. "Ellen," he called to the soggy, woeful woman behind the Elephant, "take a picture of us!" She had the camera around her neck, as usual, and extra film in her photographer's vest along with her wide-angle lens. Charles grinned wildly, like a daemon. Ellen had now tied herself to the life-raft so as not to hurtle down *Circe's* nose as they careened the crests of the waves. She half-turned and raised the camera to frame a snapshot of Ruth, Don, and Sy. They sat like shushed, recalcitrant children banded in their windward seats, all color drained from indignant faces. She snapped one of the jubilant Charles as he guided them over the deepest Ionian waters, his joy stilled only

by 1/500th of a second.

Charles Boyd, C.P.A., whose new tan and one-day beard had rendered him dark and strong and rugged -- (and invincible?) -- was ready to tackle any problematic event. If the wind died he would propel the boat on his adrenaline rush alone. If a crew member died, they'd be tied as ballast to the bowsprit. If they encountered a riptide, he would dive into it, swim like Jack LaLanne, and tow *Circe* to shore. He checked the knotmeter. Nine knots!

"Ready about," Charles declared, waiting for no one. "Helm's alee!" He coaxed his vessel through the wind and moved the mainsheet deftly across its track. Then he tacked the jib, winching the sheet with one hand while steering with the other. From his cockpit Charles played the sea like a one-man band.

Thunderous shudders of *Circe's* push through the tempest frightened the shivering crew to their timbers as he reinstated the boat's beating position. The sailors had slipped hard into each other after the tack, finding their feet higher than their heads. When, in mid-turn, the boat had leveled off, they barely had time to take a collective breath before it resumed heeling on the other side. The threesome scrambled across to the high seats, grabbing on to anything they could find, including each other, to keep from tumbling into the drink. Ruth snatched the rails with both hands and lost possession of her nearly completed anchor which went sailing behind them to its new home at the ocean floor, where anchors ultimately belong.

Charles roared his triumph -- "Look at her fly!" - as they teetered like a rollercoaster on a whitecap's pinnacle. He pinched every atom of air he could steal from the beating wind. *Circe* was winging her way to Ithaca!

On the forward deck, a drenched Ellen hung on to her life. When they topped a wave and she peeked under the jib to find the island, she saw they had entered a turbulent bay. The steady westerly breeze grew into hard, whistling gusts that pounded them from every direction. Sails thrashed so violently it seemed they would pop off the rigging; the mast and shrouds protested in periodic quakes. Charles was intoxicated with power. He wanted to stay out all day but he knew the jig was up. He could tell that Sy had reached his limit and he sure didn't want any revolting puke in his cockpit. The port of Kioni lay ahead so he motioned to Ellen, who was parched mute from sheer terror, to strike the sails. Believing this the only means to salvation, she complied. Crawling to the jib, she tore it down shackle by shackle from the forestay, and was about to secure it with a bungee cord when a gust whipped the sail right back up and refilled it with air.

*Circe* jerked hardover. Sy had at that moment been trying to wipe the spray from his eyeglasses. They flipped out of his hands and onto the gunwale where they tipped precariously. Charles saw Sy reach for them, his fingers stretching to grab onto the temple, when Ellen yanked the jib sail down again -- in one Herculean

swipe dumped its wind -- whereupon the boat's attitude immediately shifted. The abrupt righting motion caused Sy's spectacles to lift like a spirited condor, hover for a moment in mid-air, and then splash like a turkey into the deepest part, fifteen thousand feet, of the Ionian Sea. Charles had no time to consider that he had, perhaps, in an effort to ease Ellen's dilemma, contributed to this upshot by a remedial steer to the wind.

After she had downed the mainsail and whipped it around the boom, Ellen collapsed on the deck and that's when Charles first realized, with horror, that he might have overtaxed her. He switched on the engine. *Circe*, herself no mean stinkpot, ground through the army of whitecaps like a chainsaw. Charles had not yet driven her on a docking maneuver but his confidence was in little danger of waning. "Prepare to lay anchor, Don," he commanded. "Sy, clear the winch and rig the anchor line." The two men labored as if in slow-motion, or, he thought, it was simply the stark contrast to Charles' own accelerated sense of reality. "Drop it, Don, drop it now!" The old man's hands quivered as he released the anchor, and his teeth must have been chattering, too, because his pipe plopped in the water soon after. Charles geared into neutral and Sy cranked the winch handle like he was in the last stages of making ice cream. Ellen, poor heaving Ellen, had managed to pick herself up from the deck and ready the dock lines.

The anchor failed to get a purchase. A tempest was now pushing them back; Charles gave it some gas. They thrust closer to the rock wall and just as they were near enough for Ellen to hop off with the ropes, *Circe* blew away again -- over the anchor rode and toward the sea. Charles jockeyed ahead again, closer, with Ellen poised to leap. Each time he forged forward they were blown sideways or back. Over and over, Ellen gauged when she could safely leap onto the quay. Finally, when Charles thought for sure he could hold the position he shouted to Ellen: "Jump *now!*" In the span of a second, Ellen appraised the four-foot gap between herself and the rock wall. She hesitated one split second more, and then she ... disappeared.

Two idle fishermen had been watching from their boats near the shore. When they saw her catapult they scrambled for *Circe*. Just as they arrived at the scene Ellen Dunlap surfaced. Together they pulled her out of the water, snagged the bow pulpit, hauled in the bucking boat and roped it to a cleat. Charles Boyd sprang from the weaving cockpit; Ruth Hill found a (wet) blanket; Don Hill put a hand to his mouth, finding his pacifier gone AWOL; Sy Schmidt was called away to fight a battle between vertigo and inertia.

The camera was still attached to a gasping Ellen. Charles knelt over her as she lay spread-eagle on her back. She belched and spit a fountain of brine in his face. "Ellen, Ellen," said Charles, panting, not touching her yet. "Are you all right?" Ellen's eyes swam like minnows.

"My camera's ruined," she cried. Charles removed it from her neck. "Yes, it's full of salt, sweetheart,

and you are, too. But you're not hurt, that's what counts. Thank God you're not hurt. You're not hurt, are you?" She turned her head toward the whirling water and saw fifteen or twenty film canisters, and one of her shoes, catching a wave. They floated out to sea like offerings. He decided it would be better not to say anything more just then.

That night at the taverna Sy presided at the head of the festive table. He danced with his friend, Stavros, and Stavros' brother Nik -- the three men linked arm over arm -- to rhythmic, undulating Greek music; at the end of the song they shattered plates on the floor. Sy slapped backs all around and gifted T-shirts. He pronounced that tomorrow would be a peaceful day... a nice, short motor trip to the Gulf of Molokardo... and that Captain Don would reign as honorable skipper. Ruth looked sharply at Charles over her pointy nose and hugged Don and Sy together like stuffed dolls. Ellen stared vacantly at the cracked wall over Charles' shoulder, at a large stuffed fish.

**Petra Perkins** has lived and worked in Louisiana, California, Colorado, and her favorite city, Seattle -- but now she writes passionately about being held prisoner in Denver. She tried to write a bit during her career in the aerospace industry as an engineer then manager, and recently as a STEM education volunteer and mentor. But now Petra is a full-time author of fiction, poetry, memoir, creative non-fiction and essay, winning an award in the Denver Woman's Press Club 2011 Contest for Unknown Writers in Fiction.

"Do not be afraid; our fate  
Cannot be taken from us; it  
is a gift."

—Dante Alighieri,  
*Inferno*





*Alice Leaderman*  
*2012*  
*Novella Runner Up*



## ***The Saltonfell Case***

In September of 1887, I received a letter from my uncle, Sir William Stoddard Afton, inviting me to visit him at his country home in Surrey. Laid up with a broken leg from a carriage accident, he was bored and missed intelligent company, by which he meant he had no one to talk to about the medical and scientific matters that occupied his life. Uncle William had no children, having lost his wife, Elinor, when they were both quite young. He lived most of the year in London, where he lectured to medical students and pursued his researches into human physiology and disease. Although I had not chosen to study medicine, I had an interest in medical science, and Uncle William had explained enough over the years to allow me to follow his work in a general way, so I was a fair substitute for a more scientifically adept companion. I left London by train, looking forward to fresh air, plain food, good conversation, and to making my uncle laugh as I had always been able to do.

A manservant met me at the station, and when we reached the house, I descended from the carriage to find Uncle William leaning on his crutches, ready to greet me. His handshake was firm, but his expression was somber and distracted. He took me into his sitting room, arranged himself on a sofa with his leg propped on a cushion, and rang for tea. I asked whether he had much pain from the leg, and he said no, it was mending well.

"But something is wrong, Uncle," I said.

His mouth tightened and he looked away. I waited for him to recover himself.

"I beg your pardon, Laurence," he said, "but I received some bad news yesterday, and I have not yet come to terms with it."

He told me he had received a letter from a young man he had met on a trip to America some two years before, a letter telling him that the young man's brother had died. As he seemed quite affected, I asked whether he had known the brother as well.

"Yes, I knew him," he said, his eyes on me but his attention drawn inward. "I knew three of the brothers and their mother."

Uncle William had told me something of his travels in America but little about his social life there, so

I did not know who this young man or his brother might be. I expressed my sympathy, and he thanked me but remained quiet.

A serving girl brought the circular wicker tray and the white teapot painted with pink roses that had been used in the house for as long as I could remember. The tray held plates heaped with scones and biscuits, a pound cake, and several ripe pears from my uncle's orchard.

"A feast, Uncle," I said as I filled a cup and passed it to him.

He sipped his tea but did not touch any of the food, which was excellent as always. After I had bolted down enough to stanch the hunger that follows travel, I sat back and joked about being a glutton. Uncle William smiled, but I could see it would take more than a few jokes to relieve his gloom.

"I think I should like to tell you the whole story, Laurence, if you are feeling quite settled and patient," he said.

I poured out more tea for both of us and said I was ready. He seemed taken aback that I had declared my willingness to listen so easily.

"Ah, well, it's quite a long story," he said. "Are you sure...?"

I indicated I was.

"Well. All right," he said, but he frowned and paused before he started again. "The matter began with an intriguing medical case, but it led to my witnessing several bizarre events that remain inexplicable to me even now."

He drank some tea and stopped his cup midway on its return to the saucer.

"I suppose I am doing the right thing in telling you this," he said.

I had never seen him hesitate so. I said if he was not sure I was the right audience for his story, I would not be insulted if he changed his mind.

"Forgive me, Laurence," he said. "You are indeed the right audience, perhaps the only person who is. When you hear my tale, you will understand why I have told no one until now."

With that, he began his story:

As you know, I sailed to America two years ago last April to present a paper at an international medical conference in Philadelphia and meet colleagues in several other cities. I stopped first in Boston, where I had been invited to give three lectures at the Harvard Medical School. I had also an objective closer to my heart, which I had confided to no one, and that was to visit a childhood friend who, at the time we allowed our correspondence to cease, lived near Boston with her husband, Edward Saltonfell, and their six sons. Marjorie Ferrant, as I had known her, was my playmate and confidant from age seven until we were nearly grown. As a young man I let myself hope that we might marry, but when she was sixteen, she left her aunt's house in Norwich to join her father in Boston. Marjorie and I corresponded a great deal at first, then less and less, until we exchanged news only with our Christmas greetings, and then not at all. I was curious to see how her life had turned out, and I wrote to her as soon as I arrived in Boston. Meanwhile, I delivered my first lecture at the medical school.

The next afternoon, a messenger brought a polite note from a Mr. Saltonfell, which said he was in the lobby and wished to speak with me. As my accommodations included a small sitting room, I asked that he be brought upstairs, and I prepared myself to meet Marjorie's husband. I opened the door to a tall, sandy-haired young man who introduced himself as David Saltonfell, one of Marjorie's sons. He was quite handsome, sturdily built, with keen brown eyes like his mother's and excellent manners. I invited him to sit down, and he handed me an envelope which contained a short note in Marjorie's angular script inviting me to spend a few days at the Saltonfell home beginning two days hence. I told Mr. Saltonfell—David as I had already begun to think of him—that I would be pleased to visit, and asked whether his mother had told him who I was. He said she had.

"It will be a joy to see your mother again," I said, "and I look forward to meeting your father and brothers as well."

He grew still and solemn and said that he had not come merely to carry letters, but to prepare me for my visit to his home. Naturally, I thought this a strange statement.

"We are not the family we once were," he said, and I could see he was working his way to something difficult. "In the past six years we have lost my father and my three older brothers to a strange affliction."

In stumbling words, I managed to express sympathy, but I could scarcely believe life had dealt such blows to my dear friend whom I had missed for a good many years before I met Elinor. To be deprived of the love and support of a husband was sad enough, but to lose three children as well was a crueler portion than any human being should have to bear. And here was her son, who had lost his father and brothers, leaning over as if he would provide comfort to me. I composed myself and

asked him how his mother was bearing up.

"Some days she is so nervous and delicate that a sound or a word may upset her; at other times she is more normal and even smiles."

"You are worried about her," I said.

"Yes. My brothers and I are hoping you will see her as a friend, but also as a doctor."

"Surely you have a family physician," I said.

"Yes, and we like him, but he could not save my brothers. I read about your lecture in the newspapers, and I know you are famous even beyond the medical profession. Also, my mother has spoken highly of you over the years."

I told him of course I would be of whatever help I could. An extra alertness in his eyes told me he had more to say, but he hesitated before continuing.

"I hope you will pardon me for suggesting it, but if I am not taking too much of your time, I could tell you in some detail about the conditions under which my brothers and my father perished."

His eagerness to pursue such a grievous topic surprised me but found an echo in my own interest. Yet I tried to see beyond my curiosity. "It will not be too disturbing for you?" I asked.

He shook his head and launched into an account of the fatal sickness, speaking with admirable objectivity about matters which tore his heart and had no small effect upon mine. "My father suffered for many years from bouts of severe abdominal pain. Neither indigestion nor colic, it could not be relieved by any of the usual stomach remedies. Once the doctors even cut into him, thinking his appendix had burst, but it had not. The attacks would last for several days, and then he would be completely well and healthy. He suffered from this malady for much of his adult life, with attacks coming every two or three years, then closer together, until there were only months between them. Within a week before or after the abdominal attacks, or during them, would come a strange swelling of his hands, to the point where he could not use his fingers at all. This too was temporary, and it was not painful. The end came after several days of abdominal pain, when his throat closed up and he could not breathe. The doctors had no idea why it happened, and to this day they do not understand the condition.

"I was kept away as a child," he continued, "but even then I watched my mother grow increasingly sad and tired and saw my older brothers fearful and disturbed after they visited his sickroom. The doctors' grim faces frightened us, and each time we thought we would lose him."

His father had succumbed to an attack at age fifty-nine. A few months later, David's eldest brother, Edgar, began to experience similar symptoms. He endured two attacks, with more than a year between them, and then died when the illness returned. One year afterward, George, who had become head of the family following Edgar's death, did not survive the first bout. Then it was the turn of Harold, David's senior by four years. A minister,

married with two children and living in Northampton, a town in the western part of Massachusetts, Harold suffered two attacks in a period of months and died of a third, with his wife, his mother, and David in attendance. The family had lost Harold the previous October, six months before my visit.

"My mother has just three of us now," David said. "Besides me, there is Charles, a lawyer, who is two years older than me, and Roger, my junior by four years, who is enrolled at Harvard College." His voice became softer. "I love my brothers, and to lose either of them would be almost unbearable for me, but it would surely kill our mother."

He looked directly at me. "If you are thinking, 'here is a man eager to save his own life,' you are right. I am frightened for myself, of course, but I would die twice for each of my brothers if it would prevent my mother losing Charles or Roger."

I can see him still, standing with his back to the window, the daylight transforming him into a shadow, and hear these words, surprisingly clear in my mind as I paid little attention to them at the time.

"I often feel as if a spell or curse has come upon us," he said, "a most irrational view, I admit."

**Alice V. Leaderman** is a New England native transplanted to the Mid-Atlantic, Maryland. She writes fiction, including stories, novellas, and a novel, and participates in an excellent writers' group. Two years ago she added cross-country skiing to other outdoor activities such as hiking, downhill skiing, and gardening with native plants. Ms. Leaderman was graduated from Barnard College, and she earned an MFA in creative writing from George Mason University in 2002.

## Words & Music

A Literary Feast in New Orleans  
November 19 – November 23, 2014

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Festival dates are November 19-24, with discussion programming designed for multiple audiences: stu-



Randy Fertel, Ph.D.

dents, scholars, developing writers, established authors, educated readers, and patrons of the arts. The five-day festival will include daily *Literature & Lunch* sessions, evening entertainment, film events, live drama, and music events. Randy Fertel, Ph.D., author of the new book, **A Taste For Chaos: The Hidden Order In The Art Of Improvisation**, will be 2014's keynote speaker.

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Riot was seven years old the spring his father went off to Africa and got himself shot to death by a child soldier hopped up on heroin and palm wine. As far as anybody knew, as far as our neighbors and my mother and his mother and the foreign desk and especially Riot was concerned, Porter and I were still happy when he left, still in love, still making it work against the odds. A triumphal story, the future personified. Even then I was astonished people bought the myth, that no one could see what seemed to me so painfully, excruciatingly obvious. But then who among us really pays that much attention to anyone else? To their new shoes, maybe, their updated kitchen, their traded-in car. Maybe even to the clothes draping their body but to the human being inside? Very few.

So everyone bought the story that Porter was only going off to Africa for a month to fill the space between the old correspondent leaving, withered and spent, and the new guy to come. There was a space because the paper was having trouble finding someone young enough and restless enough to want to go. If Porter wanted the job was his, of course, but no one thought he would want it. Not with a wife and child at home.

But he did. "Who knows?" he asked. "It might be good for us. It might even work."

Porter said this as he was packing. If packing was the right word for it; he was stuffing a handful of tee shirts and faded jeans into his old, khaki duffle bag. He worked fast, his eyes gleaming, his tongue shoved into his cheek in concentration, careening around our bedroom like the Hutus were hot on his tail, though his plane was still hours and hours away. When he stood still for a moment, thinking what else he might need, his foot tapped against the carpet. It was the first time in years I'd seen him that excited. Watching him from the doorway of our bedroom, I was almost happy for him. It was almost nice.

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe you'll get there and realize I'm not some angry, crazed black woman."

"Maybe you'll stay here and realize I'm not the boogie man."

We looked at one another then, we met one another's eyes, brown to blue. He still had beautiful eyes.

"Guess not," I said.



*Kim McLarin*

## 2012 Gold Medal for Best Novel In Progress



## A Boy Called Riot

honey, a continent with fifty-four countries, hundreds of languages, cities as big as New York, doctors, lawyers, teachers, just like here."

"Okay," Porter said, rubbing his son's head.

"It's not like the show on television, baby. Africa is the cradle of civilization. There were empires there, kings and queens and warriors and great, great libraries, all long, long before the people of Europe showed up. Africans were working iron when the people of Europe were still stumbling around in Dark Ages."

Porter's smile was tight. "Can we save the history

Porter said, "No."

He went into the living room to say goodbye again to Riot, who was curled up on the couch reading *Matilda*, a book about a child whose vicious, stupid parents make a mess of things. Riot loved to read, took to the habit like a duck to water when he was five, I swear, without me hooking him with phonics or flashing cards in his tender little face. He loved reading, loved books and the life of them, the oxygen, just the way I did. My child. That he also loved card games like his father, adored nothing so much as plopping down on the couch with Porter on Saturday afternoon and screaming himself hoarse for the Phillies was okay with me. Porter loved him for that. His child, Riot. Even then straddling the canyon, keeping everybody cheered.

"All right, my man," Porter said. He had been calling Riot "my man" since our child was two. I could never figure out whether that was some preemptive strike, some tilling of the ground for the adolescent years, or not. "Be a big boy and take care of Mommy while I'm gone."

Riot giggled, but I winced at that. Not supposed to put that kind of pressure on a child. How could a man so smart be so dim? But I bit my tongue. The teeth found their way into the grove imbedded there with no problem at all.

"Daddy, are you going to starve over there?" Riot asked.

Porter laughed and shook his head. "Don't worry, Riot. I'm taking plenty of food with me."

My tongue slipped out. "Daddy is going to a country called Sierra Leone in western Africa, Riot. There's no famine there. There's plenty of food, and cities just like Boston, nicer even. Africa is a huge continent,

lesson for some other time, perhaps?" he asked.

"I don't want him thinking Africa is one, vast jungle where people run around with bones in their noses going bugga bugga," I said.

"Like when I'm not about to leave?"

"I want him to know his history."

"Part of his history," Porter said. "Just part."

I opened my mouth but Riot leapt forward upon the couch. "Daddy," he said, "will you bring me back something?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Porter said. "Anything in particular? Or shall I pick?"

Riot said, "You pick."

"You got it, my man." He bent over and pulled Riot to his chest, hugging him tight. "I love you, buddy."

"More than all the sand in the Sahara?" Riot asked. My heart bounced; this was our games, Riot's and mine, begun when he was three or four. I love you more than all the stars in the sky, than all the cells in my body, I love you more than all the drops of water in each and every sea. Riot and I were the two poets of the family; Porter had never much joined in. But he did now.

"A million times as much," Porter said. "You can't even know."

\*\*\*

Eleven months later and it was Riot's birthday, the first *Since*. I was ready to hire the circus, to bring in the ponies and the clowns and one of those huge, oversized inflatable bouncing cages where the children took off their shoes and flopped around like ping pong balls. Ready to stuff the piñata with full-size Hershey bars and serve up the pizza and chicken wings and bake a four-layer cake: chocolate, carrot, lemon and chocolate again. Just as Riot liked.

"You can invite as many people as you like, honey. Your whole class."

Birthdays 1-7 seven had been low-key, at-home affairs: games, cake. One guest per year of age. None of this conspicuous consumption that ran rampant in the suburbs, none of these obscene, overblown affairs that rivaled a state dinner for 125.

But that was Before and this was After and this time I didn't give a damn. You could not spoil a child who'd lost his father. It was impossible.

Plus I think I knew by then that Riot would not spoil, could not, no matter what I did or did not do.

"So what do you think, baby? How about that laser place?"

We sat in the kitchen at the table, Riot doing his homework, me beside him with the printout of a story I was supposed to be writing. Really, though, I was done with the story – some fluff piece on early toilet training. It was as good as it was going to get. I was there to keep Riot company. It was all I could do, sometimes, not to follow him throughout the house, trailing from room to room, bobbing in his wake.

"You went there last year for somebody's birthday? Owen's? That was cool."

"It was okay," Riot said. "Some big kids from another

group kept shoving Wilson around."

"We'll rent out the whole place. You can stay all day."

Riot looked up from his math book, alarmed. "That would cost a lot of money."

"So? We're good for it."

"We have to be careful now," he said. "With money, I mean."

My heart snapped. Where did he get this? My mother, who'd hovered around for four months after the funeral, sighing and shaking her head? Porter's mother, who we had not seen since the funeral, though she lived twelve miles away. Afterwards, she had lurched up behind me, the bourbon hot on her breath, and hissed, "I told him not to marry you! Don't you and that mulatto bastard expect anything from us!"

My heart lurched but I kept the grin pasted on. "Honey, we're fine. Don't worry about money. We're fine." In fact we were; Porter's life insurance, which I had insisted we both get when Riot was born, had paid off all debt except the house and left a little egg. But even had there been no insurance I would have sold my body on the street to keep him from having to give up even a single pair of jeans.

"We're fine," I said again. "Don't worry. How about the zoo? No, that's boring. Bowling? They have soft serve ice cream!"

Riot clicked open his notebook, slipped his math sheet onto the rings and clicked the binder closed again. "I think I want to have the party at home."

Across from where we sat, rain pelted against the window above the sink. The rain was relief, because I didn't have to feel like I should be dragging my son outside into the crisp, autumn air, biking down the bike path, hiking up in the Blue Hills, driving merrily off to some crowded apple farm. "Or how about the science museum?"

"It's too far," Riot said. He was finished with his homework, but he made no move to move, to leave. Lately it seemed that we were living around his table. In the past we had always eaten all our meals in the dining room. The table was larger there and less cluttered; the kitchen table collected the mail, newspapers, Riot's homework sprawled everywhere. But now I cleared that stuff every evening and we ate in the kitchen. Less room for noticing.

Trying to joke him out of his preternatural seriousness, I said, "Oh, so I can do the cleaning up?"

"I'll help. I can clean."

I looked at my son, at his beautiful round and serious face. I could never figure out how to characterize the color of his skin; I hated all the old, usual description like café-au-lait or caramel. Why was the skin of black people always compared to food? Why not to something larger, something grand? He was the color of an eagle's feathers, the color of a fawn as she raced through the forest. A perfect mixture of his father and me.

"I'm kidding. I just want you to have a great party, anywhere you want."

"I want to have it at home."

"Okay." I smiled. "That's a good idea, actually. We

# NOVEL IN PROGRESS: *A Boy Called Riot*

can spend the money on something fun, like getting a magician to come in."

"I want chocolate cake. And ice cream, please."

"You got it!"

"And I want to invite Jesse," Riot said, glancing casually down at his math book.

"Sure, honey. Jesse is -"

"And Seamus." Riot looked at me.

I got it. I saw what he'd been aiming at all along, how carefully he had plotted his strategy. Really, I was astonished at his craftiness. Astonished and proud.

"Honey," I tried to sound reasonable. "You know you can't have Seamus and Moses at the same party. They'll fight."

"Seamus," Riot said. "I want Seamus."

"Riot, be reasonable."

"Please, Mom."

My breath caught. What was I supposed to say? It was the first thing he'd asked of me since his father died, the first real thing.

"All right. But if Seamus starts any trouble, he's gone."

Riot jumped up from his chair and threw his sweet arms around my neck. The warmth of him was like a tonic.

"They won't fight," he said. "I won't let them."

\*\*\*

The first time I met Seamus I hated him. It is a harsh and ugly thing to admit one hates a child but there you are.

We met Seamus in the park. Riot was five, just weeks into kindergarten but already the master of it, the most popular kid in his class. But it was Columbus Day, discovering America and school was closed. I took the day off.

Unfortunately, everybody else in town had the same idea. We pulled into a parking lot crammed so full of minivans and SUVs I had to circle twice before I could find a spot. With the engine still running, I turned to Riot and made a face.

"It's a little crowded. Maybe we should go somewhere else?"

Riot fidgeted in his seat, anxious to be outside. "Won't somewhere else be crowded too?"

A reasonable question, since the day was perfect: seventy degrees, sky like a painting, the sun warm and sweet. I shut down the engine. For a moment we watched the kids before us, running crazily across the matted surfaces, swinging from the monkey bars, hurtling down the slides. At first it looked like the children were all just running wild, their shrieks of delight ricocheting across the parking lot, then I realized a game of tag was taking place. The designated "it" was a pale, fat kid dressed in designer jeans and a silly tee-shirt with epaulets on the sleeves whom I immediately thought of, some reason, as Calvin. Calvin trundled himself heroically across the AstroTurf, lurching now and then at the other children, who twisted or dodged or sometimes strolled just out of reach. They did not even bother, most of them, to grab the

home base fence.

One kid in particular, red-haired, grinning, whippet-thin but in a rough, ropy sort of way, simply stood with his arms crossed against his skinny chest, taunting.

"Hey, Fatso, move your ass!" he screamed in the most horrible Boston accent, all flattened vowels and dropped R's. "Try to run why don't ya?"

I glanced at a green plastic bench just outside the playspace, where four white women sat chatting in animated oblivion. If one of them was the bully's mother, she wasn't claiming him. Calvin's mother either.

"Run you pig, run!"

This occurred time and again until the boy in the yellow jacket was red-faced and tight-lipped and verging on tears. He would stagger toward whatever slice of the large, plastic play structure was closest and lean for a few seconds to catch his breath. All the other children laughed. And because this was suburban Boston and because Riot had wanted to go to a big park, a nice park, a park along the river with bouncy rubber mats beneath the swings instead of hard-packed dirt, they were also, every last one of them, white.

"Look at that boy," Riot said softly.

"Let's get some lunch," I suggested. But Riot was already gone.

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**Kim McLarin** is the author of the critically-acclaimed novels *Taming It Down*, *Meeting of the Waters*, and *Jump At The Sun*, all published by William Morrow. McLarin is also co-author of the memoir *Growing Up X* by Ilyasah Shabazz with Kim McLarin. Her memoir, *Divorce Dog*, will be published in 2013 by C&R Press.

*Jump at the Sun* was chosen as a 2007 Fiction Honor Book by the Massachusetts Center for the Book. It was also nominated for a Hurston-Wright Legacy Award and chosen by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association as a 2007 Fiction Honor Book.

McLarin is a former staff writer for *The New York Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Greensboro News & Record* and the Associated Press. She has taught at Northeastern University and Fairfield University. She is currently an assistant professor in the Writing, Literature and Publishing department at Emerson College in Boston.

McLarin is a regular commentator on *Basic Black*, Boston's long-running weekly television program devoted exclusively to African-American themes. The show airs on WGBH-TV in Boston.





Jennifer Steil  
2012  
Novel In Progress  
Runner-Up



## Chiaroscuro

From the forthcoming book, *The Ambassador's Wife*, to be published by Doubleday in spring 2015

August 11, 2004

Miranda

Observed life

A single ray of sunlight streaming in through a tiny square cut into the top of Miranda's *diwan* caught in the dusty air, exposing the glittering powder with which the women filled their lungs. Atoms of stone exhaled centuries ago that have drifted out windows and down narrow passageways, in and out of mosques, in and out of *Mazrooqi* mouths. Male and female, adult and child, believer and heretic, sharing breath. Miranda contemplated the light, the tumbling grit, tempted to draw out her own sketchbook. Pieces of the universe, as old as god, rained down on them.

She sat on the floor at the end of the rectangular room, charcoal pencils and pastels fanned out in front of her. The women were still floating onto the cushions, *abayas* sinking down around them like parachutes, two on either side. Aaqilah and Nadia on her left, Tazkia and Mariam on her right. Their faces are bare, *niqabs* flipped back over their heads. As Miranda shuffles through a stack of sketchbooks on her lap, they unzip bags, curl their bare feet underneath them, and lift their eyes to her, hopeful, wary, eager, anxious.

They've been meeting for several weeks now. Each time, the women are incrementally more relaxed, more confident. But it is slow. Their fears are too well founded to be vanquished entirely. In her first class, as if to make sure she understood what they risked, they had told her—in turns, interrupting each other—the tale of Aila. Instinctively the girls who doodled in the margins of their school notebooks were drawn to each other, formed a kind of protective secret society. Aila had been among the boldest, sketching caricatures of their teachers and friends that she shared only with her fellow artists before tearing them into confetti or setting fire to them in an unpopulated alley. When her father discovered one such drawing on one of the back pages of a textbook, he had taken Aila by the hand without speaking and led her to the room where her mother was ironing their sheets.

"Go," he said to his wife. "I have a lesson to teach to your daughter." As soon as the woman was out of sight Aila's, father had turned the iron on its side and stood behind the girl, holding her wrists. With slow deliberation, he pressed her palms against the scorching metal. Her mother had responded immediately to her screams, but had been unable to pull her husband's arms away. Aila was hospitalized with third-degree burns for 13 days before she died of septicemia.

The story had a dampening effect on Miranda's professorial passion. While she hadn't cavalierly invited the women to study with her, she had insufficiently grasped the peril in which she placed them. Never had such responsibility been laid on her shoulders. Yet, here they were. Five hungry souls, gathered before her, their passion overwhelming their terror. Did this not have to be honored? Knowing what they dared, how could she *not* teach them?

She hadn't wanted to challenge them too much at first, hadn't wanted to exacerbate their fears. Only slowly, gently did she approach them, the way one walks toward a wounded animal guarded by its mother, teaching their fingers to trace ordinary objects.

"I have some extra sketchbooks and pencils," she said casually, passing them around. "In case you would like them." Sketchbooks and pencils were never extra, never in danger of going unused. But none of the women—whose parents were shopkeepers, teachers, or unemployed—could afford to buy them for themselves. They have been drawing and painting on pages torn from school notebooks, magazines, the margins of textbooks. She had to find a way to give them what they needed without it looking like a gift, like charity. They touched the thick new paper with wonder. Tazkia bent to inhale its woody scent.

"I have a new exercise for you to try today," Miranda said. "So I'm not going to waste time talking. First, I want you to draw an object from memory, from your imagination. It will be something you can find in this house or in the courtyard, but not in this room. It could be a plant, a tea kettle, a chair. Think about this object. Summon it. You will have thirty minutes to work. This is the

first half of the exercise.”

“We can pick anything?” asked Tazkia.

“No. Here...” Miranda picked up the cloche hat lying upside down beside her. Azu’s hat. “I’ve written the names of four objects on scraps of paper and put them in this hat. You will each pick one piece of paper, and draw what is written on it. Okay? Any questions?”

The women were silent, staring at her anxiously. “It’s not a test. You’re just drawing.” When no one spoke up, she passed the hat to her left, to Aaqilah. Tazkia pulled out a piece of paper, frowned at it, crumpled it in her hands, smoothed it against her sketchbook, and crumpled it again. There was a clatter as the women reached for their pencils, the creak of their stiff new books, and then nothing but the scratching of pencils on paper.

Miranda turned to look out the windows, forgetting she had covered them. All of her portholes were obscured by scarves and sheets, to conceal her women from view. It was unlikely that anyone would be able to see in here, on the third floor of the house, but her students’ paranoia was contagious. The only uncovered source of light was that small square in the ceiling. It was still bright outside, still enough light burned through her makeshift curtains to illuminate their work. But it wasn’t ideal. Sighing, she flipped open her own sketchbook. What could she do? Not Azu, not any woman. Their bed. It was the first thing that came to her.

The alarm on her mobile phone startled her back into the room. “Okay, stop,” she said to the women. “Turn the page.”

“But I’m not done.” Mariam’s chubby round face gleamed with a sheen of sweat.

“You are for now. Forget what you have just done and find a new page. Everyone there?” The women nodded, stroking their clean pages.

“Now, go find the object you just drew, and bring it back here if you can. Or draw it where it is. I want you to draw it from observation. Look at it closely as you draw, notice everything about it, every little detail. Don’t make any assumptions, just draw exactly what you see in front of you.”

With a rustle of rayon, the women stretched their legs. Tazkia shot out of the room first, followed by Aaqilah and Nadia holding hands. Mariam lingered, looking anxious. “What is it, Mariam?”

“I drew a tea kettle...”

“You can go take our kettle, it’s all right.”

Relieved, Mariam smiled and slipped downstairs.

Miranda followed them, turning off at the bedroom she shared with Azu. She looked at their mattress on the floor and then back at her sketchpad, smiling. It wasn’t anything like what she had drawn. The blue felt blanket wasn’t pulled up neatly, but tossed in a heap at the foot of the bed. White sheets had been ripped from where they were tucked underneath the mattress and lay twisted, damp, and mangled. Azu’s pillow was halfway across the room, where she had flung it this morning when it became lodged between their two bodies. In the corner, Miranda’s squashed pillow held on

to the vague outline of Azu’s profile. Her head had been turned to the left, her cheek pressed on the embroidered roses of the pillow case, her teeth gripping a fold of the cotton as Miranda took her hips between her hands. Even standing here, Miranda could still smell her, the dark wintry forest pine of her.

The bed she had drawn was the kind of bed you might see in a children’s first words book, an illustration of a generic bed. But it wasn’t this bed. Quickly, she sketched their sex-tossed sheets, feeling a tug of longing in her gut, before returning to the diwan and her women.

As they continued scratching at their pages, she wandered the room, looking over their shoulders. Aaqilah drew her pencil along the stem of a potted plant, the basil Miranda grew in the courtyard. Mariam huddled over her sketch of their ancient tin tea kettle. A spiderweb spun from Nadia’s pencil. And Tazkia had drawn the bicycle that rusted against the walls of their house.

“Time’s up,” Miranda announced. The women looked up at her, slightly dazed, coming back into their bodies. “Tear out the first drawing so that you can lie it alongside the second, and tell me what you see.”

The air stood still as the women examined their work. It was unusual for the city to fall this silent, as if it were holding its breath. It was long after the clamor of lunchtime but before the muezzins for evening prayers.

“Wow,” said Tazkia first. “Very completely different.”

“Different how?”

Tazkia squinched up her face, wrinkling her stubby nose. “More detailed?”

“Not so boring?” This from Aaqilah.

“And why is that?” The girls simply stared down at their two pieces, as if waiting for them to speak. “Because when you draw things from memory, you tend to set things down as symbols. Like the cocktail glass signs in airports.” Whoops, bad example. “Or like the airplane symbols you pass on signs on the way to the airport. They are recognizably planes, but not specific planes. Only when you observe an actual plane, and put down its specific lines on paper can you see.” None of them had ever been on a plane, but they saw them overhead with alarming regularity, government planes on their way to the North.

Miranda leaned forward on her hands, pulling Tazkia’s drawings across the carpet and holding them up. “Look at the first bicycle. It’s a generic bicycle, a two-dimensional illustration of the word. We know what it is, but there is no personality there. But here,” she put the first one down and held up just the second. “Suddenly her bicycle has three dimensions. The handle bars are turned sideways. They have thick rubber grips on them, and tassels on the end. The tires are slightly flat. The seat is banana-shaped rather than triangular. There is a screw coming loose behind the seat, hanging off of it. The basket on the front has a hole. You couldn’t make this bicycle up; you couldn’t imagine it.”

Miranda set down the drawings and turned Nadia’s spiderweb sketches so that they are facing the

women. The first was neat and geometric, a perfect hexagon. The observed spiderweb is larger, sprawling, an octagon with a small tear on one side, a thread hanging from the top. "Do you see? When you actually look at things, weird things happen that you would never know about were you not observing."

Tazkia was kneeling, pulling drawings closer to her, inspecting them all. "Magic," she says. "Like magic."

"No." Miranda shook her head, smiling. "It is only that there are more interesting things in this world than you can imagine. You must go out. You must explore. And you must keep your eyes wide, wide, open."

**Jennifer Steil** is author of **The Woman Who Fell From the Sky, An American Woman's Adventures in the Oldest City on Earth**. Published by Broadway Books/Random House), it is a memoir of the year she spent as editor of the *Yemen Observer* newspaper in Sana'a. The book received accolades in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* chose it as one of their best travel books of 2010, and *Elle* magazine awarded it their *Readers' Prize*.

It has been published in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, and Poland. Jennifer is now completing her first novel. While she currently works as a writer and freelance journalist, theatre was her first love.

She completed a bachelor's degree in theatre at Oberlin College before working for four years as a professional actor in Seattle. During this time, she became increasingly frustrated with the limited roles available to women and the dearth of female voices in the theatre world at large.

Without abandoning theatre, she began dedicating more time to her writing, eventually completing an MFA in fiction at Sarah Lawrence College and a second master's degree from the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Since 1997, she has worked as a reporter, writer, and editor for newspapers and magazines in the US and abroad.

Recent work includes a long piece on Yemen in the *World Policy Journal*, a Yemen piece for the German paper *Die Welt*, and several London stories for the *Washington Times*.

After spending four years in Yemen and two years in London, she has relocated to La Paz, Bolivia, where she is living with her husband and young daughter.

## Novel In Progress: OTHER FINALISTS

### **African Son**

Peter Tattersall, New Orleans, LA

### **Angel of Deceit**

William H. Coles, Salt Lake City, UT

### **Bondage**

John Malone, Lafayette, LA

### **Coffee for Copper**

Sharon Thatcher of Boise, ID & Wayland Stallard, Roanoke, VA

### **Constellations**

Carlos Cunha, Gainesville, FL

### **Father's Day**

Adam Falik, New Orleans, LA

### **Fire on the Island**

Timothy Jay Smith, Paris, France

### **Heavens**

Shannon Capone Kirk, Manchester-By-The Sea, MA

### **Head Count**

Janet Taylor Perry, Ridgeland, MS

### **Johnny's Gone to Hilo**

Andrew Clarke, Milwaukee, WI

### **Lost Soul**

Margie Walker, Houston, TX

### **On the Track of Unknown Animals**

Barbara Litkowski, Zionsville, IN

### **Psychopomp and Circumstances**

Greg Houser, Tuscaloosa, AL

### **Run of Play,**

Seth Satterlee, New York, NY

### **Teacher of the Year**

Rita Ciresi, Wesley Chapel, FL

### **The Disloyal Planter,**

Bernard Smith, Mandeville, LA

### **The Girl in the Bathtub,**

Robert Raymer, Sarawak, Malaysia

### **The Invention of Violet,**

Amy Boutell, Santa Barbara, CA

### **The Many Deaths of Mickey O'Donovan,**

Xavier McCaffrey, Chicago, IL

### **The Warp and Woof,**

Zachary Tyler Vickers, Rome, NY

### **Trouble with the Hourglass,**

Candi Sary, Costa Mesa, CA

### **Narrow Pilgrim,**

Kimberly Faith Waid, New Orleans, LA

### **Wings,**

David Johnson, Kalamazoo, MI

### **Womb**

Mary Hutchins Reed, Chicago, IL





*Geoff Schutt  
2012  
Novel In Progress  
Runner-Up*



## **Lower case love**

(The excerpt below was subsequently published in the May 2013 issue of "In Other Words: Merida")

### **3. Uncle Harry**

The second week in May and garbage day and Eleanor leaves the house to take a walk. There, on the ground, meant for the garbage but somehow having escaped, is a greeting card. A Christmas card, actually. "For a Dear Niece at Christmas," reads the outside, and inside, "May this happy Christmas season, Bring special joy to you, To a brighter every day, dear Niece, Straight through the New Year, too!" It is signed, simply, "Uncle Harry." Not "Love, Uncle Harry," but "Uncle Harry."

The front of the card pictures a young girl, perhaps the age Eleanor was when her mother left, or a little younger, but close enough. The girl is wearing a red jacket, covering a light blue dress, and she has a matching hat on her head, wider than her body, with little sparkles of diamonds. She holds a gift in one hand, and a flower in the other. It looks like a leaf from a poinsettia. But it might be a rose.

Eleanor tries to wipe the dirt from the card. It's still moist from a morning rain.

She turns it over, looking for the marking -- where the price would be. There is an imprint on the back that reads, "Art Guild of Williamsburg 10X592."

The card could have been 50 years old. Or it might have only been a year old.

It certainly is at least five-plus months old, Eleanor thinks, and tossed out with the trash, but not quite making the trash, either.

\*

Eleanor took this as a sign. She took lots of things as signs, but this was something bigger. This was something quite extraordinary in fact, finding a thrown-away Christmas card in the middle of May. She didn't have an

Uncle Harry, and if she did have a long lost Uncle Harry, if in another world, this card might have been meant for her -- she wondered why he didn't sign the card with some measure of "Love." It all seemed so impersonal.

And it was so past tense.

And this wasn't Christmas in July. This was disappointment in May.

Here was a card from an uncle to his niece. Perhaps a gift had accompanied the card. Maybe there was money. (Money is so easy to give -- much easier than love. Even writing out the word "love.")

Didn't really matter, Eleanor thought. Did not really matter at all. Uncle Harry was a lousy guy. He was a jerk. He was everybody's uncle they did not want to invite over for the holidays. He was an alcoholic. He was a gambler. He was a child molester.

You did not want to sit next to Uncle Harry at Christmas dinner, that's for sure.

Or else -- he didn't know any better. Maybe he didn't know how. The emotions part, Eleanor thought. Maybe he kept his emotions deep inside, but if he did keep his emotions inside, why even send the card in the first place? It seemed a waste of time. A waste of a Christmas card.

\*

Eleanor hated the niece. She did at first, anyway. But the niece was beginning to seem familiar. Maybe the niece was a selfish young girl who didn't care for Christmas at all. Maybe Uncle Harry had included a twenty dollar bill and all the niece could think was how to spend the money. Forget the card. Forget Uncle Harry until next year, or her birthday, or whatever.

Or maybe not.

"For a Dear Niece," and you look so happy, but now

you've been tossed out, and you're not even good enough for the garbage, Eleanor thought. You land in the street and I find you.

Hello Dear Niece, my name is Eleanor. I suppose you're good enough for me, Eleanor thought. You're good enough for me to pick you up, and to brush the day's scum off of you, and to hold you in my hands as if you are some girl deserving of that special joy, and to something brighter every day, whatever that meant. Through the New Year at the very least.

Well, Eleanor, was thinking now, and quite loud in her own head she was thinking this. The New Year is long past. And so is Christmas. You understand? she was thinking. Christmas is over, and there is no New Year!

It's the second week of May.

\*

Present tense always seems to sneak up on her. Eleanor feels flushed. She thinks, But I wish -- I wish -- . *God, no* .... Her eyes are tearing up. I wish I had an Uncle Harry, and if he didn't sign "Love" on his Christmas card to me, I'd make him say it. I would. I really would make him say it.

Even if he was a child molester, I'd make him say it. I would shake him by the shoulders. I would scream at him until he said it.

\*

Eleanor turns to look at the houses. The card could have come from anywhere. "Do you hear me, Uncle Harry?" she cries out. "Do you hear me? I'm looking for you."

And after all of this, she cannot let the card go. It would be too easy to let it fall right back to the ground, where she found it. Leave it for next garbage day. Or somebody will pick it up before garbage day. Or some animal or bird will use the card for a nest.

"Uncle Harry," Eleanor says, but very softly, "I will always love you. It doesn't even matter if you already have a niece. I will be your other niece. We can share you, Uncle Harry."

Geoff Schutt's short fiction has appeared in The Quarterly (edited by Gordon Lish for Vintage Books/Random House), The Best of Writers at Work, The Wastelands Review and The Laurel Review, among others. His short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He has received three artist grants for his fiction-as-performance art from The Arts Commission of Greater Toledo. After living in Ohio for many years, he now resides in Boston. His novel-length work, including the novel from which this story is excerpted, is represented by James McGinniss of James McGinniss Literary Associates, New York City. More about Geoff Schutt is available at his blog, "This Side of Paradise," at <http://geoffschutt.blogspot.com>

## 2014 William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition

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*Paul Byall  
2012  
Novel In Progress  
Runner-Up*



## **Ridgeland**

On his way to the shop, Carl turned his pickup into the McDonald's drive-thru and ordered an Egg McMuffin and a large coffee. At the window a yawning, bleary-eyed teenager wearing a headset and a stud in her tongue took his money and handed him a white paper bag, which he placed on the passenger seat beside his morning paper and an oily pair of old work gloves. He drove past a row of weary front lawns – vanquished by the season and the wayward tramp of a thousand adolescent feet – and rustic porches sporting orange and black decorations, pumpkins and Indian corn. Soon would come the bedsheet ghosts and dangling skeletons. The town was surrounded by farmland, and behind the houses stretched acres of fields, mostly shorn to stubbles now. The combines were gobbling the last of the autumn corn.

He turned into the drive and stopped the pickup before the gate in the chain link fence that surrounded the lot. The October winds had built a fringe of refuse – soda cans, candy wrappers, beer bottles, paper bags – around the base of the fence, and he kicked a Coke can away from the gate as he withdrew the keys from his pocket. He wiggled the key into the padlock and wrestled it back and forth, wondering if this might be the day it snapped off in the lock. He parked at the side of the building to leave room for the customers' cars in front and crossed the lot to the mournful crunch of gravel beneath his work boots.

He unlocked the office door and flicked on the lights, triggering a fluorescent hum that would soon merge with the cinderblock walls and gray linoleum and become part of the general dreariness of the place. Dropping the McDonald's bag and his morning paper on the desk behind the counter, he passed through the office to the garage where he flicked on another set of fluorescents that illuminated Freddy's clutter of tools, parts and greasy rags. The Camaro transmission Freddy had left on the floor jumped up at his feet, and he stumbled and skipped – squawking out loud, "Shit!" – on his way to the bay doors. He pressed the button on the wall, and the doors rattled up, flooding the garage with the light of day.

He walked back to the office, sat in the swivel chair behind the desk and pulled the Egg McMuffin and coffee from the bag. He unfolded his newspaper, spread it open on the desk and bit into the McMuffin. How long

since he'd last tasted a home-cooked meal? He couldn't pinpoint exactly when his marriage had descended to this level, it had happened so gradually, like muddy water settling to silt. He recalled coming home a few months earlier to the welcome of a note on the kitchen counter: *Gone to Mom and Dad's*. That hadn't been the first time he'd been greeted by a note, but it had been the first time she hadn't left something for him to eat, a tuna casserole or a couple pieces of fried chicken. Since then they'd become like roommates who worked different schedules. Except Millie didn't work. He'd find himself most evenings in front of the TV with a pizza or Chinese takeout watching some Fox News bimbo recite the days' catastrophes.

He awoke once in the middle of the night and felt around on the bed for the lump of her body only to remember that she'd spent the night at her parents'. That night he'd dragged himself out of bed and into the bathroom to stand over the toilet listening to the drone of his urine against the porcelain, drumming out an insistent refrain: this was where he was, and it wasn't going to get any better.

He'd had his chances. Coming out of the Army, he'd applied for the FBI, had passed the civil service test and the interview in St. Louis, but they would have had to move, most likely to D.C., and Millie wasn't having it. Neither were her parents. Instead the old man had bought the garage and said, "This is for you guys, a wedding present." But it wasn't really; it was still in the old man's name. That was their hold on him.

He popped the lid on his coffee and chucked it into the waste basket. He hated drinking through those punch-holes. You had to tip the cup up so high, he always ended up spilling it down his chin. He took a sip of coffee then pulled a package of Marlboros from his breast pocket, tapped a cigarette loose and plucked it out with his lips. He tossed the pack on the desk and glanced up at the clock on the wall. Where the hell was Freddy?

*The Ridgeland Morning News* recorded another predictable yesterday, a headline on the failing bearing factory – finally closing its doors after years of decline – and a spate of burglaries over in Stonecastle. There was a side article, a single column, about the Ridgeland High majorettes competing in some twirling pageant and the



usual drivel about the area sports teams; Stonecastle Bearcats heading to the state championship. Whoopy-do.

There was a sound at the door he thought might be Freddy, but when he looked up a tall man in a long, suede jacket was standing on the concrete floor glancing around. He didn't come directly to the counter the way they usually did, but hung back, as if he were casing out the place. He was an out-of-towner, you could tell that right away. He wore a black T-shirt under the suede jacket, except it wasn't really a T-shirt, because it had long sleeves, the cuffs protruding about an inch beyond the jacket cuffs.

"Can you do a wheel alignment?"

Carl took another sip of coffee and lifted his cigarette from the ashtray. One thing he'd learned over the years: don't let anybody rush you. "What you got?"

"Mercedes. S65 AMG."

"S65? We don't see many of those."

"I bet not," the man said, offering a half-smirk of a smile, just a thin crack opening slowly in his face, like drying mud.

Carl looked down at his schedule, tapping his pen on the counter top. "Can't get to it for a while. Got three cars in front of you."

"How long's a while?"

"Two, three hours."

"Is there someplace nearby I can get a bite to eat?"

No way this man was from around here. Aside from the car and the clothes, there was a way of standing, talking, and . . . the eyes. The eyes of Colton County men beyond a certain age had a glassy dullness to them, but these were alert, like an animal's. He'd seen eyes like that in Afghanistan. "There's Barney's. About three blocks down the road." He threw his hand in the general direction of the place.

The man pursed his lips, thinking.

"You can leave it, or you can bring it back. It's up to you."

The man tossed Carl the keys. "I need to stretch my legs."

"You got a cell phone? A number where we can reach you?"

The man gave him a number, and he jotted it on the service form.

Through the window, Carl watched the man cross the lot to his car, noting the incongruity of his shoes on the gravel, loafers that looked like alligator or some such exotic leather crunching against coarse gray stones. He opened the trunk of the Mercedes and withdrew a black leather bag with a long strap, which he looped over his shoulder. The car had California plates.

Something about that picture was strange – besides the alligator loafers – something about the man removing the bag from the trunk. Carl stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. What was it about that picture that bothered him?

Freddy came walking sideways through the lot admiring the Mercedes, his hands jammed into his jacket pockets,

his cheek distended by a plug of tobacco. He pushed through the door and asked who the pussy magnet belonged to.

"Just some guy," Carl said. "Needs a wheel alignment."

"Ain't never done an S65 AMG," he said.

"You ain't ever seen an S65 AMG."

"Car like that'd solve your woman problems." He shot a stream of tobacco juice into the metal waste basket in the corner. "They drop their panties just to feel that soft leather on their bare asses."

He had told Freddy maybe a hundred times not to spit into the waste can, each time silently swearing to smack him in the face the next time he did it, but Carl only frowned and stabbed a cigarette in his mouth. Freddy had been two years ahead of him in high school – a little weasel of kid even then – and Carl suspected he resented working for someone he used to think he could push around. He'd tried it once in the locker room after football practice and Carl had bloodied his nose. Freddy was the kind of kid who thought it funny to slip red hot analgesic balm into a teammate's underwear while he was in the shower. But he was a good mechanic, probably the best in town.

He turned the page in his paper and saw that his father-in-law had been given another award, this from the Rotary Club for meritorious service, whatever that meant. There was a picture of him accepting a plaque, smiling his big shyster face at the camera, his suit jacket unbuttoned to show a round belly hanging over his belt buckle. *Charles 'Chuck' Chisholm of Chisholm Ford accepts the annual award from Rotary President Burl Carver.* What a crock. They'd pin a ribbon on Al Capone if he donated enough money. Carl had been a member once. Had met for breakfast every morning at the club and sat around the table with all the other titans of commerce in town, drinking coffee and talking about how they had to keep the liberals out of government.

Old Chisholm was there every morning, always the first in and last out, which was easy enough because he had a whole battalion of underpaid salesmen patrolling the showroom and the used car lot where you could pick up a broken-down clunker for 20% over book. Old Ben Grimes had bought a '99 Volvo from him once, and the left front strut snapped a month later on the interstate and nearly killed him. When Carl had mentioned it to Millie, she'd said, "Well, you can't expect him to know everything about every car he sells. He's not clairvoyant."

Chisholm had held his own through the recession, although '09 had been touch and go. The business probably would have gone under had not his brother, Herbert, been president of Ridgeland Bank and Trust. There were about five families that ran the town, and the Chisholms were one of them. Their father had been the most prosperous farmer in the county, owning close to a thousand acres. Millie's parents still lived on the family homestead, although they'd long since leased out the fields to neighbors. Carl doubted if old 'Chuck' had ever planted his fat butt on a tractor seat.

Spring arrived early in The Bottom, when a brick etched with the words *heathen sand nigger* crashed through Baba's storefront window. The sun had barely risen over the trees, and we were getting ready for school in our usual slow motion when Baba called home. Without wasting a moment, Mommy ushered me and Sami out of the house and around the corner to survey the damage. Her hands were tight on ours as she dragged us along. Sami's backpack got caught up in his stubby boy-legs, and my Solar System mobile, with its colored Styrofoam balls and twine, got jumbled while I tried to keep my knee socks from pooling around my ankles—Mercury, Venus, and Earth impossibly knotted together like strange fruits.

When we got to the shop, there was a giant hole in the window like a screaming mouth with jagged fangs. Through it, we could see Baba cooking eggs and cheese on the griddle. Mommy pushed us inside the door and bells jingled overhead. A recording of the **Qur'an** was already on repeat, the verses pouring out from a cd player shelved high above the cash register, squeezed in among the light bulbs, toothbrushes, manila envelopes, batteries, and single packets of Thera-flu. Waiting patiently in front of the candy rack, there was a skinny man the color of a paper bag. His eyes, like ours, shifted back and forth from Baba to the pile of glass shards in a pink dustpan on the floor. Next to it, the brick was heavy and still alive.

"Have you called the police?" Mommy demanded.

"Do you think it's a good idea?" Baba asked, wrapping the man's sandwich in aluminum foil.

"He does have a point, Missus," said the man. At that time, people were cautious about calling police into The Bottom.

"I fix it myself," Baba said.

Mommy ignored both of them. "Sabry, you have to make a police report. This is a hate crime." She flipped open her cell phone, dialed 911, and stepped away from us to give the details to the operator.

"It's a damn shame all this toxic behavior in the world." The man shook his head, placed a couple of crumpled dollar bills by the register, and then stepped



*Alison Grifa  
Ismaili*

## 2012 Gold Medal for Best Short Story



### ***The Bottom***

out to begin his workday. The rest of the neighborhood was still waking up. "Did you have time for breakfast?" Baba asked us, his head barely peeking over the meat counter. I nodded, and Sami said, "Runny oatmeal." With one finger pressed to his lips, Baba slid two spicy spinach pastries into our hands. They were warm and greasy, carefully wrapped in paper towels. He winked at us. "They're on their way," said Mommy, referring to the police. She dropped her shoulders and sighed when she saw our hands filled with Baba's treats. Then, she grabbed us under our elbows and steered us out the door to school.

Later that night, Sami clicked on a flashlight so his face glowed in the dark room we both shared. Mommy was downstairs talking on the phone, her voice rising in angry muffles through the floorboards. "What's a sand nigger?" he asked, shining the flashlight into my eyes so I had to blink. I knew what it was by putting two and two together. "It's one of those desert fleas whose bite itches for days," I lied. He moved the flashlight under his chin and nodded. "Well, what's a heathen then?" I searched the glow-in-the-dark stars that Baba had stuck all over our ceiling. I didn't know the answer to that one.

That spring, there was a lot of weather even for southeast Louisiana. Thunderstorms crashed in the clouds and set off car alarms bleeping and whining up and down our soggy street. Mommy didn't mind. She would watch the storms roll in from our little back porch, her maroon-colored hair growing frizzy and swirling around her head like Jupiter's rings. Faulkner skies, she called them. The angels bowling in heaven.

Baba, on the other hand, took the weather very seriously. There were tornado warnings on the radio and TV, interrupting the regular shows with loud, evenly timed buzzes. During the storms, Baba would hover over our beds, whispering with his voice raspy from the cigarettes he could never quit: "Wake up... wake up... It says to stay low and away from the windows." Then, he'd herd

# SHORT STORY: *Alison Grifa Ismaili*

us downstairs, dragging our pillows and blankets so we could camp out in the living room.

In the beginning, Mommy would wave off Baba and roll over deep in her sleep like a dragon. But when the news reported that a mother died in a tornado not too far from East Baton Rouge Parish, Baba insisted that she come downstairs with us. And she did, after a lot of humphing and grumbling.

One night, Baba had us all sprawled on the floor, staring up at the water circles on the ceiling and listening to the hail chunks pelt the sides of our house. He rested between Sami and me, squeezing the two of us on either side, his own thoughts somewhere far away. Mommy had her back toward us, already snoring.

"Baba, do they have tornadoes in Palestine?" asked Sami. He was only seven, but had already memorized the country capitals on five continents. We were both mystified by wherever Baba had come from. We knew it had to be different than here...different than The Bottom. But something told us that it wasn't different-good. Lots of times, Sami and I would whisper about it during the late-night conversations in our room. What kind of place could be worse than The Bottom?

"No," said Baba. "No, they don't have tornadoes."

"Well, why not?" asked Sami. He was a boy with a lot of questions.

"God spares them these things in Filisteen," said Baba.

"But, why?"

"Because, instead, they have war."

The shadows scattered in the headlights of a car passing by on the damp street. I imagined Sami's face on the other side of Baba, scrunched up just like mine, as we tried to figure out this new piece in the puzzle that was Baba's history. Baba still had his arms around us, but when I looked over, he had fallen asleep, his small chest like a sparrow's, rising up and down with shallow breaths.

Our neighborhood was called The Bottom because it was so poor, you couldn't get much lower. Mommy said it was like the bottom of a barrel or the bottom of a shoe. Some of the houses were held together by chicken wire and ripped tarpaulins and rotting two-by-fours. Ours was the only two-story house in the maze of tiny streets.

We had to live in The Bottom at first because Mommy was only an adjunct at LSU and Baba's degree didn't translate into anything in America. Mommy said that this was because America was racist, but Baba thought it was because he didn't have the proper licensing—a few courses, a test or two, and he would probably be able to get some good work in one of the chemical plants lining the Mississippi and the Gulf. He said things like this took time. First, he'd have to learn to read and write good English. He always said this, and then he'd run his fingers through my hair—angel hair, he called it—and said that *I* would have to teach him one day.

Instead of being an engineer, Baba had opened

up a convenience store in The Bottom. It was the only one that didn't sell malt liquor or hot fries or moldy salami. Baba stocked it with only halal meats—frozen kefta balls, chicken drumsticks from a Muslim farmer in Zachary, beef stew. He kept whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables in large crates from the Red Stick Farmers Market. Whatever was in season—strawberries, blueberries, bell peppers, squash, mustard greens, radishes.

In the beginning no one came, but then Imam Shaheed Jones from the storefront mosque on Washington Street started convincing people in the neighborhood to shop at Baba's store. He was a thick man, the color of volcanic glass, and most days, he marched up and down The Bottom in his black suit and tie sweating under the Cajun sun, just to make sure everyone was all right. He said that The Bottom was a food desert, and at Friday prayers, he would tell everybody to stop using food stamps to buy government cheese and mystery meat at the Cheap-O-Mart.

Imam Shaheed would come over our house for dinner sometimes, and he and Mommy would pound our table with their fists, furious about the injustices in East Baton Rouge, the South, and the world. They were always talking about "the community" and the loss of pride and self-respect. The loss of hope! They'd shout and throw their hands in the air. The two of them shared the same reptile-spirit and saw eye-to-eye like they were born from the same egg, one black and one white, and then separated.

Little by little, more people came to Baba's store, and soon he stopped bringing home overripe fruits and just-past milk for us to gobble down in a hurry. Some of the ladies on the block began dropping off pralines, boiled peanuts, fresh-baked sweet potato pies, and loaves of jalapeno corn bread, hoping that Baba could sell them. And he did, only sometimes keeping a twenty-five-cent profit on each cake. Mommy argued that he should be more consistent with collecting his share, because after all, we were a struggling family in The Bottom, too.

Most days, I would go straight to Baba's shop after school where I'd find him with a gigantic man named Mr. Khalil, who had sprawling tattoos on his forearms the size of bowling pins. Spider webs, skulls, crooked old trees and crying flowers marked his bulging muscles. Together, Mr. Khalil and Baba sat side-by-side on mismatched chairs, using the ice cream freezer as a desk. Baba's fingers, gray with graphite, flitted back and forth over a workbook filled with times tables, fractions, and decimals.

"Ayouni, you're here!" he would announce when he saw me. "Come, ayouni, come." Instead of my name, Noura, Baba always called me his eye. He would pull an ice pop out of the freezer-desk and hand it to me.

Mr. Khalil wasn't the only one who came for help with math or science. There were others, too, who would sit in huddled rows of three or four, their cheeks leaning



into their palms, sharing one textbook. Baba would stand next to them, rubbing his stubbly beard and correcting their sketches of tetrahedrons.

"Why do they come?" I asked one day when the men left after a complicated series of handshakes.

"They are learning G-E-D," Baba said. "They need help with mathematics, and I know mathematics."

Then he went to fill up a bucket to mop the store again.

"We did fractions last year in fourth grade," I said, following him into the stock closet.

"Ayouni, maybe they don't have as good teachers as you, eh?"

As a way of saying thanks, Mr. Khalil gave Baba his hip hop demo, and Baba filed it carefully alongside of his **Qur'an** recordings and Fairuz cds. The other men brought him sunglasses, t-shirts, an outdated Blackberry, which Baba didn't know how to use. Sometimes, the men's mothers or wives or girlfriends would send along lemon squares or gumbo without any pork in it.

Outside of the shop, time moved much, much faster. CNN was constantly streaming from our television. Anti-Muslim protests and talk of anti-Sharia laws became a choppy soundtrack to our lives. In the middle of preparing dinner, Mommy would run into the living room with a chicken thigh in one hand and a wet knife in the other, shouting at politicians on the tv, bird guts flying through the air. These reports and Mommy's yelling became more and more frequent, and I remembered the brick in Baba's window just a couple months earlier. My mind traced over and over the shapes of the scrawled letters, the capitals all misplaced. **HeATHEN SAND Nigger**.

Imam Shaheed paced the streets some more, telling us that if we see something, say something. At Friday khutbah, he would say: "Pray for those who don't understand us." Mommy, who never attended prayers, just rolled her eyes because she had different ideas about compassion.

In the meantime, Baba was at work. Only every now and again, I'd catch him watching Al Jazeera from Mommy's laptop late at night when he finally got home, his face a steely-blue in the glow of the monitor. His dark eyes would bounce back and forth over the scribbles of the Arabic news ticker at the bottom of the screen. Gunshots and shouts for freedom echoed from Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen. Somehow, they were not that far away from The Bottom.

The knock came on our front door as more of an annoyance because it was Friday, and we were in the middle of playing Battleship—me and Sami against Baba—and we were winning. Fridays were the days we loved most because Baba closed shop for a few hours after prayers to spend time with us. Mommy was usually absent doing university stuff, and this time she was on her way back from an interview at Tulane for a tenure-

track job. Something real, she had reminded us again and again throughout the week.

I nudged Sami to get the door. Baba and I were serious when it came to winning, so I had to concentrate carefully on my next move. Baba, too, studied his pieces and occasionally his eyes drifted to the TV, where there was breaking news from Benghazi. Over the voices of the American reporters, there were screams and bomb blasts and angry-sounding consonants that only Baba could completely understand.

He looked at the doorway and then at me, and we both realized that Sami had been gone too long. Baba got up, and I heard him on the other side of the stairs.

"Yes, of course, come in, come in." Baba's words always tumbled out of his mouth in a hurry.

"Sami, take to the kitchen." He directed from the other room and called to me, "Noura...?"

Both of the men had short-cropped hair—one blond, the other gray—and they wore dark suits that seemed too angular for our kitchen with its saggy ceiling. They seemed cramped and uncomfortable at our tiny table, but still the gray-haired man smiled. Baba quickly picked up all the Arabic magazines he got sent to him in bunches from his cousin in New York.

"We're sorry to bother you, Mr. Abdullatif," said the man with gray hair. His accent was boxy, not from Louisiana.

"No problem, no problem," Baba said. "Ayouni, please, make a coffee." He sat down at the table. Next to the men, he seemed to be made of wire hangers.

I got the copper rakweh from the back burner of the stove, and Sami handed me a tin canister with a fake mosaic design. The top was screwed on so tight that my hands hurt trying to open it. I had to hold it close to my chest and turn until I felt the redness in my face shoot out of my eyes.

The extra-fine coffee grounds spilled all over the floor.

Sami's eyes widened at the mess, and I looked over to find Baba watching me calmly. The gray-haired man smiled some more. His teeth gleamed like a Crest Whitening Strips commercial.

"Ayouni," Baba said, "regular coffee is fine. Make in the coffee pot." Then he said to the men, "She is quite good in mathematics. Last year, they said she has highest scores on the test in Baton Rouge."

Sami began wiping up the coffee grounds with a wet paper towel.

"Sami, too, is very good at his studies. I am blessed," said Baba. His hands rested on the table in front of him.

"Kids are great, aren't they?" said the man with gray hair. His gaze lingered on us a little longer. The blond-haired man had already turned back to Baba.

"We have a few questions, Mr. Abdullatif," he said.

"Just a few things we're investigating," said the gray-haired man. "Standard procedure. We get a tip from someone, and we just have to come and check it out."

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Baba nodded, his mouth in a small frown.

I finally got the water in the pot, and the right amount of spoonfuls in the filter. I pressed *brew*, and then Sami and I stood frozen and silent like two anoles caught where they shouldn't be.

"We understand you're a chemical engineer, Mr. Abdullatif?" asked the blond-haired man.

"I was, but now I am a shopkeeper. My shop, Belinda's Market, is around the corner." Baba gestured behind him.

"Yes, we know it," said the gray-haired man. "Business good?"

"Thank God," said Baba, translating from his head to his mouth.

"You had some trouble a while back with some vandalism?" asked the blond-haired man.

"Trouble?" Baba said. "No... no trouble."

Everyone got quiet for a minute, and the men studied Baba.

"A broken window, but I fix it," he said. "It's no problem."

From the other room, loud buzzes interrupted the newscast. Another announcement from the Louisiana weather service. A tornado watch for the following areas: East Baton Rouge Parish, Ascension Parish, Iberville...

"Where did you get your degree?" asked the blond-haired man.

"Alexandria, Egypt."

"But you are Palestinian?"

"Yes...but I am permanent resident in United States for ten years." Baba turned toward me and Sami. "Ayouni, the coffee's ready. We will need cups."

I realized the kitchen was full with the thick smell of Dunkin Donuts coffee—another gift from Baba's cousin in New York. It was an ongoing joke between them—Baba sent Louisiana hot sauce up north, and we got Arabic magazines and coffee in exchange.

Sami lugged a full gallon of milk from the refrigerator and pushed it onto the table. I got out the cups that Mommy saved for company.

"Thank you." The gray-haired man beamed at me when I put a cup in front of him.

None of the men touched the milk, and only Baba put sugar into his cup. Spoonful after spoonful until he laughed at himself. "My wife says my teeth will be first to go."

The gray-haired man smiled and nodded.

"How did you meet your wife?" said the blond-haired man.

"She was on vacation in Egypt." Baba stirred in the sugar and looked up.

"And you never pursued your career as an engineer here?"

I felt Sami's hand slide into mine.

"I worked in a restaurant when I first came to Louisiana," Baba explained with only the slightest glance toward us. "My wife was completing her studies. Then we had a baby and again another baby. We didn't have

the capacity for me to study and catch up to American qualification. Maybe, one day... if God wills it."

The men sipped their coffee.

"Have you been back home to Jericho, Mr. Abdullatif?" asked the blond-haired man.

"Yes, three times," Baba said. "I'm very lucky."

"You must miss it," said the gray-haired man, hunching forward over the table.

"I miss it." Baba nodded.

The gray-haired man stood up and his face grew serious. "As you know, there are a lot of rumors going around, a lot of people scared. We need you to come with us to our Homeland Security Office in New Orleans. Should be just a few more questions. Someone will drive you back in no time flat."

Then, the blond-haired man stood up, and they both towered over Baba. Sami squeezed my hand.

"Is there something wrong?" Baba's eyes shifted between us and the men.

"Just some procedural questions, sir," said the gray-haired man. "The truth is your name—Sabry Abdullatif—popped up on one of our databases. Probably nothing, but we have to investigate."

Sabry Abdullatif. The gray-haired man's accent made squares around the waves and swirls of the Arabic syllables. I imagined Baba's name in small letters on a computer screen somewhere, next to a blinking cursor. How different it must look to him, his name in English, from left to right. How would they translate it? Patient servant of the All-Gentle.

"Baba, don't go," I said. I felt my face getting hot.

"You could end up on the No-Fly List, sir," said the blond-haired man.

Sami started to say something, but it ended up as a whimper. The tears were already streaming to his chin.

When Baba stood up, the men backed out of the kitchen. He leaned down and put a hand on each of our cheeks.

"It's nothing. Ayouni, you watch Sami till Mommy gets home. You are my big girl now."

We followed Baba into the living room. On the news, demonstrators were protesting and tearing down a wall somewhere in the Middle East. Baba finally silenced them with the remote.

"Ayouni?" Baba stopped with one hand on the screen door. "Please, you and Sami, clean the cups before Mommy gets home." He winked at us and stepped out. Sami sprinted after him, and I followed.

Outside, the men leaned against their shiny black government car. They both wore sunglasses even though the sky was dark and filled with rain. The air was fat with humidity.

Mr. Khalil and Imam Shaheed were also outside where our small patch of crabgrass met the street. Their sizes matched that of the government men. Sami and I ran toward Imam Shaheed, who put his arms around us. He was warm in his black suit as if it stored heat from the sun.

"You got a warrant?" Imam Shaheed spoke over

our heads.

"Mr. Sabry, you don't have to go nowhere with these men," said Mr. Khalil. "They ain't got a warrant for you." He didn't look at Baba, but instead glared at the men like a fierce bull.

"They got nothing on you. You didn't do anything, Sabry," said Imam Shaheed.

"Please don't go," Sami said.

Hot tears poured down my cheeks, and Baba ran his hand through my hair.

"It's nothing," he whispered.

The gray-haired man opened the car door, and Baba nodded toward Imam Shaheed. An unspoken message passed between them.

"You not back in a few hours, me and the whole neighborhood's comin' to get you," he said.

"Insha'Allah," said Baba, and ducked into the car.

The gray-haired man slammed the door and rounded to the other side. The blond-haired man got into the driver's seat.

"No, no, no!" screamed Sami as they pulled away, and then he buried his face in Imam Shaheed's side.

The government car was halfway down the street when Mommy pulled up in our dented station-wagon. Seeing us with Mr. Khalil and Imam Shaheed and some of the neighbors, she tumbled out of the car and stomped toward us in her chunky interview shoes.

"What happened?" she thundered. "What's going on?"

Sami broke away and hugged her waist. She continued walking even though he had attached himself to her midsection.

"They took him," Mr. Khalil answered.

"Who—?"

"He's just cooperatin', Belinda," said Imam Shaheed. "He'll be back in a few hours."

"What? This is outrageous!" Mommy shouted down the street where The Bottom bottomed out.

Thunder crashed in the sky and the car alarms jumped alive.

"Did they have a warrant?" she yelled, breaking away from Sami. She slapped her sides and shook her head, pointed to the street. "This is a violation of his civil rights. Why didn't you do something?"

Then, Mommy started spinning like a slow-moving cyclone. The kind you see in bright color codes splashed across the maps on the evening news—reds, oranges, yellows. "No, no, no..." she said to herself, her hands gripping her hair. She spun and spun and spun out of control until Mr. Khalil finally caught her in his massive arms.

Suddenly, she was deflated and small.

"Now, now, Ms. Belinda...He'll be back in a few hours," Mr. Khalil said.

Lightning lit up the sky and the clouds finally burst. Imam Shaheed squeezed us into a tight circle and steered us between the raindrops and back into the

house. Someone clicked on the TV to a rerun of the **Real Housewives of Atlanta**. Coffee smells filled the air again, dishes clinked. The grown-ups barked at one another in the kitchen, made phone calls, and paced the floorboards. Mommy sat between Sami and me on the sofa, her hands clenching the hem of her skirt by her knees. In front of us was our half-finished game of Battleship, some of the boats hopelessly sunken, others narrowly escaping defeat.

## Short Story: OTHER FINALISTS

*Addressing You*

Tad Bartlett, Metairie, LA

*An Unknown Soldier,*

Tadzio Koelb, New York, NY

*Deal of a Lifetime,*

Bruce Wexler, Elmhurst, IL

*In Less Than a Minute,*

Russell Reece, Bethel, DE

*Jingoes*

Matthew Pitt, Gulfport, MS

*Lady in Black,*

John Halliday, Cary, NC

*Lake Sybelia*

Karin C. Davidson, Columbus, OH

*Locked in the Punch,*

James McCallister, Columbia, SC

*Mother's Days,*

Paul Negri, Clifton, NJ

*My Vegetable Love,*

Paul Negri, Clifton, NJ

*Oh Thou Whom My Soul Loveth,*

Rochelle Distelheim, Highland Park, IL

*Perfume River,*

Jim Fairhall, Chicago, IL

*The Limits of Certainty,*

Renee Thompson, Granite, CA

*The Necklace,*

William Coles, Salt Lake City, UT

*The Other Side,*

Charles Broome, New Orleans, LA

*The Russian Bride,*

Becky Browder, Jacksonville, AL

*The Uncertainty Principle,*

Samantha Schoech, San Francisco, CA

*Through the Hole,*

Robin Martin, Brooklyn, NY

*Water Bear,*

Maurice Ruffin, New Orleans, LA

*What Felt Good at the Time,*

Chris Waddington, New Orleans, LA

*Wild Man Wyman,* Joseph Barbara, New Orleans, LA





*Milly Heller  
2012  
Novel In Progress  
Runner-Up*



## **Longingly**

The party is for parents new to Sinclair. I'm here as an old hand, reassuring, welcoming. It's not a hardship; my daughters love the school, where so much papier-mâché is done in science it's like another art class. I chat up three new parents, cast about for a fourth. After four families I'll allow myself a glass of wine, wait for my husband, who had to work late. The living room is packed. A small woman with thick eyeglasses hesitates near the French windows. She's benign, bookish, perfect. I head toward her but the director of admissions, roly-poly, pink-faced, blocks her from view. He hurries past her; she's too insignificant to greet. He is smiling up at, it can't be, my lips almost blister, so it is, looming outsized, over-colored, as if inserted into the wrong diorama: Jules Segresset. Or at least the wrong party, for he and Sonia send their children to Regis.

He leans against a marble mantelpiece, his dark hair reflected in the mirror behind him. His face is long, witty, almost a caricature of a French aristocrat from an earlier century. Instead of a blue-black business suit he should be wearing a cloak, headed for the opera. Two Sinclair parents speak to him, close to his ear. Their voices are fast, low. He nods as though they are confirming some secret truth. The director of admissions reaches them and slaps the shoulders of the Sinclair parents. He shakes Jules's hand and must make one of his bawdy jokes because Jules blushes, vulnerable, shy, before joining the group's laugh. I slip from the room, search for the bar.

The party isn't at the school but at the Delarondes' house. The Delarondes are one of Sinclair's few old-line families. They live in what my mother calls a swoon of a house in the Garden District. The bar is in a small round parlor. Even in my Jules-induced frenzy, for it's obvious he and Sonia must be moving at least one child to Sinclair, I see how pretty the room is, plum with cream trim. Waiting in line for a drink, I manage a pep talk to new parents, a married couple from the Midwest. My voice is calm and pleasant while inside I'm wild-eyed, aghast at the images looping around my brain of Jules and me. The new parents tell me that Proctor and

Gamble transferred them here.

"We would go anywhere for P&G," the wife says. The husband nods. "It is a very special company."

They ask more questions about crime than about Sinclair. The wife does the talking while her husband keeps up an undertone of how "well, different" it is here in New Orleans.

"We bought a house in English Oaks," the wife says. English Oaks is a gated community on the other side of the Mississippi River. "That way our son can ride his bike safe from, you know," she lowers her voice and glances at the black bartender, "troubled youth."

I count them as three families, bringing me close to a second glass of wine.

The headmaster is chatting with Mrs. Delaronde in the hall. The three of us give each other thumbs up signs because the party is going well. The schools are desperate for new students, though it's six years since Katrina. My manic smile is in place. These functions have rules: when you slap on a nametag, you slap on a smile. Mrs. Delaronde calls out to me to please fill up a plate; she has too much food. I say I will when Chris, my husband, gets here; he's writing a brief. They widen their eyes in exaggerated sorrow.

"The law," the headmaster says, "is a demanding mistress."

The word mistress restarts those lurid pictures of Jules and me. I wander into an alcove off the hall. The alcove is unlike the rest of the house, forlorn; there's a piano scattered with sheet music, and framed diplomas and certificates on the walls. When Chris gets here I'll tell him I'm sick, need to leave.

Seeing Jules shouldn't throw me like this. He broke off our affair almost fifteen ago, plenty of time to recover. Usually I feel gratitude for his timing, as it was shortly after he ditched me that I met Chris. I've run into Jules once since our affair. That time I was calm, composed. The carousel at City Park: my older daughter was three; my younger was still a baby, and I had her strapped onto my chest in a front papoose, her head just below mine. Jules was helping one of his sons off a flying horse. We admired each other's children, exchanged a quick

embrace. Desire did not surge through my veins. The affair was hard to recall, blurry; my life with Chris and the children was sharp, full of promise. Even the music grinding away on brass pipes, "Beautiful, Beautiful Copenhagen," made passion absurd, the first syllable of "Copenhagen" hitting a high screech over and over.

Tonight, though, I need the innocent carousel setting, the migrainey music, a baby strapped to my front like a shield, to mute my longing. I lean against the piano. The wind is picking up; palm fronds and banana tree leaves, more like Barbados than New Orleans, sway against the window. This August has been an even hotter and stormier than normal.

"Margaret Eisler?"

It is Sonia, Jules's wife. The whole party is a conspiracy to remind me of my one affair with a married man.

"Sonia!" My voice is overly friendly, an attempt to cover up the steaming cauldron of shame and guilt I want to fling myself into whenever I see her, which is rarely.

"Hello, Margaret Eisler." I've noticed this before: she uses my first and last names when greeting me as if to say that though she took her husband's surname she respects me for keeping my own.

We kiss on both cheeks. Her mother is from Spain, and the family keeps to the Continental ways. Sonia's face has an arresting shape, like an upside-down teardrop, her sisters and mother have it too. Once, when I was about nine, my mother and I were trying to find a parking place outside of the Gus Mayers department store, and we saw Sonia with her sisters, and her mother, Lena, emerge from the store laden with shopping bags. My mother said, "Now I get to see what Lena looked like when she was young. Lovely. Those are lucky girls."

"You have a child at Sinclair?" Sonia's tone is low; we are spies making contact.

"Ellie is in fourth and Jane's in second."

She blinks. "Both are at Sinclair?"

"Yes, both."

"Wow. You must really like the school to put have put both of your children there."

I finger my nametag. "I love it. We all do."

She cocks her head. "But you went to Regis, didn't you, just a few years behind Jules and me?"

"Kindergarten through twelfth, a lifer, but Chris didn't want to pick a school just based on whether I'd gone there. You know, he isn't from here."

My mantra: "Chris isn't from here." I should have it emblazoned upon my forehead to explain any deviation from tradition. Last month I ran into a friend of my mother's when I was leaving DeVille's dry cleaner and she said, startled, "But your family has always used Renaldo's!"

Sonia says, "Most Regis graduates are so boring, like Jules and me, we can't imagine our children anywhere else."

"Well, that's natural." I'm queasy, as there is something I've left out: Regis rejected Ellie, said she

wasn't ready for the school's "demanding kindergarten curriculum." I could confess this but then Sinclair would look like a catch basin for Regis rejects and Ellie less than stellar. Anyway, compared to other tale I am suppressing, namely my affair with her husband, this omission is slight, a rider to the main bill.

Sonia says, "Now Jules and I have to be open-minded. Our baby starts Sinclair in the fall. Henry. He will be in third grade."

Rapture rushes into my voice, that's how much I love Sinclair's third grade. "A fabulous year. Your son will adore Ms. Armstrong. She completely engages the kids. Ellie missed her so much over Christmas break she wrote stories about her."

"We observed her class in March. She seemed..." Sonia hesitates, "quite good." She makes "quite good" sound like "not too bad."

"Ms. Armstrong is excellent," I say with finality. "The whole school is. I'm crazy about it."

Sonia gazes at me, giving no hint that my partiality to Sinclair reassures her. If anything, she is tallying points against me rather than toward Sinclair. I should dig into my arsenal, bombard her with phrases about the "new Sinclair," let loose a few numbers about National Merit Scholars. But I don't. Even my most carefully aimed missiles (middle-school jazz ensemble! Classics club!) would bounce off her smooth, polished facade.

We stand in silence. When someone is quiet I go to Technicolor, and when someone is Technicolor, I fade. I thought it was involuntary, this leveling, but not tonight. I wonder if Sonia is one of those people who withhold conversation until tempted into it by tidbits of gossip and confessional nuggets. She gently touches one of her earrings, as if to check which pair she has on. They are small discs of silver, deceptively simple, like her dress, a pearl-gray linen shift. Her dark hair grazes the loosely tied scarf around her shoulders. Sonia and her sisters know how to wear scarves. It's a talent I link to having a European mother. The scarf she has on is translucent, with strands of plum-colored silk woven throughout; the thin straps of her delicate sandals are also plum. I sigh in envy.

Sonia must misread my sigh for she looks at me and says, with a tremble in her voice, "I'm sorry. This is difficult because Regis... Regis is home."

I soften. "I would hate to have to move my girls out of Sinclair."

"Our older three are thriving at Regis. We thought Henry was too but they told us he's--" Sonia's voice drops. Her expression is troubled. I lean in, absurdly hoping to hear something dramatic, he is a druid, or a hardened gambler; it is disappointing when she whispers, "dyslexic."

I wave it away. "Sinclair can handle that. It has great resource programs."

"So everyone says." She shakes her head and presses her lips together in doubt, suddenly aged, severe. Then, probably to stop me from proselytizing

Sinclair, she asks where Chris is.

"Writing a last-minute brief. It has to be filed tomorrow morning."

"Ah, I remember those days--briefs, depositions, time sheets." Her face relaxes; her beauty returns. Jules was an attorney for a large law firm, almost everyone I grew up with in New Orleans is a lawyer, but about a year after marrying Sonia he took a cushy job at her family's lucrative coffee firm as an in-house dealmaker. He invests the company's assets, oversees real estate transactions in Brazil, and so on. When first I heard this, I smirked. Working for the father-in-law: how tame, how predictable.

Sonia looks above me. "Hi there, we were just talking of you," for Jules is in the doorway, making the alcove tiny.

"Margaret," he says. I'd forgotten about his voice, the way words sound like they take an enjoyable tumble around the back of his throat. I nod hello; it's all I can do.

He leans down to give me a kiss. I guard against any sort of thrill, I'm a sentry upright against a hail of bullets, if I get hit the fortress is lost, the night is lonely, cold... His lips brush against my cheek, close to my mouth, and in my inmost darkness a soldier spins, loses balance, falls.

"Margaret and Chris like Sinclair so much they put both their children there. Isn't that reassuring?" Sonia's tone is overly bright.

"First let me meet their kids. Then I'll tell you reassuring it is." He leans back. Jules is so tall he often stands like a human recliner; he must see more from a slant than by looking straight down.

"Oh, you don't want to meet them. You'll run screaming from the room." I can do this, keep it light, hold aloft a layer of banter to cover the roiling beneath, roiling that comes only from my side. Jules emits a purr, steady and pleased.

"But I love to run screaming from rooms. It's what I do best." His face is thinner, has fined down, as my mother would say. He asks, "Still in the advertising business?"

"Part-time."

"What is it exactly you do?" asks Sonia.

"I'm a copywriter at McGuinness, out by the airport." I bite off the word "airport" because Jules and I used to meet near it, and quickly add that now I work mainly from home.

Sonia asks what some of ads are, if she's seen them on TV.

"Most of what I write is boring, pamphlets for hospitals, funeral homes, old age homes."

"Funeral homes?" Sonia shivers in distaste. "Maybe it's just me, but I can't stand to think of death."

"It's not just you," Jules and I say at the same time. He looks at me with his fined-down, deeper-set, hungrier eyes, and I shiver too.

He glances under lowered lids to Sonia, who is smoothing down her already smooth dress. Does he get

a thrill having us side by side, his Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, his Eleanor Roosevelt and Lucy Mercer, his Betty and Veronica? And Sonia could be Veronica, a smaller, tidier Veronica, but I am no Betty. I'm a nice Jewish girl with an Arab-looking slant. Almond eyes, high-arched nose, heavy lips. I went to NYU for college, and mid-Eastern tourists sometimes asked me for directions in Arabic or Farsi. When I told my mother, she was horrified.

"You don't look like an Arab! You're not that dark!"

"I am that dark," I told her.

Sonia sips from her wine. "Don't you ever get to write anything fun?"

"We have the Okra Annie's account. I've done some writing for it."

Jules and Sonia look at each other, laugh, and Sonia says in a small, hurt voice, "Sad, alone, last to be picked."

It's a dead-on imitation, I have to admit.

"Did you write those?" she asks. "The lone little okra ads?"

"Guilty."

Okra Annie's is chain of Cajun restaurants across Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Florida Panhandle. The ad campaign plays on okra's status as a detested vegetable, always shunned, until it happens upon a big burbling pot of gumbo. Then okra finds its role in life, its *raison d'être*. The TV spots are deftly done, with animation, and we don't kill off the okra when it lands in the gumbo, oh no, gumbo gives the okra verve and confidence. I can't believe the hours the art director and I have spent discussing how high an okra would splash, how fast it would swim.

Sonia goes on. "But now, now I belong. To Annie's gumbo." With shy pride, "Okra Annie's."

I tell her she's a natural. "We could use you on the voice-overs."

"If you think I'm good, you should hear J.P."

"J.P.?"

"Jules-Paul," says Jules, "our oldest."

I say, "Jules-Paul? But your middle name is Louis."

The look Jules gives me tells me to shut up and shut up now.

Sonia says, "I can't believe you know that."

Oh, God. I focus on a framed diploma hanging on the wall, like spotting to avoid dizziness while jumping on a trampoline, and rattle on about how obsessed I was with the yearbooks when I was at Regis. "They were my **Talmud**, my **Koran**, especially the senior pictures and quotes."

Sonia says, "Isabel used to do that too." Isabel is one of her sisters; she's a year younger than Sonia, they look like twins. "Whenever we needed a yearbook, we knew to search her room." She smiles at me sympathetically. She has placed me; I am like Isabel. Jules's long fingers relax around his glass. He says he going to get another drink. "Can I get you anything?" he asks the two of us, or perhaps the one of us, the wife/ex-mistress unity we seem to have become.



I shake my head. "I need to find Chris, get some food."

"Perfect," says Sonia. "We'll sit with you."

I hesitate.

"Unless you don't want us to," she says, eyebrows up.

"No, I'd love to, it's just that Chris might not even be here yet. I tell you what, you start, and we'll come find you."

Jules nods, grasps Sonia's shoulder, and swivels her gently toward the hall. I avert my eyes from his hand on her scarf, his fingertips spreading to the bare skin of her neck and upper arm. Then I make myself look, remind myself there are things I can't have, things just to be looked at longingly. Jules and Sonia turn toward the dining room; I veer left to the living room.

The party is long past the stage where anyone has to worry about it. It's loud; the caterers are loading trays with empty wine and cocktail glasses and, if people still smoked, a huge cloud of cigarette smoke would hover low over the crowd. Chris is near the French windows, chatting with a school secretary. Chris is on Sinclair's board of trustees. The secretaries love him; he never blames them for typos in the minutes or transposed numbers in the annual plan: "He is so sweet." I am told that a lot about Chris, along with "He is such a nice guy" and "You are so lucky."

I ask him if he's finished the brief.

"Yes. Brutal. I'm starved."

He wraps his arm around me, hugs me to him. Chris has an owl-like look: small wire-rimmed glasses, short high-arched-nose, and he's stocky, broad-shouldered. The coaches at his high school tried to get him to play on teams but he had other interests, which he describes in two words: stoned again.

The party opens and closes around us. We wind our way to the dining room, stopping at the bar, pausing to say hello to various teachers and parents. I am ravenous but when I smell the shrimp and garlic, usually so tempting, and see the colors and plentitude on the table, I know I won't be able to eat. I need to sit down. Without looking at what I'm doing, I fill my plate quickly. Chris examines each dish, exchanging anticipatory comments with whoever is near him.

"Chris, you have to move a little faster, you're holding up the line."

This is untrue. My voice is so sharp that he looks at me, hurt.

"Sorry," I mumble. "I just don't feel well."

He has concern all over his face. "What is it?"

"Huge headache."

"Are you well enough to stay and eat? If not, we can go home."

Guilt engulfs me. If I say no, he will have to abandon his carefully chosen, inviting meal. And he's had a horrific day, for if Chris says it was brutal he means he struggled. He grappled with unwieldy issues and difficult people for thirteen hours straight. And now, because

of me, he will have to go home to forage around the refrigerator in hopes the kids didn't finish their neon-orange macaroni and cheese. It is too much, having someone else's happiness cupped in my hands like this.

I tell him I'm well enough to last through dinner.

A party laugh erupts, getting louder as it travels from group to group. I've reached my get-me-out-of-here quotient, so Chris and I take our plates to the back porch. It's long and deep, with round tables covered in white tablecloths. Fans whir along the ceiling. The screen must be thick, almost magically so, because it is not hot. The tables are full. Friends motion to us to pull up chairs but Chris shakes his head no: too crowded. I see the Proctor & Gamble couple leave, and we head toward their empty places. Too late, I realize that Jules and Sonia are sitting there, along with the Delarondes, who are giving the party.

Jules stands up, and he and Chris shake hands. Their shirts gleam white in the dark. Chris says, "Jules," and Jules says, "Christopher." Chris has told me that here in New Orleans, so formal, he is called Christopher more in one year than in his eighteen years in Minnesota.

As Chris pulls out my chair for me to sit between him and Jules, he bumps it into an aluminum walker that's wedged between the table and the porch screen.

"Watch out for Shuffles!" calls Mr. Delaronde.

I look around for a dog or cat; then I see he means his walker.

Mr. and Mrs. Delaronde, with their small, neat features, and small, square shoulders, look like they came in a boxed set. Mr. Delaronde is in his seventies, and though he has something wrong with his legs, he exudes energy. His wife is a few years younger. She too has a vigorous air and a gaze that, like his, mixes sharpness with benevolence.

Mrs. Delaronde, in her precise voice, announces, "I am trying to convince Sonia she should become an interior designer."

Sonia is sitting back in her chair as though Mrs. Delaronde's suggestion has been thrust upon her. She says, "I'm not sure I—"

"But what you've done to your house is a dream," says Mrs. Delaronde. She turns to me, "Don't you think so?"

This is awkward, as I've never been to the house, so I simply say, "Sonia has exquisite taste." Little lights strung along the bougainvillea and banana trees shine dots on Sonia's dress so that it shimmers like mother-of-pearl. She must have an enchanted closet, and whenever she opens it the right outfit awaits, rustling softly.

Mr. Delaronde says, "They used to be interior decorators. Now they are interior 'designers.' Why the change?"

"It sounds more professional," says his wife.

"Just like Jules and I are not lawyers," says Chris.

"We're attorneys."

Mr. Delaronde shakes his head as he butters a hunk of French bread. "And 'narcs' are now federal drug

enforcement agents." He looks at Chris. "Don't you miss 'narcs'?"

Chris blinks rapidly behind his glasses, says he doesn't miss them.

"I love what you've done to your mother's house," Mrs. Delaronde says to Sonia. "She told me it was your idea to paint the halls that putty color."

I wonder if "putty" is a Garden District pronunciation of "pretty." Then I realize she means the shade of putty.

"I've never been able to get any of my sisters to use a putty," says Sonia, sitting forward. "The first time I tried one was years ago, when I helped Jules's sister with her condo in Tudor Heights."

My face pulsates, as that is the condo where Jules and I used to meet. His sister bought it as an investment but the developers went belly-up so she asked to Jules to sell it for her. The whole complex, which encircled a swamp, was sinking. The swamp was supposed to be filled in for a golf course but the money ran out. Then the land began sucking in the buildings. The developers, trying to copy English Oaks, the gated community where the P&G couple bought their house, named it Tudor Heights. What with the bankruptcy, and the sinking, Jules called it Tudor Depths.

\*

When Jules broke up with me, we were in bed. I had the sheets pulled up to my shoulders, as I am weirdly modest when lying around. He was propped up on one elbow beside me, tracing my eyebrows with his finger. The condo, dim, silently air-conditioned and, as I now know, putty-colored, rested around us.

He said, "I've been thinking."

"Hmmm?" I figured he was about to change our days for the next week.

He ran his finger around my eyes, sketching on a pair of spectacles. "Margaret," he said, and my name folded back upon itself, "I need to stop pretending I'm not married."

When bad news is in sight, I erect a Plexiglas barrier between the news and myself for a few seconds. So I didn't voice what my thoughts were babbling: Please, no. I'll do anything you want, say anything you want, no matter how embarrassing. We can meet summers only, winters only, anything. Please. Please. Please.

All I said was, in a cracking voice, "Are you sure?"

He dropped his hand from my face and said.

"Everything's gotten complicated. It used to be that you were over here," and he pointed at the wall next to his side of the bed, "and Sonia was over there," and he pointed, confusingly, at me, "but now you're all over the place."

I said, "I can work on that."

And then I began to cry.

\*

Mrs. Delaronde is talking. "Sonia, you need to branch out, start a website."

I stare at the cluster of flowers and candles in the

center of the table. Jules is very still beside me; he is thinking about the condo. But perhaps he is just wishing he'd taken more roast potatoes. The unknowability of other people is vast and dark. I drain my wine.

Mr. Delaronde says, "'Hookers.'" He is wearing a crisp seersucker suit. "No one ever talks about a sex worker with a heart of gold."

"Exactly, sir," says Jules.

I have never heard Jules call anyone "sir" before, as we were never with anyone else. It is like I am trying to construct who he is by scrabbling about in a drawer filled only with loose staples and paperclips and a half-empty tape dispenser.

Chris says to Sonia, "Maybe you could help Margaret and me. We are hopeless at that kind of thing, and our house needs work."

As I pride myself on not caring too much about home décor, my indignation at this remark is hypocritical, yet I do think our house looks pretty good, in a book-strewn, faded-rug, kind of way.

I say, "My theory is that when your house has high ceilings and hardwood floors you can't go wrong."

Chris says, "I believe our living room disproves that."

Mrs. Delaronde spreads her hands in triumph towards Sonia. "This is wonderful. Your first clients!"

"Good," says Jules. "I can retire early."

I mime "I will call you," to Sonia and she nods helplessly back. I won't call; she is being pushed into this. It's painful to imagine driving down Magazine Street visiting chic home furnishing stores with her. She'll be reluctant and I'll be bored. The sun will boil us; we'll struggle to find parking places and fret about running late to pick up the kids. I can already hear our relieved goodbyes.

Or maybe we will joke about the pretentious salespeople, stop for iced coffee at PJ's, and listen to Ella Fitzgerald CDs in the car. This is to be hoped, as there is doubtless a mathematical formula stating the closer I get to Sonia, the less I will be drawn to Jules.

Mrs. Delaronde tells her husband that their grandson Evan is in Ellie's class. "He is madly in love with her."

"He made her a beautiful Valentine's Day card," I say. The warm breeze rustles through the screen. It has the same scent as the Tussy Tropics lip gloss I wore in ninth grade.

"But she spurns him," says Mr. Delaronde. "She does not have a heart of gold."

"That would be because she is not a hooker," says Chris.

I run my fingers along Chris's wrist, grasp his hand. He is the house in the woods I need to get back to. Once I said to him, during the dark time when my father lay open-mouthed and yellow, dying of liver cancer, "You can't fall apart on me," and he said, "Don't worry, I'm not fall-apartable."

Mr. Delaronde rests his knife and fork on his plate

like an illustration for good manners. "It's not just Evan," I tell him. "Ellie's word for all boys is 'contaminated.'"

"Smart girl," murmurs Jules.

The ripple in his voice makes me uncomfortable. I shift around in my chair to rearrange my skirt. It's a black linen pencil skirt, not the greatest linen because the greatest linen gets baggy, and also, Chris has only just finished paying back his law school loans. Anyway, it's the kind that's a little shiny but keeps its shape. But I am pleased with my shirt, a white V-neck blouse with flowing poets' sleeves, or at least I was before comparing it with Sonia's tidy elegance.

But something comes back to me: about a year after Jules ended our affair I went to a baby shower for my old friend Leslie Brower. Sonia and her sisters were there too, as they are Leslie's cousins. We were sitting around the coffee table, watching Leslie unwrap her presents, when one of Sonia's sisters said "Sonia, is that a new shirt?"

"Yes," said Sonia. "For the first time ever, Jules bought me clothes for my birthday. He went to Delphine--"

"I love that store!" chorused the other women at the shower.

She continued, "I never go there, because I like my clothes more tailored, but Jules walked in and bought this shirt, this camisole, and these jeans." She stood up so we could see the jeans. She was wearing exactly my style of jeans, gauzy shirt, and lace-trimmed camisole. And right then I remembered that on one of our last days together, when Jules was helping me gather my clothes from the floor, he asked where I bought them. "Delphine," I said, "On Maple Street." I hoped he wasn't going to buy me clothes because that would hit too close to the sugar daddy/mistress paradigm I wished to avoid. But no, he was planning to discard me, though first taking a trait of mine to graft onto Sonia. Sitting on the couch, passing around a black-and-white baby mobile, I tried to muscle up anger. Instead, I felt peaceful, beneficent: I had given Jules a gift.

\*

Mr. and Mrs. Delaronde leave the table, bidding us courteous, alert goodbyes. Mrs. Delaronde needs to check that the caterers are refilling the dessert trays, and Mr. Delaronde wants to rest. "Can't dance, don't ask me," he says with a wink, bumping along behind her with his walker. Their empty places gape out of proportion, as if the Delarondes were bulwarks against the night creeping in through the screen.

"So," says Jules, "What made you all turn your backs on Regis?"

Before I can launch a parade a clichés about what a "better fit" Sinclair is for Ellie, Chris says, "It's not so much that we turned our backs on Regis—but that Regis turned its back on us."

Sonia's eyes get sparkly as she glances from Chris to me.

I say, "Chris, I was soft-pedaling the whole Regis thing. This is a Sinclair party." It's no fun imagining Sonia

regaling Jules with my earlier, edited version on their drive home.

Chris kneads my shoulder. "But it worked out perfectly. I liked Sinclair better from the start though Margaret was a bit... Regis-centric."

"But now I'm Sinclair through and through," I say, and I sound like Mrs. Delaronde, staunch and precise.

"We'll probably like it so much we'll move all our kids there," says Jules.

Sonia smiles a private smile into her water glass.

Jules spears a last bite of salad onto his fork. I try to focus back on the flowers and candles. Last week when I swam my laps at the JCC the swimmer in the next lane moved at the exact same rate I did. It was all I could think about, this shadow alongside me, slowing when I slowed, speeding up when I sped up. My stroke deteriorated; I lost count of my laps. Finally, almost in tears behind my goggles, I had to climb out of the pool.

I say, "Chris, we need to start heading home. I promised the sitter—"

He says, "Remember those little doberge cakes we saw inside? They're calling my name. Then we can go."

He says he'll bring enough for the table, and I watch him leave. The party should be thinning but the porch is jammed with people. Earlier it looked pristine out here; I wouldn't have been surprised to see classical musicians wending around the tables, piping Mozart. Now tablecloths hang lopsided, chairs from inside the house have been dragged out, and it's clamorous, like a speakeasy. Beneath the noise I hear the start of *Brickyard Blues*, meaning Mr. Timmons, the music teacher, has found the piano in the alcove.

Much closer, there's a bar of generic, recorded blues: Jules's cell phone is ringing. He pulls it out of his pants pocket, listens, and holds it out to Sonia.

"J.P.," he says. "He's fighting with Olivia and Henry over which DVDs to watch."

"Henry should be in bed." Sonia tries to shoo the phone away. "You handle it."

He gives her a "come now, let's be serious" look, which I add to my construction of him.

She takes the phone, resigned but not out of humor—it's a married moment—and walks into the house so she can hear clearly.

There is no more wind, and the air is as heavy as cocoa butter. I stare down at the table. Jules is twisting and untwisting his napkin. He sees me watching. He grabs my right wrist and slides his hand up my arm, giving it hard, almost harsh squeezes. His hand fits easily under my flowing sleeve. Just below my shoulder he presses his fingers and thumb deep into my flesh. He doesn't relent, and my arm becomes a vessel that the rest of my body is pulled into, first my shoulders, then my head and torso, lastly my feet, waving wildly.





*Will Thrift  
2012  
Short Story  
Runner-Up*



## ***And The Sun Sets On Walker Street***

166 Walker Street

Kwame leaned down and kissed his mother's cheek just above where the little plastic tube lay across it.

"Goo'bye, mama."

Euleta Johnson stirred awake to see a figure silhouetted against the morning light at the front door, and for a split second she thought an angel had come to take her home. But when he stepped outside and quietly shut it, she could see that it was just Kwame. She relaxed a bit in her chair, comforted by the association of her son and an angel. It was like witnessing another little message from the Lord. She'd been getting a lot of those lately.

On the floor beside her chair, she heard the oxygen machine click on. The whirl of the compressor filled the room like foam insulating her from the cars booming and rushing by outside. She could feel the gentle pressure of air in her nostrils. Light seemed to push back on the shadows in the room, and she felt like a parade balloon bumping against buildings on her way to the sky. But the feeling faded as her body adjusted to the influx of air.

Although her thoughts came slower these days, she was thankful that she could still concentrate and that her mind was still good – at least *she* thought it was. She closed her eyes and saw Kwame coming and going from the room. She could hear the echo of him clinking things in the kitchen. It didn't occur to her whether it had been yesterday, or earlier that morning – the time didn't seem to matter anymore, only that Kwame was there. But Kwame suddenly drained away from her memory like someone had squeezed water from a sponge. Mr. Jemison, from two streets over, emerged in the void. Having been recently called Home, his family no longer had to care for him like a newborn. Euleta was glad that she wasn't that kind of burden on Kwame. *There is Kwame again.* Some of her friends still thought of Kwame as a child, called him "simple" in a nice way, a "sweet boy" even though he was a grown man. But Euleta knew he could take care of her if he had to.

Euleta sensed a presence in the room, like

someone familiar had come in when Kwame left. But she couldn't quite bring the face into focus. She only knew that it wasn't Kwame.

Then the children rushed in, her front room filled up with little voices. Their bodies quivered like feathers in the wind. Kwame had brought them by to visit her a few days ago, but she could still summon them behind closed eyes, and it was like they were in the room again. Their budding faces seemed to glow in his presence. Euleta saw the shine reflected in Kwame's eyes as he beamed over the little boys. Kwame was like a light, burning brighter every day in the long shadow of her life.

Kwame told her what was happening to the younger boys in the neighborhood. Some of the older boys would swoop in and bully the younger ones into doing awful things. Euleta had heard some of the ladies at church saying that this one or that one was running drugs, or watching out for the police. Bessie's great-grandson had come home all beat up, but he wouldn't talk about it. Kwame figured that if he could keep the children busy at a public place like the Rec Center, they stood a better chance of not getting caught up in all that, so he started a basketball team. With Kwame watching over them, maybe the boys wouldn't fall prey to Luther and his gang.

Luther shaded Euleta's other thoughts like an eclipse. She said a silent prayer for him. Even though he had always been bad, Euleta made it a point to pray for Luther every day. She hoped maybe he'd see Kwame's example and realize that it was better to help people than to use them.

The machine clicked and the little fan wound to a stop. A cardinal chirped somewhere nearby, and a cacophony of traffic filled the silence. Euleta felt smaller, like she was sinking into the chair. The sun had arced through the morning sky, and as her eyes slit open, a ray of light intersected a crack in the windowpane beside her. As if by an invisible hand, a small band of colors slid toward her across the floor and then disappeared. At first she thought of it as another hint at the beauty she may soon behold when the Lord finally called her. But then

# SHORT STORY: *Will Thrift*

it occurred to her that, despite sitting in the same chair morning after morning, she'd never noticed it before today. The weight of that singularity seemed to settle on her. *Something about today is special.* She envisioned Kwame's trek up and down her beloved street and through the neighborhood, asking people to help out his new team. She thought about whom he may meet, and how he'd come across to them with his gleaming smile. She knew some of the folks from church would give a little bit, but he'd also be seeing some of the new neighbors in their shiny new houses – like the couple across the street who had enough money to put in the fancy kitchen and hire whole crews of nursery people to plant their yard. When she thought of planting, she felt the longing ache in her hands.

Before she drifted away again, she asked God to keep her little beam of sunshine safe, and help him raise enough money to buy some jerseys for the little ones.

169 Walker Street

Mox closed the heavy door, but peered through the beveled windows at the top as he twisted the knob of the deadbolt. Outside, the man's head bobbed in and out of sight, first descending the front porch steps, then out the gate and past the side hedge. Mox raised up a bit to see which way the man was headed, but the hedge that he'd been meaning to trim blocked his view.

Behind him, Angie floated down the stairs, her old robe staying a step ahead of her. "Who was that, hon?"

Mox squinted and craned his head to see up and down the street. His nose picked up the sharp odor of the ebony stain still curing on the front door. It roused him a bit. "He said he's our neighbor, but I don't recognize him. He wanted donations for a kids' basketball team or something."

Angie yawned. "Is he with one of the schools?"

Detecting no encroaching threat, Mox relaxed a little by the door. "No. I think it was just a neighborhood thing."

Angie glided into the kitchen. Mox followed and sat at the island, resting his hands on the cool granite. He absently watched her make coffee while his mind lingered by the door.

"You know, that guy's got a lot of nerve going door to door in this neighborhood, especially on a Saturday morning. The people who *have* jobs here might be interested in sleeping in."

She glanced up at him while she folded the top of the coffee bag.

"I mean, you never know what people may want when they come to your door. He could've been casing the place - there's still some pretty bad elements on this street."

She prodded, "Did it *look* like he was interested in our living room?"

"How do I know? Those people are kind of sly sometimes."

She feigned distress, "Well you didn't invite him

in did you?"

"Hell no. I'm thinking now that I shouldn't even have opened the door."

She was a Saturday morning prosecutor, "But you *did* open the door, didn't you?"

He looked at her like he had a notion of where the conversation was going, but was too stubborn to concede, and instead attempted to leap ahead to the root of the matter bugging him. "You know, we invested in this neighborhood. We took an old house and fixed it up. They're renovating three houses one street over, and a whole new subdivision is being put in a half mile from here. Values are supposed to be going up. We're trying to revive this street, and the people who were here before us had better get with the program or just sell and get out. *Their* version of this street has had its day."

She finished with the coffee maker and turned to him. "Mox, you're missing something here. It's not just about a few new residents and property values, it's also about diversity and tradition. This neighborhood is eclectic, just like the city. There are people who have lived their whole lives here. We didn't fix this place up just so we could sell it and make a quick buck. We're going to be here for a while."

He rubbed his chin but didn't say anything. She was right, but they were still new enough at married life that he didn't want to come right out and say that. He thought about Reese, the guy who'd referred to Walker Street as "high risk but high reward." Reese hadn't been able to flip a house in the past three months. Oh he talked big over beers, but Mox sensed that Reese was in denial - things in the real estate arena were slowing down. The signs were right there in the front yards - more for sale than sold when it used to be the other way around. Even if he and Angie had wanted to move (which they didn't), it seemed that bigger forces were at work to keep them on Walker Street for the long haul. He reflected on the clarity of his thought. Or maybe the effect of the vapor at the front door was wearing off.

She continued, "You've got to have more faith in people, Mox. If we're going to live on a street like this, in a neighborhood like this, we need to get familiar with it. And I'm not talking about a handful of new neighbors who are just like us. I'm talking about the people who have lived here forty or fifty years like Mr. Pinckney. He lived out the last half of his life in this house." She gestured toward the door, "Did that guy say which house he lived in?"

Mox said, "I think near us across the street." Suddenly Angie's old robe and morning-bed-hair gave her a sage look. In a few short sentences she had gotten to the most important part of the matter - why they had chosen this particular street on which to live. It wasn't just about rebuilding a house; it was about rebuilding a community, house-by-house and street-by-street. What better way than to dive right in and get involved? *She will indeed make a good lawyer.*

Angie had been continuing her plea, "...I mean that if it was a basketball team for a neighborhood

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organization, maybe you could at least check it out. You still play after work up at the health club sometimes, aren't you interested in what's going on here?"

He sat back, and his jaw slacked. She awarded herself with a little smile when he rubbed his chin a second time.

Mox brightened, "Keep the coffee hot, I'm gonna go for a run. I think that guy's on foot, so I'll try to catch up to him and ask him more about it."

132 Walker Street

"Yo' Mamma's in jail for the weekend."

That's what Big D had said as he shuffled up the street. Dollar (or "Little D" as he liked to think of himself) wondered whether Big D had been drinking, hoped maybe he was teasing. But he hadn't seen his mother since yesterday so Big D's proclamation had a ring of truth to it.

Dollar sat on the front porch steps of the house where he lived with his grandma, two sisters, four cousins, a new niece named Bit – and sometimes his mamma. He was anxious now because when his mamma was gone, there was nobody to keep the older boys in the neighborhood from coming around and making him go with them. He didn't like hanging out with them. Sometimes they hit him and made him run little sacks from one house to another. He knew what was in them, and he knew it was wrong, but he didn't want them to hit him.

KJ, Mister Johnson, helped him stay away from them, but he was out today too, trying to get some money for the team uniforms. The Reck Center was locked up because there was nobody over there. Sometimes he wished he could go live with KJ at his mamma's house, and today was one of those times. He dreaded that the boys would be by in a while and make him go with them.

When he used his imagination, Dollar didn't think about better times on Walker Street – past or future. Right now was all he knew of that. But Dollar did dream that he and KJ would take the train to somewhere uptown and play ball on one of the nice outdoor courts. People would be walking their dogs in the grass and throwing Frisbees. The cars and traffic would be out of sight behind hedges and shade trees. KJ would smile and show him some cool moves and nobody would bother them there. Sometimes this dream seemed to last forever and be over in a few seconds all at once.

Dollar's older sisters burst out the door behind him. He looked up and saw three boys, like menacing insects buzzing at the top of the street. His sisters stood on the porch, yelling and waving for them to come down to the house. Something stirred in his stomach, flipping and flapping harder with the boys' every step. Dollar pretended not to notice them descending the hill. His sisters, both wearing tight jeans and pink shirts, ignored him while they argued about who would be with which boy. Dollar suspected one of the boys was Bit's daddy, but it didn't seem to matter much to anyone. He thought of

running inside before they saw him sitting on the porch, but his grandma was asleep and they'd find him in there. They were bigger than him and would catch him if he ran down the street. There was no place in the neighborhood that they wouldn't find him. The only way out was the train, and he needed KJ to do that.

So he sat where he was and watched the boys bounce and yell as they rounded the wall at the bottom of the empty driveway, chattering at the girls. The shuddering butterflies inside him were gone, like something had shooed them out and draped a big blanket over him to keep them away. One of the boys shoved Dollar's head as he climbed past him on the stairs. The other two told him to get up, that he was coming with them. Dollar didn't look back at the house as they pushed him towards the street.

Corner of Walker and Glenwood Avenue

Tubb looked at the last bolt while his hand played over a line of cool metal tools, sensing the forged grip of a wrench. He cursed as he adjusted it to the casing bolt, pulling until it groaned in submission, vowing that this would be the last time he was going to work on Kwame Johnson's car, especially on a Saturday, without seeing any cash first.

Once the casing was loose, he saw the problem right away. He had hoped it wouldn't require a brand new clutch, and it didn't look like it would. He didn't have the money to front one to Kwame anyway. A few adjustments and tests, and it would be done.

If it hadn't been for Kwame almost backing over Tubb's mother in the church parking lot – the car had popped into reverse by itself – Tubb wouldn't have taken the job. The last time Kwame brought it in, it was three months before he settled the bill, and Tubb didn't like stringing out the payments that long because he was sure he had lost track of a few over the years. But there was something about good ol' Kwame that made Tubb give him a break.

With the casing finally off, Tubb slid out from under the car and fished a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. He lit up just outside the garage bay in the shade of a tree that had started as a weed back before he had bought the place from Truman's estate. Truman had been the one who saw that Tubb had a knack for mechanics. He started out by having Tubb watch him and fetch tools as Truman squirmed under cars or leaned waist deep into an engine. Eventually Truman let Tubb handle small things like oil changes, and then gradually more complicated repairs like brakes and fan belts. Truman had a subtle way of letting Tubb know when he'd done a good job – he'd inspect the work, asking a few questions along the way to make sure Tubb knew the answers, then he'd tilt his head to one side and nod at the same time as if to say "good job," but he'd never say it. Tubb knew what Truman meant. He had looked forward to seeing Truman go through this routine at the end of a tough job, and he missed it still. He remembered his



# SHORT STORY: *Will Thrift*

old daydreams that the sign outside would one day read: "Truman and Tubb Auto Repair."

In the parking lot of the Convenience store across the street, a guy named Jay was setting up a table under a makeshift tarp pavilion. Tubb waved to him over four lanes of Saturday morning traffic. Jay waved back.

Tubb pulled in some smoke and blew it out at the passing cars – competing emissions. He was glad he didn't have to hustle like Jay, pretending to peddle socks and t-shirts, and hoping he didn't get caught for the other stuff. He knew Jay moved merchandise that the gang stole from malls, not to mention Luther's drugs. Jay wasn't paying for those shiny twenty-two inch spinners with tube socks.

Tubb looked back at Kwame's car on the rack and rolled his cigarette between his thumb and fingers. Maybe that's what made him keep helping Kwame out. Kwame never ran with those guys. He got jumped by them a few times when they were all younger, but he had managed to steer clear and keep himself out of trouble. Kwame cared about the neighborhood boys, and wanted to keep them from ending up like Jay – or worse.

Tubb added the butt to a hundred others in the gravel at the base of the tree and gave it a grind with his toe. He looked up and saw the ghost of the big block letters "T-R-U" that had been painted over when Tubb renamed the place. He marveled that twenty-odd years sometimes seemed like just yesterday when you thought about it over a smoke.

He walked back into the garage. The wide chrome bumper that had grazed his mother caught his eye. The street scene behind him played out in miniature on it's curved edge. Colors streaked across it as cars passed. Jay's little tarp fluttered on the other side. The scene was like a crazy version of real life, not the way it was when Tubb was younger. Back then Truman would tip his hat to the ladies walking past the shop down to the bus stop. Everybody seemed to know everybody else. Guys like Jay, and Kwame, and Luther were just kids. *When did it all change?* It seemed that something had disappeared with people like Truman, but Tubb couldn't put his finger on it.

As he sat down, ready to slide back to work on Kwame's car, he resolved to himself that he'd take his mother up on a longstanding invitation and go to church with her tomorrow.

27 ½ Walker Street

Luther sucked on the pipe, expanding his chest and letting the smoke seep into every inch of his lungs. The herb made him think in tunnels, focused instead of everything overwhelming his mind. Rather than relying on his conscience (and having to weigh outcomes and consequences), he let the herb reveal to him what needed to be done. When he was high, his word was the only law. Yet when the high was gone, he doubted himself, and worse, he feared that others doubted him too. It was like a dark shadow impending on the edge of

his mind, and the only way to keep it at bay was to stay high enough that he didn't notice it, because it was always there. He held the smoke for a few moments and then blew it out in the face of the boy standing directly across the table from him. The boy suppressed a cough. The cloud drifted toward the floor and filtered out through the shades standing around the room.

Luther tapped cinders from the pipe into an ashtray. He suspected what the boy would say, but he'd perform the ritual anyway just like it was done to him. "Where was you at last week, boy? We had things for you to do."

The boy stared down at the mute pipe and ashtray. He could feel Luther's eyes on him – everyone's eyes, but he didn't dare look up.

Luther began pelting him with open-ended grunting sounds, "Huh? Huh?" He wanted an answer, if not for himself, then for those who stood around. A few chuckles rattled from the others in the room.

The boy crackled softly, "Basketball."

Luther seized the word out of the air like he was stealing a pass. "*Basketball!*" He looked at his minions. "This little joker's playing *basketball* when he knows he's supposed to be here."

The shadows cackled disbelief.

Luther leaned across the table and swatted the boy's cheek, knocking his head to the side. He was hitting a lot of them lately and it occurred to him that he hadn't had to do that so much until just recently. The shadow in his mind seemed to swell a bit.

The boy sucked air and worked his lips, fighting back tears that he knew would only bring him more grief.

Luther continued, "Now, don't make me have to do that again." He took in the quivering boy. There was something intimate and familiar about his smacking the boy and then him standing there, sniffing. It gave Luther a feeling of control that he hadn't had when he'd been that boy. He leaned closer and spoke softer, "Who you playing basketball with?"

The boy tried to focus on his shoes through watery eyes and whispered, "Mister Johnson," as if invoking the name of an authority figure might help him.

"*Mista Johnson,*" Luther repeated through clinched teeth as if he were grabbing the man by his shirt collar. He leaned back on the sofa and looked at the two shadows standing closest to him. In the dim light, their eyes burned back at him, far away fires. Luther asked, "How many of our fine young boys have told us the same thing lately?"

They shot back, "Too many, boss."

"Me and Kwame came up together. This is *my* street. He oughtta know better than to be stealin' *my* boys!"

The others in the room tossed agreements to him.

"Well we gonna take *Mista John-son* to school. Teach him a lesson. 'Cause apparently he don't know how things work around here."

Another round of agreements circled the room.

Luther looked back to the boy. "There ain't gonna

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be no more *basketball*, understand? You see *Mista Johnson* up in here?"

The boy began looking around the room unable to make out anyone except Luther.

Luther smacked the boy across the cheek again. This time there was no struggle to hold back tears.

"*Bas-ket-ball* ain't gonna help you boy." Luther pushed the boy's forehead with a finger, then barked toward the ceiling, "We in charge of this street, ain't that right?"

The room resounded again with agreement.

Luther pinched the tip of a dried plant from a baggie and pressed it into the pipe bowl. He was worked up now, which called for another hit. "This boy here needs somebody to show him how it's done. Where's Dollar? That's a good boy, now."

One of the shadows spoke up, "They bringin' him in right now."

Yellowish teeth showed between Luther's lips like a smile, but his eyes weren't grinning. "You gonna go around with Dollar today and watch what he does." He looked back at the shadows with their glowing eyes. "And you two gonna go find *Kwa-me* and bring him here."

The eyes widened like little waxing moons and one of them asked, "Whatcha gonna do boss?"

Luther stared off into space for a moment and worked his mouth in a way that elicited a real fear of the unknown in those around him. There was a light at the end of this particular thought tunnel. Although he'd dealt with that light before, this time it needed to be snuffed out, end of story. The room came back into focus and the pending question seemed to hang in front of him. So he answered, "Well, I'm gonna dim his light for him." Then he held the pipe gently to his lips and with a flick of his thumb turned the plant to glowing embers.

166 Walker Street

Judith stood by the gate as Kwame eased the front door closed. He must have been watching for her to arrive so he could leave his mama for a little while that morning. Judith had agreed to sit with Euleta and visit for a few hours, maybe read some Scripture to her while Kwame went around the neighborhood asking for donations for his new team. He thanked her as he passed and Judith thought what a sweet boy Euleta had raised.

Euleta's eyes were closed and her machine was purring. Judith watched for a moment, noting her friend's slow breathing. She would wait a while and if she didn't wake on her own, Judith would nudge her and read to her. For now, she sat in a corner of the sofa across from her friend and opened her Bible to the light of the window. She never noticed as a little prismatic rainbow scooted across the dusty floorboards toward Euleta's feet.

After a few chapters of *Second Samuel*, Judith looked up to see Euleta's eyes open. The machine had stopped – maybe that's what had caused her to look up. She flipped a creased ribbon from the back of her Bible to mark her place.

"Can I get you anything, Euleta?"

Euleta waited while everything caught up to her. "I don't remember you coming in, Judith. Kwame's out isn't he?"

"Yes. He asked me to visit with you this morning while he's out raising money for his basketball team. He's such a sweet boy."

Euleta nodded and looked out the window at her flowerbeds. At one time they had been the envy of the street: callas, daylilies, geraniums, and her prized roses anchored and thriving on the chain-link fence. In the cold months, she used to work all day, digging up the dead material and turning it to nourish the plants in the coming season, adding new soil and compost, covering the perennials against the frost. When it got warmer, she would plant new seeds or bulbs and weed and prune until it was perfect. When the weather turned hottest, she would sit in the shaded yard swing, breathing the aromas deeply, taking in all the unfolding colors, and thanking God for the opportunity to tend to His beautiful things.

She spoke while still gazing out the window, "You know I tried a few times to teach Kwame about planting and tending the garden. But he was too much like his father, God rest his soul." She chuckled and turned toward Judith, "He wasn't blessed with a green thumb, not for plants anyway."

Judith craned around to look out the window at the tangle of weeds and brittle vines that spilled out of the old planting beds. She thought of saying something about God's things needing to lie fallow sometimes, but the machine kicked on again and she saw that Euleta's eyes were closed, her head rested against the back of the chair.

Euleta was replaying Kwame – out there mowing the yard, skirting the weedy flowerbeds. She wanted so badly to get back to it again, but she didn't think her withered, knobby fingers could work the shears or turn the soil anymore. Even though they were hard for her to appreciate, she knew that the weeds and the few gray stems that remained clinging to the fence were once and always God's things. They didn't have to please *her*. She had done everything she could possibly do and she had faith that what remained was part of His mysterious plan.

Kwame had a different kind of green thumb – the kind for people instead of plants – and Euleta was more proud of him than if he had had the best garden in the city. Somebody along the way, she liked to think it had been her husband, had set Kwame on a narrow path and had instilled in him a sense of duty that kept him from straying. It seemed born into him to help the younger ones along and keep their hands from being idle.

But then a thought strayed across her mind like the little rainbow that had traversed the floor earlier: just like her garden, and the street beyond, sometimes God had to let something break down and wither so He could replace it with something better. She found herself comforted and troubled by this notion at the same time.

The machine must have cycled off because Euleta heard something skitter in the rafters of the attic, little

# SHORT STORY: *Will Thrift*

claws propelling across eighty-year-old beams going about the business of decay. She wished the machine would come on again and drown out the sound. She wished it would just stay on all the time. Then she thought she would ask Kwame to go up into the attic when he got home; see if he could find the holes where those things were getting in and tack up some screen or something to keep them out.

The sun warmed the air of Euleta's living room. The oxygen tank played a slow afternoon rhythm that made time expand with each passing on/off interval. Judith had read the scripture in a cracking voice for a time. She had occasionally looked up at her friend, but couldn't tell if His words were heard. The gradually dimming light softened the room, making it harder to see the threadbare arms of the sofa, and hiding the dust on the tabletops. Then Judith's **Bible** lay flat in her lap. Her finger relaxed from the verse, and she breathed lightly, as dormant as Euleta.

Judith started awake with the vague notion of something going on outside. Through the window, she saw tree limbs reaching out scratching at the deepening blue sky. The room was dark so she turned on a lamp. *I must have dozed off. Have I really been here all day?* Then she heard car doors slam outside. A radio crackled. Euleta was still sleeping so Judith opened the door and

stepped out onto the sidewalk. Despite the dark, she could see figures moving from their houses toward the street, faces peering in her direction. Here and there a few porch lights flicked on. Two police officers stood just outside Euleta's gate. Beyond them, she saw the young couple who had bought the Pinckney house standing in their yard. Then Judith learned why Kwame hadn't returned yet, and she knew that it was going to be a long night on Walker Street.

A graduate of the University of South Carolina, **William Thrift** has traveled extensively in the US and abroad. After serving many years as a corporate regional manager, his creative side has emerged. In addition to writing a novel, he placed 2<sup>nd</sup> Runner-up in the 2011 Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society's Faulkner - Wisdom Creative Writing Competition for his short story, *The Summer of My Faith*, has been published in the South Carolina Writer's Workshop's collection, *The Petigru Review*, and is the editor and a contributing writer for *Columbia Home & Garden* magazine. In his spare time, he serves as Secretary for the historic Cottontown neighborhood in Columbia.

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When people think of tango, they tend to think of one pose: arms clasped and held out, bodies facing each other and moving side by side. A rose clasped in the teeth. They think of a certain face, a serious and imperious way of holding the head, an intense, unyielding gaze.

The first time I danced with some male beginners, I was impressed, intimidated and yes, amused, at their theatrically exaggerated, but courageous, adoption of the tango face. I didn't think I could be so brave and I knew I shouldn't giggle at their attempts, but they looked so charming and so silly.

I've learned that there is a lot about tango that makes me feel joyful and playful, there are tempos that amuse me and partners with whom I play and experiment. But, if I really want to learn to tango, if I want to dance in Buenos Aires one day, I'll have to adopt my own tango face. I'll have to face what is at the root of my discomfort and uncertainty.

It can unravel me to be honestly and steadily gazed upon. I fidget and become short-tempered, because I don't know how to let myself be looked at. More, I don't know how to *look* anymore. As a writer, I often stare at people without thinking. But then I'll catch myself making them uncomfortable and I'll look away, settle for covert peeking. When I am most interested in a person, intellectually as a writer or sexually as a woman, whether I am looking or being looked at, I am vulnerable, exposed.

\*

I didn't consider any of this before my first lesson. I was worried about dancing closely with a stranger. I wondered if I'd struggle to pick up the steps, make a fool out of myself. Yet, I would very quickly see that all of my discomfort, all my social anxiety, would be reflected in this one tiny, vital part of the dance.

Much of the initial awkwardness does come from the proximity of the embrace. While many people find this level of contact with strangers uncomfortable, I was surprised by my almost automatic comfort with close embrace. In part, it offers an escape from the part of the dance I do find difficult, the gaze. I feel most awkward when my partner and I are face-to face, looking at each other from within a merged personal space.



*Emilie Staat*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Best Essay



### *Tango Face*

if they are magnified to those watching, who often see something different.

At first, I could feel eyes upon me at all times, could imagine the critical gazes of the other dancers, even if I couldn't see them. The heady excitement, the crawling fear, of being the object of someone's gaze, it never failed to take me out of my body and put me into my head: a chaotic, messy place.

This happens far less often now, with many more dances to my name. I feel the music more than the looks,

Initially, my most frequent partner was my instructor, who prefers an arm draped around his shoulders and neck. This position brings his partner tight against his chest and allows for additional support and contact. Dancing with him in his preferred embrace naturally solves the problem of where to look because, with our heads very close or touching, I generally shut my eyes.

The first time my eyes closed was an accident: they slipped shut without any conscious intention on my part. It was also a revelation, forcing me to relax into the lead, to allow my body to be guided, because I couldn't see where I was or where I was going. Intentionally handicapping one of my senses enabled me to trust not just my partner, but my own instincts. I listened to the music and felt the messages his body was telegraphing to mine.

As I continued to tango, I found myself staring at the bodies, especially the feet, of other dancers. Experienced, beginner, female, male: it didn't matter. I had my favorites and my eyes were drawn to them, but whoever I watched, I discovered that I could take in their mistakes and their strengths and later, when I danced, I could feel the new information flowing through my body, correcting my posture and my balance. If I watched dancers, there was an unconscious translation into my body.

I learned through dancing, too, especially on occasions when a partner repeated a step so that I could try again. However, the actual moment of the dance is pure emotion, self-doubt and euphoria jumbled together. I second-guess my partner's lead and my response, feeling my mistakes happen as

with my eyes open or shut. I look through and past the audience, the other dancers, and if our eyes should meet, it is far less disruptive.

At first, my best partners were my height or barely taller, and I turned my face to the side of theirs while we danced, if we didn't lean our temples together. It seemed impossible to dance in this same close posture with Ben, a very talented dancer who is almost a foot taller than me. I admired his dancing and wanted badly to dance well with him, but I struggled with our more open, shifting embrace, which required me to maintain my own axis and allowed me to see Ben's expressions.

He has a particularly expressive face, grimacing when a trick fails. To a new and insecure dancer like me, each of these wincing was a painful accusation. "Stop making faces at me!" I said in exasperation during one dance.

"Don't look at my face," Ben said, then tapped the hollow at his collarbone. "Look right here. You'll see the shift of my shoulders, which will tell you where we're going."

Dropping my eyes excuses me from the painful eye contact at close range and makes following while moving first much easier. While I still catch an occasional grimace cross his features out of the corner of my eye, they don't feel like accusations anymore.

But tango begins before the dance, with a subtle yet terribly important gaze I haven't yet mastered. The *cabeceo* is an invitation, without words, and involves direct and sustained eye contact, often from across the room. If a leader catches the eye of a follower and nods to the dance floor, he is inviting her to dance. If she maintains the eye contact, smiles, or nods, she has accepted.

This is perfectly elegant in theory, but fraught with peril in practice.

He might have trouble meeting your eye, or you might think he is looking at you, but he is inviting the women behind you. You might not want to dance with him.

Maintaining eye contact to encourage an invitation is the most difficult part for me. I feel desperate

and give up, though I've been told that it's fine for a follower to stare at a lead, to ask to be asked, as it were. It is shockingly uncomfortable. In those excruciatingly long seconds of staring, you are stating your desires without words. Admitting that you want something, especially something you might not get, is dangerous.

When I confessed once how hard I find the *cabeceo* to several more experienced female dancers at a large *milonga*, one Argentinean woman waved her

hand and said, "Because Americans do not like to make eye contact."

Eye contact while speaking is generally required to express honesty, but silent and steady eye contact can feel threatening and confusing. While it is slightly easier in an environment where others know the etiquette and how to respond, it still feels unnatural. The times that the *cabeceo* has been sent in my direction and I have successfully accepted, my satisfaction has been enormous and the dance is always good.

\*

Recently, an artist sketched and painted me in watercolor, which required that he study me intently for an hour. Moreover, I *watched* him looking at me, taking apart my features and then putting them back

together in his sketchbook. His gaze was like a touch, the slip of his brush across the paper and my features, caresses. It was intimate and uncomfortable, intoxicating and strange. I doubt I would've been capable of sitting for an artist and being stared at critically, if it weren't for tango and practicing the *cabeceo*.

In the portrait, my face is still and stoic, just a tiny sardonic smile turning up the lips in an expression that is unfamiliar to me, but which friends instantly recognize. My gaze is direct and unflinching. My eyes catch yours and hold them.



*Emilie Staat with judge Andrew Lam at Words & Music 2012*

**Emilie Staat** has always loved to dance, but she had no formal training before learning to tango. She does have formal training as a writer, with an MFA in fiction from LSU, prizes for her screenplays and a novel almost a decade in the making. She works in the film industry, is an assistant editor at *Narrative Magazine* and writes freelance book reviews and author profiles.



*Elsie Michie*  
*2012*  
*Essay Runner-Up*

## **Fossils**



Of all my mother's relations, I remember best my great aunt Alice, who lived alone in a big house in upstate New York, near Utica, and used to tell stories about how in the winter when it snowed hard she would get out of her house from the second story windows. She was tall and boney, with straight gray hair pulled up in a bun that had wisps sticking out at the base of the neck, the kind of indomitable woman you read about, like Lady Hester Stanhope, who in the early nineteenth century travelled in the Middle East, wearing the clothes of a Turkish man and undertaking the first archaeological dig in Palestine. When my great aunt took us to find fossils, it was an expedition. She accoutered us with buckets, hats, and small rock hammers like the one Tim Robbins orders in *The Shawshank Redemption* to chisel his way out of prison. Then she took us to a valley that had nothing living in it just piles of stones tumbled down in chaotic heaps by some force that was no longer present.

Though she was old my great aunt walked easily across the rocks, balancing on their uneven surfaces, and picking one up here and there, flat wide ones with narrow edges, sensing something in the shape that seemed promising. She would feel along the sides of the rock and tap it gently with her fist as if testing for ripeness the way my mother did with melons in the supermarket. You pick something up that is sealed on the outside, with no way in, and wonder what it contains. My great aunt stood tall, a shadow blocking the sun, as she finally chose the stone and began hammering around the edges. "I am trying to find the fault line," she explained, teaching me that there are places where you can just tap, and suddenly what looks whole will fall apart. These rocks remind me of the Easter eggs I loved that had a little cellophane window at the end so you could peer inside to see a whole world hidden within their sugar shell or like the geodes my mother collected whose muddy looking exteriors split open to reveal a nest of crystals within.

I watched my great and tapping and cracks forming in what had seemed solid rock. They spread and connected, forming a dark line that ran all the way round the stone. Pulling gently at both sides as if they were two halves of a sandwich, she opened the stone,

showing me an inside that was not the uniform gray of the outside. Instead it was marked as if someone had drawn patterns like the half-erased chalk markings you see on blackboards at school. "Those are the remains of animals that lived millions of years ago," she told me, "Trilobites," insects whose segmented shape reminded me of the Horseshoe Crabs we saw at the Jersey shore, animals that, though alive, felt as if they came from the past. The hard brown shell, the tiny eyes, the razor sharp tail, and the crab legs beneath the carapace all felt timeless. Once, in the seaweed spread along the beach at the line between the water and the land, my mother and I found a nest of Horseshoe Crabs that had just been born. Their shells weren't hard and brown but soft and translucent so that you could see through them to watch the scurrying crab legs as the babies scuttled down to the ocean.

Perhaps the valley where my great aunt took us had once been part of an ocean. She sent my brother and me out to find fossils of our own, and we brought back rock after rock, rocks that for years my family kept on shelves in our garage. They wouldn't be thrown out until we had to move and my mother said, "I'm not taking all those stones with me." Trilobites became uninteresting. There were so many of them. We found rocks that had the patterns of ferns inside, delicately etched as if the plant had curled up and gone to sleep inside the stone. But my brother and I were getting tired. There was no shade, no life, no trees, only stone. And the sun burnt down. It felt like the kind of place described in the Bible, the valley of the shadow of death. But I brought my great aunt one more stone, a fat one that looked as if it was about to give birth. She felt around its edge with long fingers, made so skinny by age the rings she wore slid between the knuckle and the joint, which was swelled with arthritis. You could see the bones beneath the flesh, as it time was wearing down the container to reveal what was inside.

She glanced up at me with a smile, and began to tap. I held my breath, waiting for the seam that, instead of connecting the two halves, would allow them to come apart. My great aunt pulled gently so as not to damage what was inside, the way you do when you bake something, run your knife around the edge, and turn it



upside down, tapping on the bottom of the pan. You want what is inside to slip out whole, with no flaws, the cake or loaf of bread standing perfect on the plate onto which it has slid. At first the parts of the rock clung to one another, as if they didn't want to be parted, didn't want to reveal what they had held secret for so long. Suddenly they let go. Within was the first fossil we found that was not a flat shape etched into the rock. It was a scallop. On one half of the split stone, its dome rose. You could see the striations running along its back, even the grainy texture of the original shell. The other half held a perfect negative, hollowed out into the rock, a shape that recorded the details of the creature that once lived there as faithfully as the half that looked like the shells we found on the beach. And it takes my breath away and stills my heartbeat, even now, as I am becoming as old as my great aunt was then, to remember the beauty of a once living form, its symmetry, its flaws and flawlessness, captured forever in a rock it never knew would form around it to make it a permanent record that could be carried into the distant future, a time capsule waiting for a child's eyes.

Remembering that shell, I think of a ship I saw recently when I was visiting Stockholm. It is housed in a museum built only for it, the way the rock I found encased the fossil I did not know was within it. You opened the doors and entered a dimly lit room that arched up to the ceiling like the atrium of a hotel. Within it lay a gigantic shape, an object both living and dead, both animated and inanimate, both in the past and in the present. Called the *Vasa*, it was a ship built by the King of Sweden for his fleet, which once dominated the northern seas. He wanted it to be the terror of the seas and decided part way through building that it needed not one but two tiers of cannons, whose doors, decorated with the carved wooden heads of the lions that represent Sweden, would swing up on hinges as the guns slid out to defeat their enemies. But the decision to add the extra canons was fatal, the kind of decision they made in constructing the *Titanic*.

The *Vasa* set sail in Stockholm Harbor, its high stern covered in carvings of Roman and Christian symbols, emperors and saints, sea creatures and martyrs, as if in 1621 you could still appeal to both powers. But even together those gods couldn't protect the giant ship, which hit a squall and began taking on water through the lower tier of canons. It sank before it got out of the harbor. I imagine the ship sailing, its flags flying, its painted mermaids and gilded lions gleaming in the sun. Did a crowd stand there and watch it go down? Did it feel like an unprecedented disaster? And yet, like the shell I found in the fossil, the sinking of that ship represented a serendipitous chance, a moment in time when something live, moving, whole was captured as it was and preserved for the future, preserved for me to see.

The ship sank on the margin between the sea and the harbor, between salt and fresh water. Such a borderline is, as I learned once in a film on caving, a place where things grow that exist nowhere else. Using

one of those neologisms they create to make instructional videos sound more interesting, the narrator of the cave film called those creatures "extremeophiles." They loved extreme conditions where no other beings survive. Such environments preserve what would otherwise be destroyed. The soft mud of what must once have been the bottom of an ocean had surrounded the scallop shell I found, engulfing it in something that hardened to keep it safe and whole. The information plaques hung around the *Vasa* told visitors that if the ship had sunk in the sea, worms would have eaten it. If it had sunk in fresh water it would have rotted. But sinking in the no man's land between the two in the brackish water at the edge of the bay, the *Vasa* remained whole and untouched, looking almost the way it did when it first set sail in 1621. It was shorn only of the bright paint that had originally covered it, which mostly washed away after centuries of being laved by the currents of the harbor.

In 1961 they raised the *Vasa* and placed it in the museum where I saw it. They had to find ways to preserve the ship after it was taken out of the water that held it intact for centuries, so it is impregnated with some form of plastic to keep the wood from rotting. And though the iron bolts that held the hull together were still whole and functional when the ship was raised, they began to be eaten away as soon as it was exposed to the air. Workers are replacing them all (there are more than 5000) with bolts made from stainless steel. The ship continues, like the fossil scallop we found years ago in a rocky valley in up state New York, to keep its form even as the things it was originally made of are replaced by something else. In James Joyce's *Ulysses* Stephen Daedalus thinks about how the molecules he is breathing in and that form his own body could have been part of Shakespeare's body. We are constantly being remade in our own image. Joyce calls it weaving and unweaving. But that image is too intangible. Time doesn't just follow in currents; it creates objects, fossils that allow you to stand on the border between the living and the dead. A shell becomes a stone, a ship that once held two hundred men, who slept in the open on its deck, becomes a thing in a museum.

When I first saw that ship, I felt the same suspended animation I remember from when my great aunt showed me the scallop. For a moment as I looked at that thing from that distant past all that was living within me seemed to slow down, my heart, my breathing, even my thoughts. I think of the phrase they use at funerals "the quick and the dead." Quick means the living, the quickness of motion you feel as your blood beats in your chest or flows through the artery at your wrist, the quickness a mother feels as a baby starts to move inside of her, quickening, as they say, in the womb. Yet the rim of skin that surrounds your fingernails is also called the quick, and it, too is a borderline, a space like the brackish waters of the bay that held the Swedish ship and kept it whole. The quick lies between one thing and another, between the flesh of my hand that is soft and living and can be hurt and the hardness of my nail that is impervious

to wounding. All these borders feel like the fault lines my great aunt showed me years ago in the stones she opened to reveal the fossils hidden within them. There are places where we discover that what we thought were separate things—our bodies as we go through the world, the stones we walk on, the ships we sail in—touch one another in surprising ways.

Looking at the scallop as a child and the ship as an adult, I felt a reverence that reminded me of being in church, the sense that there is something larger than me. As I looked at those objects and reached out to feel the graininess of the stone surface of the preserved scallop and the waxiness of the wood of the ship, I was no longer confined to the moment in which I lived. I was at a boundary, a margin, a space between worlds, where I was in contact with the past. The living and the dead are inexorably connected. I touch a thing that once was live or a carapace that carried the living and is now a preserved object. But that dead thing holds within it traces of the life it once bore. I touch the ship and stand at an interface between the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries. I touch the shell and feel the presence of an even deeper time, before the dawn of human history. But all this time travel is possible because of a fluke, an improbable chance that landed a shell or a ship in the one place where it might be preserved whole and brought forward from the distant past into the world I know. I look around me wondering, what out of all the things that are here will transcend the present? What, fortuitously, surprisingly, through no effort or intention, but only by chance will breach the gap to the future, reaching forward into millennia I will never know? What objects will become future fossils, to be touched after I am long gone, by someone who will look back to the past as I do now, quickening the dead to life?

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## Essay: OTHER FINALISTS

*A Lesson Before Writing*, Judy Hood,  
Homestead, FL

*All This Time, I Thought My Eyes Were Brown*,  
Cathy Lepik, Atlanta, GA

*Anywhere to Hang My Dog—Sketches for a  
New Beginning*, Ruth Moon Kempfer,  
St. Augustine, FL

*Dramatic Entrance*, Petra Perkins, Highlands  
Ranch, CO

*Hands to Believe In*, Jacqueline Guidry, Kan-  
sas City, MO

*Happy Hour*, Roz Kuehn, Garnet Valley, PA  
*How I Learned About Sex*, Faith Garbin,  
Ocean Springs, MS

*Howling Back: Catharsis, the Mirror Stage,  
and Blues in Black Snake Moan*,  
M'Bilia Meekers, New Orleans, LA

*Job Motivation*, Mary Kuykendall,  
Middle Grove, NY

*Letter from a Logophile*, Randy Chaya, Baton  
Rouge, LA

*Mother Love, Madness, and Addiction*,  
Rosemary Daniell, Savannah, GA

*My Mother's Legacy*, Lisa L. Meitner,  
Cheney, KS

*Thanksgiving*, Cecily Bateman,  
Mandeville, LA

*The Don't-Tell-Mary Underground*,  
Natasha Peterson, Vienna, VA

*The Menu*, Terri Shrum Stoor,  
New Orleans, LA

*River Song*, Ned Cheever, Texarkana, TX  
*Searching*, Mary Bradshaw, Flowood, MS

*Stella's "Ode to a Nightingale,"* Kendall Klein,  
New Orleans, LA



*Mary Ann O'Gorman  
2012  
Essay Runner-Up*



## April's Fool

52 was the new asinine. I was suddenly single when I had planned on being married, wrapped in yoga pants and tank tops when baggy linens should have been gracing my matronly form. I was entering new territory where the route was tinged with danger. And the ridiculous.

Kevin and I had been going out for five months that were riddled with break-ups and reunions. A calendar that represented our history from Halloween to April Fool's would look like a speed limit sign distorted by shotgun blasts. Many dates would be distorted by the bullet holes representing the bad days. The days of "I'm over this."

My friends rightfully expressed concern, but I wouldn't listen. Maybe 52 is the new 14, I would tell them. Don't try to talk poorly about him or I might just go all Juliet on you. They rolled their eyes. They sighed.

My husband had left me a year before and was angry that I pleaded with him to come home, then angry when I filed for an uncontested divorce, then angry again when I filed for divorce on charges of abandonment when he refused to agree to the first or second request. I had other things I could charge him with: turning his back on me for twenty-five years, throwing things across the room, sitting slumped in his chair for years of marriage counseling, never looking at me when we made love, refusing to make love. The courts haven't listed all the possible ways to flush a marriage down the toilet. I chose "abandonment."

Then Kevin descended a ladder leaning on my roof. He repaired my leaking chimney. He came down the ladder from four stories up as if he were stepping off a kitchen stool. Lithe, I thought. A lithe man.

We talked, high-fiving each other on surviving being kicked to the curb. He quoted Frost's "After Apple Picking," talked about growing up in the land of Tennessee Williams, and used the word 'mendacity' appropriately. He said how being on high roofs like mine gave him the view of the world that God had. He stood two steps down from me so his ocean blue eyes were equal with mine. On our first date we went to a corn maze north of the interstate on a balmy October night. He led

me down a dead-end, pulled me to him, and bent low to kiss me. I felt his breath in the soles of my feet.

I took him to bed on the one year anniversary of my husband's announcement that he was leaving. Those words had landed like a meteor that had been rocketing around the universe for years waiting to find a place to burn a big hole in the ground. I had stepped into that hole.

Kevin said, "Out. Now." Thirteen years younger than me, beautiful, crazy enough to spend his days on rooftops. His body was in my bed, he hugged me when I woke up crying after I put my dog, the vestige of family life, to sleep. He looked at me during sex. I never asked. He also locked his keys in his car, phoned me drunk from bars to ransom him, showed up four hours late as a rule, and was capable of taking to the couch for days.

Kevin believed his alcohol limit was somewhere after the fourth shot and sixth beer, but he tended to lose track. When he promised to not drink when he was with me, he could show up so drunk that the date started with him sleeping it off.

There were actual dry nights with us half-dressed in front of my now-working fireplace, sharing childhood stories, smiling at our incredible luck in finding each other. But the so-called dry nights could also find me standing on the front steps of his house holding a bag of steaks and asparagus, connecting the clues—opened door, blaring music, coffee cup full of cigarette butts, half-empty bottle of cheap vodka. No Kevin. Then something like Kevin ambling down the street shouting, "We don't have to take this shit, do we, Kendrick?" at his neighbor. And Kendrick shaking his head no. Almost-Kevin might say to me, "If you're not happy, leave." When I would leave rather than wait until he sobered up, he would call me as I drove home, asking "Why did you leave?"

On April 1, he was in the driveway, leaving my house. I hoped the neighbors had noticed his panel truck there overnight; I was proud of my defiance of all the stodgy values I imagined I was leaving behind. Just part of the new asinine.

"Hey, Kevin," I said, just before he swung into his truck. "It's April Fool's Day."



He walked back. Lithe. Drawn to me like I was reeling in a fish. He stood below me in the drive as I leaned over the porch rail. "Thanks for reminding me. Timmy and them would've got me good."

"I've got one," I said. "Let's tell people we're getting married."

He smiled, bringing up the dimple that, like most of his body, reminded me of slot canyons formed by the rush of water against sandstone. "Oh, man," he said. "I can just imagine what some of your friends will say."

"I think I might get disowned." I had made no secret that my friends thought that besides him being an alcoholic, he might be wrong for me on other levels. But mostly, they insisted, it was the alcohol.

He looked a little hurt. "Now come on," I said, "let's do it. It's a good one."

He tied a bandana around his head and lit a cigarette. "Sometimes these things backfire you know."

Sometimes I should listen to people.

"No. That won't happen. Check with me later and we'll compare notes."

I was meeting Maggie for coffee that morning. I rushed into the shop with a big smile on my face.

"Okay." Her face reflected my joy. "What's going on? Did you get that job?"

"Big, big secret," I said. "I'm trusting only you with it. Swear to keep it to yourself."

"Oh my God," she said, "you're getting the divorce? He responded?"

"No. Not that." My game stopped as a black cloud weighed me down.

She saw it immediately and went back to the game. "You have to tell me. You finished your novel? There's a grandbaby coming?"

I banked Maggie's suggestions for future April Fool's Days. I had no job, no divorce, no completion, no grandbabies. I thought of the time Kevin fell down the escalator in the casino in his sports coat and pressed shirt. Not so lithe that time. I had a gorgeous man on his ass with steps melting under him as they began their secret ascent to the top, and the clanging of slot machines accompanied by flashing lights and rows of whirring fruit.

But I rallied. "No, none of those. Even better."

I dropped my voice and leaned forward across the table, not wanting anyone to hear. "Kevin and I are getting married. We decided this morning. You are the first, and only, person I'm telling."

Maggie's face scanned the possibilities for the correct response, settling on pleasant but not too pleased. "Really? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. As soon as Mr. I-didn't-abandon-you signs the papers, there's going to be a wedding."

The cappuccino machine roiled in the background. Then hissed. Then splashed into the waiting cup. "I mean, are you sure you want to do this? It's so soon and all."

"Soon?" I wasn't acting now. "Soon? It's a year

and a half since he left. I'm not getting any younger. And Kevin, is, well..." I went back into Fool's mode, "so sweet. You know that. And hot. And he loves me." She stared at me. I put a little defiance in my voice. "And I love him."

"Well, then." She shuffled her phone and newspaper to new places on the table. "Well. Then."

"So," I drew out the syllable, "so. Next announcement."

"There's more?" Any resolve she had to stay neutral was fading. I grabbed her newspaper.

"There's always more," I said. I snapped the paper open unintentionally landing on the crime update. "Did you see this?" I moved my hand as if I were possessed by a spirit on a Ouija board, sliding over the mug shots of local meth manufacturers and child pornography addicts.

"What?" Maggie was aggravated. I drew her attention to a picture-less police report about a prostitution ring. "I don't think I want to know this."

I moved my hand to the top of the paper quickly. "This." I rested my hand on the date. April 1.

"Read this."

She stared at the page right above my finger.

"Fuck you," she laughed. "Oh, holy fuck. I thought you were serious. Oh, damn. You got me good."

I knew she hated my infatuation with Kevin. And now she probably hated me for making her have to wriggle out of how much she hated it.

"Seriously," she said. "Don't do that. Don't even joke about it. Oh my god. Please don't do that. You know I think he's sweet, but he's just not right for you. He's too negative."

Late that afternoon, Kevin came over with his toolbox, his table saw, and a cooler of beer.

"How'd your April Fool's joke go?" he asked. I told him about coffee with Maggie, omitting her disgust and repulsion and disappointment, emphasizing how I revealed it was a joke.

"How about you?" I asked.

"Well," he said, "I called Angie first. She fell for it until I started talking about having your swami marry us on the full moon in August in your backyard, and how the guests would have to wear white and give live white animals as gifts. Then she tore me up."

I smiled and sipped a beer. "I like how you went over the top," I said. "Very good. Very creative."

"And then I asked her to be in on it with Mom."

He stared out over the yard. "Look at all those red winged blackbirds at your feeder," he said. "Are you giving them crack?"

"With your mother?" I never met Kevin's family. They lived hours away, and being strict Baptists, he said they wouldn't approve of me because I was still married. Quite often, Kevin would go all Baptist on me and say he couldn't see me any more until after the divorce. His mother knew I was a writer. That was all he'd told her.

"Yeah," he sighed, and pulled off the bandana,

black now with soot and grime from the day. His hair stood straight up like a coxcomb, stiff with sweat. I knew something bad was coming, like a dog knows even in the bright sun that the barometric pressure is dropping and it's about to thunder.

"I got Mom really good," he said. "I told her about the swami and the live animals, and she bought it. So then I told her we would have to move for your job. To either Massachusetts, San Diego, or Chattanooga." He laughed. "I was just pulling shit out of a hat."

He stood up and started measuring the porch with his tape measure. I wanted him to build a porch swing so I could sit outside and read. I would pay him for the labor. Strictly business, we said.

"She was going to call Angie right after we hung up. She was so happy for me. She knows I've been lonely."

"How'd she take it when you told her it was April Fool's?"

He marked the porch ceiling in two spots. "How's right here? You'll get the breeze good in the summer, and it's pretty private in case you want a buddy on the swing with you." He came behind me and rubbed my shoulders.

"So, how'd she take it? She must've wanted to kill you."

He stopped rubbing. "I never told her it was a joke," he said. I couldn't see his face.

He couldn't see mine. "What?" I tried to look at him, but he held me still.

"Please don't look at me. I should have told her. Angie called me about thirty minutes ago, so proud of how she kept the joke going."

"Are you crazy? Call her right this minute. Call her."

I pictured this woman I'd never met. She was ten years older than me, retired high school teacher, avid gardener and church-goer. She probably had worried that Kevin would never meet anyone, what with the drinking, and had been on the phone with her sister all afternoon. Probably planning a "meet the family reception" at the church with punch and cake.

"Call her, dammit."

"Does it have to be a joke?" he asked. His fingers stroked my neck, and I saw the storm clouds coming.

"Yes," I said. "Yes it does. As you have pointed out repeatedly, I'm not divorced yet. Not to mention how many times I have pointed out that I will never remarry. I will never be put in that bind again."

"Fine." He sat down next to me. "Don't hold back or anything." The air was thicker than it had been in the morning. His elbows rested on his knees. His body formed a dark, foreboding cave. I wanted to go inside the house and lock the door.

"Call her."

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. I listened for his mother's voice. He apologized. "I'm sorry, Mom.

It went too far. You know I do that." His statements had small pauses in between where her voice came through like a dog whistle; faint and high and sad. "I'll call Aunt Patsy. I'll own it, Mom. I will."

When he hung up, he glared at me. "Funny how these things tell you so much about a person, right?"

"You shouldn't have let it go so far. Now you broke your mom's heart."

"That's not what I meant." He leaned forward on his long, thin legs, and his arms flexed as he squeezed one hand into a fist and then the other. "I meant, it's funny how I didn't know how you felt until today."

"Not fair." I had told him before, but he was too drunk to hear it. Maybe I had intentionally told him when he wouldn't remember. But I didn't want to say that. "This was a joke."

I felt trapped in the open air. "I'll tell you what's a joke," he said, desperate for something full of wit and incision but only finding the beginning of a beer cluttered fog instead. "We're a joke. I'm wasting my fucking time here."

He picked up his cooler, climbed into the truck with the chimney sweep's hat painted on the side, cracked open a beer, lit a cigarette, and sped out of the driveway, leaving more tire marks. His table saw, his measuring tape, his tool box, were still there. This one would come back.

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*Peter Cooley*

**2013 Gold Medal  
for Poetry**



**Aftermaths**

from *AFTERMATHS: LOUISIANA AFTER KATRINA AND  
THE OIL SPILL*

A terrible new way to see the world  
+++  
my lens shattered, only the naked eye  
+++  
on naked properties, stripped to nothing  
+++  
teach me to sing about such voids and voids  
+++  
and always my old friend, pentameter!  
+++  
and always morning, radiance on the walls,  
the walls in my room, shadows of Plato's cave  
+++  
The polis the southern city, city light  
+++  
All of the stars I've lost inside my eyes  
all of the stars I've lost inside their scars  
all of the stars I've lost defining stars  
+++  
Make of yourself the template for that light—  
+++  
and never to be happier than this  
defining objects which can define me

in separation from my I, my center  
+++  
And all the while light running through the trees  
+++  
Make out of wonder all light's properties  
+++  
I will not write the single lyric poem.  
+++  
This is the last poem you will ever write  
the page said, continuing its writing  
+++  
No more the well-dressed poem, hands in lap  
+++  
This is Louisiana Write It Now  
+++  
I'll sing about the spirit of the place  
+++

*DOCUMENTARY POETICS: DRIVING LOUISIANA*

This is the road into St. Gabriel,  
Cancer Corridor of the USA.  
Take I-10 West from Baton Rouge, then turn,  
then US 30 West, you'll be there soon.

The air they've set on fire will come to you.  
At every side these grey refineries  
set in intended rice and cotton fields  
but now like parts from my erector set



I set up to make cities for my cars.

I'm starting to breathe in model car glue,  
I struck between pieces of model cars,  
I'm gagging as I stick, my nose, my ears,  
I'm doubling up. The glue is one with wind,  
white fire, blinding. I drive. I have to drive.

The cancer death here ten times the average  
says *Wikipedia*, that site of truth  
if you need facts. I can't see past this air....  
I-have-to-stop-for-lunch, the only car  
among trucks at this restaurant gas station  
which sports a dark casino in the back.

"The poor blacks working the refineries  
Suffer the cancer most." *Wikipedia*.  
Over a PoBoy, jukebox up on high  
everyone white in workmen's uniforms,  
I quiz the waitress. "My daddy father died  
at sixty, working all his life in them plants."  
"And the black people?" (She might have liked  
"negroes.")

"They don't have the initiative to work.  
Have you seen one?" "No." "You won't, either.  
They're back here in the woods. They won't come out."

+++  
"And no white is so white as the memory of whiteness."—  
Williams

"And no black is so black as the memory of blackness."—  
me

+++  
What color is—invisibility?  
And what race is invisibility?  
+++

## DOCUMENTARY POETICS : AFTER KATRINA

### I

To see the world again for the first time:  
this is the lesson of the trees at dawn.  
But equally—I hesitate to speak—  
the reason I feed on devastation.  
This poem is my confession of the need  
to drive through the ninth ward in New Orleans,  
the houses boarded-up, like sutured wounds  
on corpses laid out row-on-row-on-row.  
These are all hospitals—all become morgues.

No one could even try to count the bodies....

Turning off Judge Perez, a spectator  
of suffering, confessing everything  
to you, reader, in this confession booth

my poem, I forgive myself.

### II

I knew I would not make this couple up.

The problem is—putting them in the poem  
risks you believing—reader, are you here?—  
they're pure invention, for a happy ending.  
I'll include him, coming around the turn,  
the place where the poem tries to lift its wings,  
brings something forward never seen before  
or said before. There, I'm daring to say it:

a single hammer in a single hand,  
a man, his back to me, never pausing.  
I do not make him up; I record him.  
And now his wife comes forward in the poem.  
She, too, is just *reportage*, but she's gold  
along the edges, call it a nimbus,  
a hammer in her one hand, purple shutter  
in the other: obvious images,  
all right, symbols. The poem said: sing this.  
I said no, write it. The poem reigns.

+++  
Let's pretend Katrina never happened  
Let's pretend no one spilled some oil

+++  
To be—always—in some preparation  
resurrected from all this leveling.

**Peter Cooley** is Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Tulane. He has a B.A. in Humanities from Shimer College, an M.A. in Art and Literature from The University of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Modern Letters from The University of Iowa, where he was a student in the Writers' Workshop.

His eight books of poetry are *The Company of Strangers*, *The Room Where Summer Ends*, *Nightseasons*, *The Van Gogh Notebook*, *The Astonished Hours*, *Sacred Conversations*, *A Place Made of Starlight*. Carnegie Mellon, his publisher, released his newest volume *Divine Margins*, in 2009 and will release his next, *Night Bus to the Afterlife*, in 2013.

Peter's poems have appeared in such magazines as *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and in over one hundred anthologies including most recently *The Best American Poetry 2002*, *The Manthology*, *Poets on Place* and *Poetry Daily: 366 Poems from the World's Most Popular Poetry Website*. From 1970-2000 he was Poetry Editor of *The North American Review* and has recently been appointed Poetry Editor of *Christianity and Literature*.



Judith White  
2012  
Poetry Runner-Up



## Sugar Maple

### Sugar Maple

My chandeliers are lit, the golden cloth is laid,  
candles flame red and orange.  
I am expecting royalty.

Below stairs, homely servants scurry and blink, hefting  
trays of  
succulent morsels to pique particular tastes.  
The chef d'cuisine in her emerald toque  
creates culinary magic.

The fashionable and chic gather in the penthouse to  
gossip.

The Cardinal, splendid, learned, holds forth;  
starlets cluster, all gleam and giggle, in daring iridescent  
gowns,

Lord Jaye, (a nom de plume) mimics those he flatters,  
scissoring each slip of tongue,  
stealing what he needs for tomorrow's column.  
Foolish fledglings, beware!  
The hors d'oeuvres are devoured.

That opera star, passé, décolleté, besot with currant wine,  
warbles, unaccompanied,  
the aria from "L'Oiseau."

At last, heralded by her drab ladies-in-waiting,  
the Queen suddenly appears, a vision in gold,  
briefly alighting,  
declines to dine,  
she's off in a firing of flashbulbs to grace a gala.

In the drawing room,  
seven sleek gents in tailcoats argue politics,  
plan a strategic takeover.  
We would fear them if their antics were not  
so droll.

**Judith White** is a teacher, playwright, poet, director, composer and actor who has worked with young people throughout her career. A graduate of Mary Washington University, she has studied theater at Oberlin, ACT, Northwestern University, and Studio Theater, Washington, D.C., and performed in venues from Off-Broadway to dinner theater. She was Director of Drama and Speech for 26 years at the Holton-Arms School, Bethesda, Md., where she was profiled in *The Washingtonian*. She continues to mentor teachers throughout the DC area and abroad through the Center for Inspired Teaching. A student of ancient myths, she has written four plays based in world mythology, most recently **Pandora's Fire**, for Traveling Players Ensemble in northern Virginia.

Health is the greatest gift,  
contentment the greatest  
wealth, faithfulness the best  
relationship.

—Buddha



*Jim Bourney*  
*2012*  
*Poetry Runner-Up*

## **Words Then Space**



### **Facing Her**

*"I like a look of Agony"*  
*Emily Dickinson*

mirrors bottles and the quiet  
gloom of a late afternoon  
as i watch the couple  
in the booth behind  
while they wrangle  
their emotions into  
something acceptable  
for public viewing

my second beer sweats  
a ring on the bar  
their third drink  
she's a chardonnay  
he's a bourbon straight  
double please  
she's chin up defiant  
he's head down despairing

i don't need to hear  
the dialogue but it's  
there a low combination  
of supplication mixed  
with sharp dismissal  
as she stares hard  
gauging his misery  
looking for an opening

so that final cut can  
be dealt and here it is  
she takes her wedding  
ring off slaps it hard  
onto the tired worn  
table top as he looks  
into her eyes with  
sad abandonment

unbelieving and choking  
on raw agony he watches

as she leaves i see  
a soft smile curling her lips

### **The Big Poetry Reading**

raise up all those dead poets  
the great and merely good  
gather them all in a hall  
along with the living  
and the nearly living  
crafters of odes and sonnets  
villanelles limericks and lines  
un-rhymed in jagged constructions

let me put my favorites  
in the finest seats  
(it is my imagining after all)  
and let them each read one  
or two of their best  
and no one will look  
underneath every word  
trying to find missing meaning

no parsing of complete  
or incomplete sentences at this  
show no we will just listen  
and let the words spike  
through our ears  
and land in our brains  
and if we follow the reading  
on a written page our eyes

will be pierced by beauty  
not searching for the unsaid  
nor the unwritten and each  
poem will stand on its own  
sound and in its own shape  
casting passing shadows  
making resounding echoes  
in this great hall of poetry



what a concert this would be  
poets reading free from Homer  
to Milton to Keats to Kipling  
and Frost and Yeats and Heaney  
then Service then Roark  
and young Alexie followed by  
Nash and Lynch and Collins and more  
for days or months until we've

heard them all in their own ways singing  
and we've laughed and cried then rested  
and walked outside to sit by the river  
listened to the calming verses of silence  
seen the words written in the shapes  
of rocks and kept company with folks  
whose poetry is in their lives only then  
will we once again take up our pen

## Words Then Space

some words that i hesitate  
to say aloud  
in mixed company  
spill out on clean pages  
making a mess  
carrying all the meaning  
i intend or no  
meaning at all  
just sounds that sound  
pleasant or harsh  
according to the mood  
of the world  
or a different planet  
spinning on some odd  
orbit in my mind

explorations of space  
have revealed so much  
while touching so  
little can things seen  
through electronic eyes  
be as real as the dust  
from the moon  
or the dust on that ceiling  
fan turning slowly  
on a summer afternoon  
while beer cans  
sweat as we sit coolly  
talking about travel  
we'd never enjoy even  
if we had the money

and yes i mean leaping  
into space on some  
tourist's passport  
leaving love and gravity

behind seeing new stars  
and supernovas  
collapsing in on their  
own brand of infinity  
while our-reentry  
would be planned by  
a cosmic computer  
working only with  
ones because zero  
is just a concept  
for saints and mystics

*James Bourey, like so many other poets, started writing when he was a child and became convinced that he was destined to become the next Frost or Faulkner. Since that didn't work out as planned he worked for forty plus years in a variety of fields including banking, sales and wholesale management while writing on a purely part time basis. But the dream has resurfaced and James now writes everyday while keeping his ambitions firmly in check. He's been married to his wife Linda for 43 years, has two grown daughters and three excellent grandchildren and divides his time between Dover, DE and Dickinson Center, NY.*

## Recycling Romance Is Green

There is no better way to conserve the resources of the planet than to reuse the houses, furnishings, and treasures of yesteryear instead of opting for everything new. Houses of other centuries were built to last, as the residences of New Orleans and Charleston, for instance, bear witness. Their furnishings were intended to be handed down and reused, generation, after generation, with these old dwellings and antiques acquiring a lovely, antique patina that can not be duplicated overnight. Our ancestors understood the wisdom of building with the environment in mind and their old ways are now the best new ways. Let us help you recycle the romance of the past for a glorious and responsible future.

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*Jennifer Bartell*  
*2012*  
*Poetry*  
*Runner-Up*



## ***Last Will & Testament of L.J.***

### ***Last Will & Testament of L.J.***

Use my money to pay my bills.  
Except that bill from the triple-bypass.  
Don't pay them nothing.  
My heart gave out in the middle of my barn  
when I was getting tools to fix a sink.  
No. Don't pay them nothing.

Estate tax, income tax, then more taxes?  
When will they be done with me?  
The money wasn't mine to start with no way.  
No more dollars worries or taxes.  
They're done with me.

To my three children all that I own:  
Lord, let them keep the Ford running.  
And get that eave over the back porch fixed.  
Half the policy between the eldest, the youngest.  
The middle child will likely be in the jailyard or  
graveyard.

I want my eldest child born last as my personal  
representative.

In my careful and slow hand.  
Our people ain never had nothing.  
I am the son of sharecroppers.  
I came into this world alone.

**Jennifer Bartell** is a native of Johnsonville, South Carolina. A poet, she is pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Her work has been published in *Jasper Magazine* and she is the recipient of the 2012 James Dickey Writing Award for Poetry. She is also the poetry editor of *Yemassee*, USC's literary journal.

### **Poetry:**

### **OTHER FINALISTS**

*A Daub of Wool*, Dennis Fomento, Slidell, LA  
*After the Poetry*, Judy Hood, Homestead, FL  
*As the Carousel Revolved in Neon Motion*,  
Theodore Kogos, St. Louis, MO  
*Axis*, Julie Ann Candoli, Austin, TX  
*Chaotic Music*, Songa Brown, Longwood, FL  
*Circus Job, Day Job*,  
Lee Deigaard, New Orleans, LA  
*Civilization*, Craig Black, Darrow, LA  
*Diane Arbus*, Garic Barranger, Covington, LA  
*English Class*, Nancy Dafoe, Homer, NY  
*From Where This Ancient Passion*,  
Constance Clark, Waynesville, OH  
*Evermore, Mr. Poe*, Nettie Bauman Parker, West  
Hartford, CT  
*Insanity*, T. S. Eleu, Chicago, IL  
*Near Times Square*, Paul Saluk, Pembroke  
Pines, FL  
*November*, Craig Black, Darrow, LA  
*Passed By*, Craig Black, Darrow, LA  
*Side Orde*, N. Colwell Snell, Salt Lake City, UT  
*S'mores*, William Greenway, Youngstown, OH  
*The Poet in Tumultuous Youth Reflects*,  
Stephen Thomas Roberts, Lagrangeville, NY  
*The Prettiest Road for Sunsets*,  
Garic Barranger, Covington, LA  
*The Shrouded Crown*,  
Manfred Pollard, New Orleans, LA

The branches overhead crackled as they brushed against each other, their bare bark shadowy against the pale grey sky. Allan Hall could feel the damp winter in his bones as he walked home from school, scuffing his yellowing tennis shoes along the cracked sidewalk. He reached his house, an old wooden one with French windows and shabby-looking green shutters, and stepped inside.

"Who's that?" his dad called.  
"Allan," he answered.

He stopped in the doorway of the living room. His dad was watching TV with Mr. Jones, the man from next door. Both men were balding slightly, Mr. Jones more so than Allan's father. Allan's father used to be powerfully built, athletic, but now he had a worn out look about him, especially in his dark, hollowed eyes. He used to be a construction worker, but when he broke his leg falling down a flight of stairs, he was transferred to a desk job. That leg had never been the same since, revealing itself through a slight limp. His clothes never seemed to fit his body correctly; his shirt hung in loose folds around his shoulders and stretched tightly across his pot belly.

"Hey there Allan, how you doing?" Mr. Jones said, twisting around to look over the back of the blue sofa.

"Good," said Allan.

"School treating you all right?"

"Yeah."

His dad, still staring at the screen, said, "There's some Chinese in the fridge. And don't fool with the heater. That damn repairman didn't do nothin'."

"Okay," said Allan.

As Allan waited in the kitchen for his fried rice to heat up, he heard his dad say, "The fridge conks out sometimes too. This place is never going to be fixed up."

"It will. Just got to be patient," Mr. Jones told him calmly.

"I'm done being patient. It's been a year since Katrina, and I still haven't finished repairing my own house. I just want to move out of this damn city."

"Aww, you don't mean that."

Allan's older brother Charlie came into the kitchen, his wavy black hair tousled from the wind



*Leigh Vila*

## 2013 Gold Medal for Student Short Story



### Finding a Storm

down at the circular table and slowly ate his dinner. The sounds of the two men and the TV in the living room kept drifting to him, the only sound in the house besides the clink of his fork and plate. He took out his report card that he'd gotten that day: an A in Pre-Calculus, a B in Chemistry and C's and D's in everything else. He felt guilt tugging at his insides, but he shrugged it off. What he couldn't explain was the A in math. He didn't think he tried any harder in Pre-Calculus than he did in any other subject, yet every test he got back was an A. He couldn't believe that he was naturally that good at something

outside. He had a tall, wiry build just like Allan, except Charlie looked a great deal more like their father. He had the same dark eyes and strong jaw, while Allan had the narrow delicate nose and green eyes of their mother. "Hey," he said, tugging off his Loyola sweatshirt.

"Hey," said Allan. The microwave beeped, and he took out his food. "Has mom said anything more about visiting?"

"Not to me," said Charlie, a sour look on his face.

The last time their mother had visited was a year ago, at Thanksgiving. She had bought them premature Christmas presents because she didn't think she would see them again during the holidays—and she didn't. Charlie got a black double-breasted coat since she'd thought it was a suitable going-away-to-college gift. That was when she had still thought he was going to Harvard, although she should've known that wasn't going to happen. Allan was given some Bruce Springsteen CDs. What he really had wanted was a trumpet so he wouldn't have to use the rather disgusting school one.

"Tell me if she calls again, I haven't talked to her in a while," said Allan.

"Why would you even want to talk to her?" Charlie muttered quietly. Allan wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear that or not, so he ignored it.

Charlie picked up Allan's fork and took a bite of his fried rice. "I'll see you later," Charlie said through a bulging mouth.

"You just came in!"

"Yeah, I was just dropping off my books. I'm going to a party." Charlie grinned and hurried out.

Slightly jealous, Allan sat



when he didn't care about it in the first place. Then again, Allan found it difficult *not* to pay attention in that class. He never volunteered a question or an answer, but he always watched the teacher work problems on the white board. The numbers would soak in, the problems unwinding and coming loose like braids, the logic smoothing itself out in his mind. And when Allan took the tests, he wasn't going to *not* try.

\*\*\*

Gwen dropped her backpack heavily onto the floor, slumped into her seat, and groaned.

"Excited for chemistry?" asked Allan.

"This is so unfair," she said, putting her head down on the desk.

"Well, I don't like the class that much either, but—"

"No. No, it's not that. Tell me, Allan," said Gwen, turning toward him, "would you ever have a baby?"

Allan blinked. "I guess not."

"Damn right you wouldn't. Men are cowards."

"You feeling okay?" said Allan, taken aback.

Gwen grimaced. "I'm on my period."

"Oh," said Allan. "Gross."

"You're gross." She ran her hand through her light blonde hair and sighed.

"Wait, I don't get it," said a blonde girl loudly up in the front of the classroom. "I don't understand this." What a nasally voice, thought Allan. He liked to call her Olga in his head.

"Let's go over this one more time," said Mr. Kemp's in a truly depressed tone.

"Let's shoot ourselves in the heads," muttered Gwen.

Allan glanced at the white board. They had been in class for forty minutes and had only gotten through three problems. "You want to come over today?" he asked Gwen.

"Yeah," she said, drawing mushrooms on her notebook. "And please let me stay for dinner. My stepdad is going to try to make sushi tonight. With ground beef."

"You're kidding."

"I really wish I was."

When they walked home from school later that evening, Allan started when he saw a silver Corolla parked on the curb in front of his house. He recognized it immediately.

"Whose car is that?" asked Gwen.

"My mom's," said Allan.

"I didn't know she was in town."

"Me neither."

"You okay?" Gwen searched his face. "You sound tense."

"I'm not tense, I'm just surprised," Allan said, rubbing his cold hands together.

"Okay. I should probably go home. I don't want to interrupt a family thing."

"I'm sure it wouldn't matter, you can still come in."

"Okay." As they walked up the steps, Allan could

already hear his mother's robust laugh.

She was sitting on the sofa in the living room, her hand clasped around a glass of red wine. Her skin was dark with a tan, maybe a spray tan since it was January, and she had put blonde highlights in her brown hair. She looked up and squealed when she saw Allan.

"Allan, darling, it's so wonderful to see you again!" his mother exclaimed as she got up. She gave him a hug, the rim of the wine glass pressing sharply into his back. "You've gotten so handsome, just like your brother!"

Allan glanced across the room at Charlie, who was sitting in the armchair in the corner, looking annoyed. Allan noticed a man on the sofa whom he'd never seen before. He had a dark complexion, was heavysset, and was completely enraptured by whatever was on the screen of his Blackberry. He assumed that the man was his mother's boyfriend.

Allan cleared his throat and gestured to Gwen. "Mom, this is my friend Gwen."

His mother smiled widely and hugged her as well. If Gwen was surprised, she didn't show it. "It's so nice to meet you, dear!" his mother said. Allan realized that his mom's voice had grown huskier, like she'd been smoking more often.

"Well, come in, you two, come sit down!" Allan's mother turned back around and returned to the sofa, sitting closely beside the man with the Blackberry. Allan and Gwen crossed over to Charlie, who acknowledged them with a nod, and each perched on one of the wide arms of the armchair.

Allan's father entered, carrying a glass of whiskey, the ice cubes rattling against the sides. Allan could tell that he hadn't started drinking it yet; he looked nervous and alert, barely even getting out a hello to Allan.

"Tell me what's going on, sweetie! I haven't seen you in ages! I've just been asking Charlie about college, but he's not talking much, never did, he was always the strong and silent type." She paused to laugh loudly and richly, filling the entire room with its rough sound. "But I must know what's going on with you. How's school?"

"It's all right," said Allan.

"I'm glad you didn't say horrible, at least. How's school for you, dear?" His mother turned her interested eyes onto Gwen, taking in her loose and flowing grey blouse and tattered black jeans.

"It's pretty much the same as him, I guess," said Gwen, meeting her gaze directly.

"I never liked school much either. Haha, I dropped out! But you all know that. You don't, I guess, unless Allan's been telling you stories about me, which I hope he hasn't, there aren't many good ones from my high school years. I got Eric in trouble tons of times, didn't I?"

Allan's father grunted softly and stared at his hands.

"I hope I've matured a bit, though. I'm supposed to be an adult now. I can't say I'm completely irresponsible, but I still lose everything, my car keys, my wallet, my hair ties. You'd think by this time I'd be better, with my two sons all grown up!" She laughed again to

# 2012 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

herself.

Allan had the impression that he really wasn't even there, or that he and everyone else were just audience members watching his mother. The tone of her voice was just right, her eyebrows perfectly arched, her hair hanging perfectly straight, her smile finely curved. There was no doubt that she was a magnificent performer. He always had this feeling every time he saw her.

"What's your favorite class?" she asked, leaning forward.

"I, uh, don't really have a favorite class," said Allan, fiddling with a hangnail.

"You do too," Gwen said suddenly. "Yeah. You always look like you're having an org—I mean, having fun in math class." Charlie snorted.

"Math is all right," said Allan. "I don't mind it."

"Hey yeah," said Charlie, "I saw one of your test grades, and it was an 'A'. What'd you get in the class?"

"I think I got an 'A'."

"What'd you get in everything else?" his father asked.

"I have my report card, but I'll just show it to you later."

"Why, I'd love to see your report card!" exclaimed his mother.

"Why, I'd love to see it too," Charlie said.

"But this is a...family moment, I don't want to... bring school into this..." Allan protested.

"Let me see," said his dad.

Allan wordlessly reached for his backpack. It seemed to take forever, the unzipping of the bag, the removing of the binder, the opening of the binder, the removing of the report card, the unfolding of it, and finally the handing over of it into his father's large, callused right hand. The man with the Blackberry was actually paying attention now.

After his dad looked at it for a minute, his face expressionless, he said, "We'll just talk about it later."

"Oh, but I want to see it! Have you beaten Charlie's grades? You'd have to get all A's for that!" said Allan's mother. His father gave it to her.

She glanced at it and burst out laughing. "Oh honey," she said, giggling. "This is awful!"

Allan was taken aback. She didn't seem upset about it at all. He didn't understand. She'd always been hard on Charlie when he'd gotten a B or a C. Did she think Allan wasn't smart enough or did she just not care?

Still chuckling to herself, she gave the paper back to his father. "God," she said, "I don't envy the talk you're going to get tonight."

\*\*\*

Later that night, Allan took an extra-long shower, literally cleaning between his toes—which actually made him feel very fresh and diligent—and patted his body dry using only one small corner of the towel. He then combed his hair very carefully, focusing on individual locks, plastering the wet strands to his scalp with the ends just tickling the nape of his neck. He was in the process of cleaning his fingernails with a piece of scrap

paper when Charlie banged on the door.

"Allan, what the hell are you doing in there?" he said loudly.

"I'm getting ready for bed. What's your problem?"

"I have to pee! Jesus Christ!"

"Go in the kitchen sink, I'm not done."

"Stop stalling! Just go freakin' talk to dad, it's not that big a deal."

Allan ignored this and started examining his teeth in the mirror.

"Open this door, or I'll go on your bed. I'm not kidding."

Allan grunted and reached out to turn the knob. Charlie burst in and pushed Allan out.

"You made me stub my toe," Allan called as Charlie slammed the door behind him.

"Oh, my God," said Charlie from inside the bathroom.

"Allan?" came his father's voice. "Come into the kitchen for a moment."

Allan trudged into the kitchen. His father was sitting down, doing a crossword puzzle in the newspaper. "Sit down," he said.

Allan did so. He could feel his stomach twisting around in all directions as he stared at the wooden surface of the table, littered with coffee stains.

"Listen, I'm very happy that you're doing so well in math and chemistry, but your other subjects are important too," his father said. "You've got to bring up these grades. You'll be in a real mess if you have to retake English and American History next year. You'll have less room in your schedule for AP classes, like Calculus or Statistics. You should look into those."

"Okay," said Allan, feeling awkward.

"I'm taking away your cellphone until you bring up those D's."

"Okay."

"Go ahead and give it to me."

Allan pulled it out of his pocket and handed it over.

"Night," said his dad.

Charlie was sprawled on his bed flipping through one of his trumpet music books when Allan came in.

"What'd he do?"

"Just took away my phone. My grades weren't that terrible. No F's."

"Are you really learning to play 'My Heart Will Go On'?"

"No."

"I think your trumpet has mold on it."

Allan glanced at it lying on his dresser. "It might."

"Why don't you wash it?"

"It's not that bad."

Charlie rolled his eyes and got up. "Night."

"Night."

Allan returned to his room and lay down on his bed. He remained that way for a while, silently staring up at the ceiling, thinking about how his father had reacted

to his mother. It wasn't normal for his father to be so shy, even though he had a quiet disposition. Allan wished he could remember how it used to be when his parents had still been married. Charlie must remember a lot more, him being ten years old when their parents actually got divorced. Allan only had sparse memories of her, her taking them to the zoo and being afraid of the gorillas, her smiling at a picture he had drawn her, her cursing as she struggled to shove a faulty straw into a juice box. But really, Allan only had bits and pieces of her now. Not much had changed.

\*\*\*

"So why was Charlie so uptight yesterday?" asked Gwen as she scratched a smiley face into the peeling paint of the lab desk leg.

"He doesn't like Mom too much," answered Allan.

"Oh." Gwen blew off some of the paint flakes from her fingers.

"What do you think of her?" Allan was almost scared to ask.

"I don't know. I mean, she seems kind of silly at times, but I don't think she's a bad person. What do you think of her? You've never really said."

Gwen was always so blunt with her honesty. There were a lot of people who didn't like her for it, but Allan had always appreciated it. "I don't know," said Allan. It sounded like a dumb answer, but he felt the truthfulness of it. He honestly wasn't sure at this point. Gwen gave him a skeptical look, but returned to the desk leg.

"Did your dad give you a hard time last night?"

"Nah, I've had worse."

"All right everybody," said Mr. Kemps, opening the textbook and moving to the front board. "Let's all please try to pay attention, okay?" A few people mumbled an affirmative.

Allan, instead of shutting out the voices of his classmates and Mr. Kemp's lectures, straightened himself up, notebook open and pencil in hand. He had paid attention in English and in History, and it was amazing, really, how much more quickly time passed when one was alert. Allan was a little embarrassed at how much better his day had been since he wasn't bored anymore. "Well, look who's being a model student today," his friend Rickey had said last period when he spotted him taking notes. "Remind me to buy you a nice World War II map for your birthday. You never know when you'll need one." Allan knew that he probably didn't need to pay attention in Chemistry since he had passed the class without doing so, but he figured he might as well be thorough.

\*\*\*

There was a clatter as Allan accidentally knocked over a plate into the metal sink. The soapy water in the sink splashed onto the counter and onto his and Charlie's shirts.

"Careful, babe," said his mother, glancing up at him. She was seated at the kitchen table. "I'm sorry, darling," she said, returning to the conversation she was having on her cellphone. "My son dropped something.

Haha, no it's all right."

Allan, embarrassed, rubbed vigorously at the suds on his shirt with a paper towel. "Don't do that," Charlie said. "You smell so much better this way." Allan flicked some suds at him and they got in his eye. Charlie began to curse, but their dad walked in, shooting a stern look over at them.

"Y'all getting the dishes done?"

"Yes," said Charlie, blinking furiously.

"Oh, well if you have to run...don't forget to buy something for me! Hahaha, I'm joking, honey. Okay. Yes. I'll see you later." Allan's mother hung up the phone and sighed. "Rita is just so crazy. She's this lady I met at my book club."

"What are you reading right now?" asked Allan.

"Oh, I don't know. Can't think of the title. I don't understand much of it, I'm afraid."

Allan's father opened the cabinet and pulled out a tube of Pringles. He lowered himself into a chair, wincing a little. His leg must've been painning him today.

"I see you didn't bring your boyfriend today," said Charlie.

"Oh, that's right! Clark is visiting a cousin right now, but I'm supposed to meet him at Outback in an hour. How was school today?"

They both took their turns mumbling some slightly positive replies. Allan noticed his father looking at him, so he said, "I paid attention in English and History today."

"That's good," his dad replied, expression blank.

Allan felt annoyed at his father's indifference. He returned to cleaning the dishes, but he didn't notice much of what he was doing.

"Allan, do you need me to finish this up?" said Charlie. "You're not even cleaning half the plate."

"I'm fine. I'll start over."

"It's fine, I can do it."

Allan looked up at Charlie's serious face, made slightly comical by his reddish, irritated eye. "Okay," he said. His mother was asking his father about his work, and they didn't see Allan leave.

Allan walked to the park a couple blocks from their house and sat under a tree for a while, scratching different faces into the ground with a twig. He did a smiley face with buck teeth, then an angry face with shadows under its eyes and fangs. He smudged them both out with his foot. A little while later he saw his brother entering the park. Charlie walked over, his hands in his pockets.

"Dude, I'm fine, I'm really not that mad."

"You think I came out her for you? Nope, I'm sick of hearing Mom talk. But I guess we can talk about your feelings if you want."

"Mom isn't really *that* bad. Why are you always so mad at her?"

Charlie scowled. "Let's get to that later, okay?"

"Fine. I just wish Dad would be a little more responsive. He doesn't notice me very much."

"Okay, Dad does notice you, but he's not going



to be all like, 'I love you so much son, you bring honor to my family.' That's not what he's like. Besides, he's a little rattled right now."

"I know, I know."

"It'll be better after Mom leaves."

"Okay, seriously Charlie, what's up with you and Mom? You act like she's pure evil, and she isn't. She's not great, I'll give you that, but she does care about us. Do you really hate her?"

Charlie rubbed his chin. "No, I don't," he admitted. "But I actually don't believe that she cares about us. She doesn't care about anything. She's never felt guilty about leaving us. How often do we see her? Maybe twice a year? I'd rather she stop visiting altogether and leave us alone. The only reason Mom does visit is because everyone expects her too, and she wants to be accepted by people. That's what she strives for."

Allan wasn't sure if he agreed, but he thought it best to remain quiet. A breeze blew across the park, swirling dead leaves through the air. He picked one up off the ground and felt its thinness, the damp leaf-skin rough on his fingertips. He and Charlie sat there for a while, not talking. Charlie eventually mentioned that they should go back, because it looked like it was going to rain. It did rain a few hours later when Allan was in bed. The raindrops battered against the windows and the roof, and transformed the potholes in the streets into small ponds. It washed out the smell of rotting fish and alcohol from the city's dumpsters and shaded the pavement to a darker shade of grey. The next morning, everything was clean and smelled sharply of salt, refreshed and new.

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## High School Short Story: OTHER FINALISTS

*A Brief Moment in the Passage of Time*

Lindsay Andrews, New Orleans, LA

*Always Room for You*

Joshua Call, New Orleans, LA

*A Ticket to Quivera.*

Janaki Chadha, Berkeley Heights, NJ

*Brady,*

Darby Cressy, New Orleans, LA

*Clouds of Grey,*

Annie Cooperstone, Westport, CT

*Emily & John,*

Miles Jordon Essix, Atlanta, GA

*For the Pets,*

Maria Alvarado Velasquez, Idyllwild, CA

*Inheritance,*

Raley Pellittieri, Ponchatoula, LA

*Keeping My Promise,*

Shauna Moore, Gretna, LA

*Luke and the Moon,*

Aaron Cooper-Lob, New Orleans, LA

*Maybe I'll Leave, But Not Today ,*

Jada Zenella, New Orleans, LA

*My Name is Aubrey,*

Meghan Prieto, Sulphur, LA

*Never Again,*

Mitchell Ashby, Petal, MS

*Resident of the Cadavers,*

Lee Bordlee, New Orleans, LA

*Maybe I'll Leave, But Not Today*

Jada Zenella, New Orleans, LA

*The Fences I Vaulted to Escape,*

Jacob Merrell, Sag Harbor, NY

*Today My Husband is Black ,*

Madeline LeCesne, Algiers, LA

You don't choose your family.  
They are God's gift to you, as you are to them.

—Desmond Tutu



Ryenne Autin  
2012  
High School Short  
Story Runner-Up



## **The Cult of Happiness**

The older you get the earlier you arrive. At six A.M. the elderly would waddle in for rosary. Then single parents, widows, families of three and more shuffled in for mass. Mothers and fathers convoyed their caravan of diaper bags and strollers and their collection of crying babies swaddled in blankets, and toddlers spilled gold fish crackers or dribbled the juice from their Sippy cups onto the vacuumed maroon carpet and asked endless questions: What is that thing called with the water in it? Why do you dip your fingers into it? Why is it only two fingers? There were coloring books, a child's version of the Bible, and books about Noah and the Ark, the Good Shepherd and the Shepherd and the Burning Bush to keep them occupied for at least ten minutes before questions of prayers came up and why mom and dad had to walk out. And then the walls of the cry room would muffle their voices.

I was between the toddlers and the pre-teens: I still asked questions but could listen quietly to the Father when he spoke of the "man upstairs". The Hail Mary echoed and bounced off the stained glass windows. The chapel reminded me of the stoup and the holy water; I really couldn't reach it yet. The wooden pews were stone hard, and Lord, they were cold. *The Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit*. Then the Father hunched over the podium with his altar boys sewed to his side, and all seven of them stood above the hundreds of us, dressed for Sunday. Pa didn't like church. And he almost never came with mom and I but when he did, he did it for mom. Pa believed you had to be respectful and quiet, at all times, even during church. When I told Pa I had to pee he gave a stern look his hand-hardened stiff in front of his face, like half a prayer, his brows burrowed between his large, nose.

During the day, the phone rings. The daughter ignores it. The numbers are always different on the caller ID on her phone, threes in fours place and ones in sixes place and the area code is a five-zero-four or six-one-three or five-one-four. So what if the rejection is for someone considerably important, like a boss or a best friend crying because she got into a wreck or a hospital

is trying to get in touch with her because her mom had a stroke or the following week, her Pa has been sent to the nearest hospital for drug overdose, again?

The phone rings and she's in the middle of sleep, of a dream about a different city where there is good food and even better cocktails and a place to forget and Hello? Hey how are you it's been a few weeks did I wake you how's mom? the daughter sighs and rolls over and her hair spreads across the pillow like a spider's web certain strands sticking to the cloth, I'm fine yes you did but that's fine and mom's fine. She tries to catch herself from drifting, how are you? The flu is goin round I swear I'll get it soon roomin with a bunch of guys ya know bound to get to me some apocalyptic flu shit but I can visit soon. Oh oh yeah I'm sorry to hear about the flu but visit yeah that sounds fine. Great yeah I'll call you next week when I get a chance to call and hey I love you good night...I'm sorry... click and it's over and she forgets he calls with sleep and a different dream of her mom and Pa going to church and her as a child, the daughter of her mom and Pa, peeing in between pews and her Pa hiding it with sheets of bible paper.

The Father would pray and bless families he'd heard about, struggling, not doing well: pray for the Major family so their son comes back from Iraq, pray for the son of Mrs. and Mr. Romero so their baby boy can come out of the hospital and rest in his parents' arms, pray for the Varmall family for the newborn baby to be healthy and well for the entirety of his life, and the list went on until the community stood up and had blessings and prayers for more. I didn't understand whom we were praying to.

After a song by the choir, the people in the rows began to rise; one pew from either side would step out and walk down the aisle to the Father. *The body of Christ, Amen*. I wasn't allowed communion yet. Pa was against it when I took the classes; his baby huddled in a small classroom full of boys and girls my age. The students were loud, asked the wrong questions. But then Pa took me out half way, said I didn't need another teacher telling me things about God that I could just learn myself. From him, from mom and Pa didn't teach me anything and then mom

stopped talking when Pa left.

I had to still confess my sins, and is that why Pa never went up there? But mom always did. I'd go up with her most Sunday's when Pa lay in bed sick. She'd take the half-dollar sized paper bread, her right hand cupped under her left. She'd walk up there and the Father would put it up to her eyes, *the body of Christ* and she'd reply *Amen* and her eyes followed aged fingers until the Father placed the bread into her cupped left hand and she'd pick it up with her right, and she'd place it in her mouth. Mom would step down and take a little of the wine too. *The blood of Christ*. The Father never gave that to the cupped hands, though. The volunteers, older women than mom and older men than Pa all dressed up, the same as all of us, held the golden goblet of Christ's blood and a white cloth to wipe the smooth rim with after each sip.

Mom left me with Pa, when he wasn't sick, and every time I'd get real nervous and I'd think of the holy water. When mom returned I could leave the pew, and I'd relieve myself in the ladies room. The volunteers kept their necks stretched like the white columns ornamented with gold, meeting the arches, and later in the mass, the volunteers went around with wicker baskets, on sticks, going from pew to pew as another choir song played. I never knew where that money went. The Catholics are the wealthiest, Pa said.

"You're a bible beater, you don't actually care, mom, you are in the same routine you have been in since you were fourteen, and you have missed maybe one Sunday. What is it that you get out of it?" She leaned against the sink, pristine, as everything else. All the carpets, which crawled along the house, were the same: bunched up into multi-colored browns and grays. Running through them were lines from the vacuum cleaner; her mom vacuumed with ferocity, a form of the anxiety. Never overflowing, the garbage can, made by hand by her dad, was a darker wood; a name she didn't know; she knew it wasn't cherry. "All I'm saying is that, now that dad is gone, maybe you should be doing something different. If you're set into the same routine, I mean, you're not going to meet anyone new, everyone at church knows the situation and you're just going to be reminded of it everyday." The situation isn't changing, she thought; unless Jesus comes strolling in, with some verse from the bible, saying churches don't exist. Her mom sat in a chair made out of the same wood as the garbage can. Wooden panels lined the walls of the kitchen, keeping the house cool through the seasons. "Stop leaning on the counter," her mom replied.

Pa's eyes were wide, watching mom go up to the Father to receive communion and we were the only ones not up in our pew. The creases in his navy slacks tightened where his knees were bent, Pa tearing at the thin paper from the bibles in the cubbyholes behind the pews and the pages floated down to the liquid. He gathered mom's purse, grabbed my arm trying to stuff

itself into the fur of my purple jacket and he struggled trying to juggle me and the jacket and the purse and then he tried to put on his black cardigan fraying where buttons should be and we walked out that church like thieves leaving the pages to disintegrate in my urine. We never went back to that church. Mom blew open the heavy wooden doors, painted white, like an irate gust of wind and her legs hustled as fast as she could to us, "What the hell Bale," and she climbed in and Pa started our red pick up truck and we rode home, us all silent till we unlocked the door to the house.

The walk left my knees knocking into one another, my legs locked when I sat, holding on to a folded stance; they wanted to rest. I walked the seven blocks home from Church. My back felt loose, a hinge without screws, and I knew you were visiting soon; you called earlier, there was something you had to tell me that required a visit. The bathroom, my bedroom, a mirror hanging in the kitchen, were all too far for me to walk to without throbbing legs. They were messy; I hadn't cleaned for weeks. You arrived, let yourself in, all done up with a lace top and barely any bottoms on. I saw your ass cheeks hanging out for some grubby hands to hold onto. Lord, you were only eighteen. Barely in the living room and you were shouting (in detail) of what this boy made you feel, how so much different he was than the rest and how he told you, 'can't wait to feel these under sheets'. *If Jesus saw this... if your dad was here...* You sighed, plopped next to me, and I cringed and winced at the thought of some foul old man sleeping with you and groping you. There were not any sweet caresses like you imagined but harsh, vulgarities and you being smacked around in an unfamiliar bed. My legs shook and I told you, (as I do every time) don't let him be like the others who all disappeared in two weeks. And you'd say, no, this is different. He's different. But you're my daughter I'd begin to speak, my baby girl, my only child, but the screen door, open, let wind bellowed in, and you waited before quickening down the porch, to look into my eyes, to smile that sweet smile that made your cheeks bunch up and blush (I knew this wasn't a true smile, I could see it in the eyes). And then, you let the screen fly back, it screeching as the crows do before evening, back into its place.

He left. Wheeled out on the gurney like a white bag of flesh into the ambulance. I'd stand in the doorway with mom, holding her cold, sweaty hand smelling of the orange scented dish soap, her wedding ring scraping against my finger. The sirens hollered down the street like the highest pitch of a baby cry. We didn't visit him the last time. People were always over at the house, sitting on the porch with mom, holding her hand, a guy named Bobby came over often, sitting at the kitchen table with her, talking, looking at pamphlets I could never catch the name of. But they looked pretty, I remember, full of soft blues and greens.



"When's Pa coming home? Can I see him?" "No, we can't, no." She shook her head back and forth, real slow, her eyebrows, lined perfectly above her eyes scrunched up like Pa but she wasn't angry like his because her eyes started to water, the little make up she wore: the mascara, the thin line of brown outlining her eyes, (my eyes), blurred. I knew this is what she'd been waiting for, Pa leaving.

I'd hear her in the middle of the night; maybe it was morning, down the hall rocking in that chair her daddy bought for her when she was pregnant with me. It hit the wooden floor and scraped it, a thump and then scratch. In the light, you could see the marks. From the crack in my door, I saw the hallway light, through the thinness of my curtains that mom made, I saw the porch light. It kept me up most nights, but when Pa was home, the lights were off. Did that comfort you? Those lights? I couldn't get to sleep. And the night Pa left, and for weeks after that, the lights stayed on. Thump scratch. Thump scratch. The lights. I tiptoed through the hallway, sock footed, and crawled on my knees and hid behind the king sized bed. Watching her. The porch light reflected into the room like the sun during the middle of the day. A deep red knitted shawl hung around her shoulders, (it was her favorite color) like her lipstick hanging to her lips that pulled in the cigarette between

her lips which made her look older. I never saw her smoke before, but I'd often smell it. The perm she styled herself hung loose around her head; wrinkles were etched on her forehead like someone had drawn them there over night. She hadn't showered. She didn't eat dinner with me that night. She just watched me shovel in the peas and mashed potatoes, and she cut my baked chicken into pieces like she did when I was four. Before that day it would be the two of us at the dinner table, both eating and I'd ask where Pa was. "He's out baby, doing things Jesus wouldn't like, wouldn't approve of." And she'd look into my eyes, and smile, and then look down at her plate before eating again.

You didn't need to go to church, that place really is similar to a cult, I believe you, but it's what mom feels at the end of the day. When people pass away, the people who matter most, they are not there physically. But something or someone else, they are there for her. When I can't be. When you can't be. What mom has is a personal relationship with this idea or higher power or person who died centuries ago, but whatever this relationship is, whatever the response or lack of response is, she is content Pa, and I wonder what it is to be content as she is, if you will ever be as she is.

## Words & Music

A Literary Feast in New Orleans  
November 19 – November 23, 2014

### Call for Papers:

Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society, Inc., a non-profit literary and educational organization, is pleased to announce that it will again sponsor its annual multi-arts festival, *Words & Music, A Literary Feast in New Orleans* in 2014. The 2014 Humanities theme is:

*Improvisation in Words, Music, and Life.*

Festival dates are November 19-24, with discussion programming designed for multiple audiences: stu-



Randy Fertel, Ph.D.

dents, scholars, developing writers, established authors, educated readers, and patrons of the arts. The five-day festival will include daily *Literature & Lunch* sessions, evening entertainment, film events, live drama, and music events. Randy Fertel, Ph.D., author of the new book, *A Taste For Chaos: The Hidden Order In The Art Of Improvisation*, will be 2014's keynote speaker.

For details and guidelines, contact us as: [Faulkhouse@aol.com](mailto:Faulkhouse@aol.com) or visit us at: [www.wordsandmusic.org](http://www.wordsandmusic.org).



*Tyler Despenza*  
*2012*  
*High School Short*  
*Story Runner-Up*



## **Misery, Agony, Heartbreak**

Mira opens the backdoor and the trees are rustling. The sky is smooth like hippo milk. Birdsongs saturate the early, morning air of the summer solstice. Daddy's funeral band blew through her chest to where the trees were rustling. The metal handle of the watering can cools her palm. In the yard, the half-finished birdbath reflects sunlight in its mirrors. Migraine on the left side, she goes down the steps. A clement breeze flows over the exposed, tight dryness of her skin.

Her feet taste the soft sweetness of fecund earth supporting her as she walks. She bends over a plant with mottled leaves, brushes the tips of her fingers over the yellowish spots, and then takes one shriveled leaf in her hand like holding hands with Momma. The can trembles as it tilts forward to release an unsteady flow of water into the plant's soil. Her other hand, knuckled, kneads the plum of pain in the small of her back.

She lowers the can to the grass, grown as high as her ankles and brushing against them as she drags her feet to the painted white, peeling stool beside the slightly algae covered pond. Warm pond water pools around her dipped-in toes, toes that rub along Cream's (the old koi fish) nectar colored back with Cream's permission: a gasping, slippery mouth like kissing.

Mira lights a cigarette, inhales deep into her lungs, and tries to calm her nerves, as she air-kisses smoke into rings. Birdsongs never end if she listens for them, the cigarette smoke, the confirmation, settling over Mira's sweat like a mantle her faith lies under.

Through the window, she watches Nicole at Momma's vanity. Nicole brushes her hair up carefully into a bun, as Mira notices the strands she misses that can't be seen with a mirror. Once she's done, Nicole brushes her shoulders with her hands, and then pulls hair out of her brush. She stuffs the hair into her pocket.

Mira rises from the stool slowly, needles in her knees. The leaves endlessly slicing. The birdbath's mirrors wink in the sun as she approaches. Glass and stones warm under her palms again, clenched on the rim. Inside, Cream's curved body- Daddy's body was like old, candle wax- glows in the sun through its honey-glazed

glass, mouth open like kissing light.

Mira's eyes water from not having slept all night. Nicole had played her Daddy's piano. Crown touching the headboard, Mira shut her eyes and leaned into the blues Nicole's fingers stroked into its bones. She laid her arms above her head as the notes faded. When Nicole came to her, she turned off the light. Mira heard her do it. Listened as Nicole's breath fell quiet, warm against her ear, as she held her, and heat like feathers covered Mira's chest. The magnolia tree breathed through the open window, its shadows of open flowers almost nodding on their backs under the porch light. By the door, Mira's house shoes (worn, pink like sleep) lay just outside of the moon's taper.

Mira couldn't ask her to stay, knew Nicole would if she asked her. A mosquito buzzed through the window and flew into the back-porch light, reminding Mira of how her Daddy was. Mira heard it close, like it was just past her ear, as it burned off its wing, and fell dizzily. The trees were whispering. Momma's voice.

"That doctor told me it'd feel somethin' like a C-section, you know, with the way they cut you. I'd had one with you, so I know what that's like. And you're walkin' upright the way you should, so I don't think you should be havin' any difficulties. Although, you haven't been restin' enough, in my opinion, with you getting' up late at night, cause of them night sweats you been gettin'. Just keep takin' them cold showers, baby and walkin' around. Your Daddy used to walk you up and down the house late at night if you been cryin', got you in the habit of it, and you just wouldn't go to sleep when I put you down. If you saw me comin', you'd try to get away. Couldn't hardly walk yet, but crawlin' away like the devil was after you. There you are, baby, smilin' and sweet as you always been. But I wan to tell you that I know about that loss too. Settlin' into empty spaces, like tight balls inside you too dark to see how many. It's in the way you been sittin', even now, baby, with your hands fisted up under your thighs like that. But you say you're feelin' fine so I guess that's just my worryin'."

Back inside, she leaves the watering can by the back door in the kitchen. In the bedroom Mira brings

Nicole's pillow up to her face and inhales her lilac scent. Nicole left her key on the vanity. Mira's robe falls, rolling heavy like liquid on her skin as she pulls it on, slipping into her house shoes.

She brings all the plates and bowls, and bottles from her kitchen into her living room, and places them on her coffee table. She goes back into the kitchen for everything else she'll need sandpaper, hammer, adhesive, safety goggles, glasscutter, newspaper, grout, gloves, ladder, mirrors, plastic bags and knives.

Mira lights another cigarette, scoring mirrors on her coffee table with a glasscutter, unconvinced the years could negate themselves. She rolls the tool away from her, steadily, keeping it vertical, and then taps along the faint lines in the mirror. As she taps the mirror breaks into tiny squares that she piles to one side of the table. Bits of the glass embed into her palms and fingers.

Once she's done, she dumps the mirror into boxes. Then, taking a green plate, she puts it upside down on some newspaper she'd laid out over the hardwood in the living room. Mira puts on the pair of safety goggles and gloves. She hits the high edges with the hammer, and then breaks the smaller pieces. She rubs sharp edges down on the sandpaper. And repeats again and again and again, until the plates and bowls are colorful shards in more boxes next to the ones full of mirrors. She breaks the bottles, putting them into plastic bags and then striking them with the hammer into chunks that she breaks down.

Mira beings with the walls in the living room, spreads the already-mixed-adhesive with a plastic knife, sticking on glass and mirror until the walls glimmer. Climbing up the ladder, Mira covers the ceiling too.

Her heart hammers in her chest as she sweats and she reaches over to pull on the chain for the ceiling fan to spin faster. Heat rises up her back and neck and spreads over her face and arms as she attempts to breathe slowly and the room swells under her. It doesn't last long, and she continues. Sweat sticks her robe to her back.

She mosaics the floors, the bedroom, the bathroom, the hallway, and the kitchen, the supply of glass and mirror either unlimited, or replenished by her desire to reflect. Her hands hurl her life from her gut. Every design created like a flash of pain made beautiful: in her bedroom, the grief of accepting and giving is blue like knives thrust into her and pulled back and repeated, spilling colorful like oil on the ground by a gas station. Large fibroids gleam pink in the hallway and bathroom. Momma's lost breasts bear rainbows in the kitchen.

Mira, sweat covered, raises the hammer to shatter her own legs, the endless having ended. Her own body empty, but for her heart beating so fast it could crack and her phantom spirit streaming through her like silver. The shiny pieces are splayed around her so that she has to push them forward with her hands, and then dragging herself. She sticks the pieces on the refrigerator in the shape of a bird as the sun rests and she reaches again for the hammer.

**Tyler DeSpenza** is a level III creative writer at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, where she is currently studying, "Anxiety, Anger, Shame, and Art: Early European Modernism." Her works have surfaced in the literary magazine, *Umbra*—a student produced publication from within the creative writing department—of which she is an editor.



## **The Sanctuary**

A narrow Greek Revival building at 624 Pirate's Alley is where Nobel laureate William Faulkner wrote his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay*, and managed to have a rip roaring good time with pals like Sherwood Anderson and William Spratling finding his narrative voice. The building is now the home of Faulkner House Books, America's most charming independent book store. The book shop, of course, carries both reading and collecting copies of Mr. Faulkner's work. It is, in fact, however, a sanctuary for the work of all great writers—past, present, and yet to come—and for writers themselves, those who live in New Orleans and for our visiting authors.

### **Faulkner House Books**

624 Pirate's Alley, New Orleans, LA 70116  
(504) 524-2940 \* [Faulknerhouse@gmail.com](mailto:Faulknerhouse@gmail.com)  
\*[www.FaulknerHouseBooks.com](http://www.FaulknerHouseBooks.com)





*Sophia Derbes*  
2012  
*High School Short  
Story Runner-Up*



## **History**

"Do you like sugar in your tea?" It was cold outside St. Cecilia's Retirement Home for the first in a long time. Mrs. Mel served the tea hot, instead of iced and the customary sandwiches were also absent. Lissette had been visiting for three months and she had always eaten sandwiches with ice tea. The musty room felt wrong without the snacks but she said nothing. "No sugar please." Lissette shook her head. "I don't like sweet tea." Mrs. Mel's room was small and comfortable, with pictures and dusty furniture that smelled like *time*. She glanced at the pocket watch that lay on the small dresser by the clock. She wondered if it could still tick and tell time. Lissette removed her scarf and set it down on the leg of the gray sofa she sat on and sipped her tea quietly.

"I do hope you like gingersnaps, dear." Lissette looked down at the plate and smiled, teeth white and thin. "Very much so, ma'am." She had been angry, at first, when she met Mrs. Mel, upset by her lack of stories and generally thought she was boring. But later, she changed her mind. Everything about her visits were nice. "They're delicious. Did you make them yourself?" Her interests lay in history, far more than any of the actual people she would visit. But here, she could ask Mr. Bridge about serving in France in World War II and Ms. Yana about the civil rights and learned not to cringe when Mr. Patrick called Kimmy a little Negro girl. Frankly, the elderly were just more interesting than other people. But Mrs. Mel was her favorite person to visit.

Lissette looked back at the pocket watch on the dresser. She wondered where Mrs. Mel had found it. Was it a gift from her husband? Her brother? Did she have a brother? It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen and Mrs. Mel never even looked at it. The watch was formed with golden swirls and flowery designs and a little button on the side that looked as if it would be so easy to open. The chain dangled down and she would never even notice how pretty it was... "I must confess I didn't make these. Miss Rosa from downstairs did. Such a sweetheart. Came right up and gave these to me."

"That was very nice of her." Her bike was parked outside and she had promised Tommy and Kim she would meet them. Her mother expected her home earlier than usual as well. "I'm sorry Mrs. Mel. I'll have to cut this visit a bit short. My mother is expecting me home."

"Well, at least take some of these cookies with you.

You're so thin, dear."

As Mrs. Mel left the room to find a paper bag, walking deliberately through her kitchenette to her closet, Lissette found herself moving closer and closer to the cabinet. She examined figurines of lost days and untold stories and her hand slipped around a silver chain. She took the gold watch by the chain. She put the watch in her pocket. She called out goodbye. She closed the door behind her.

Lissette lay back on her Kim's bed and listened to her two closest friends arguing about the rules of Poker. Their argument grew louder and louder as Tommy accused Kim of cheating and Kim said he was just jealous that she was better than cards and Tommy said that she was mad that he was better at everything. "Could you two quiet down, I'm trying to read here."

Lissette flipped around and saw the two of them on the floor with Kim's hand on Tommy's collar. Tommy looked up and bowed *so shy* his head a little. "Sorry Liss."

Kim jumped up and hurried over, leaning on the dresser next to the bed. "How did today go? With Mrs. Mel, I mean."

"Oh, fine." Tommy and Kim, for some reason, were impressed by the fact that she occasionally visited the elderly. Lissette fingered the watch in her pocket. "Can I play Poker with you two? I know how to play."

Kim skipped over to the spot on the floor where Tommy was shuffling cards and grinned wildly. Tommy still had his head to the ground like he was ashamed to have been fighting earlier. Lissette leaned forward. "I have something to show you."

Tommy, who had been shuffling cards, and Kim, who had been poking at the grass stain on her jeans, both looked up and Lissette removed the watch from her pocket, holding by its chain above their heads so it dangled down from the chain at eye level. "From Mrs. Mel." Lissette said by way of explanation. Kim and Tommy both looked at it a second before Kim snatched it up out of Lissette's hand by bottom of the chain. Kim smiled admiring the flowery sides of the watch. "Cool," she breathed. Kim moved as if to open the watch and Lissette's eyes flashed dangerously. She fingered the button before Lissette grabbed it back. "I don't want you to damage it."

"I don't want you to damage it." Kim's voice turned

into a high and vaguely British parody of Lissette's tone. She folded her arms and crossed her legs. "I can look at things without breaking them."

Tommy was cutting the deck. "Can we play?"

Lissette tucked her feet under her skirt and started to tie her hair with the ribbon around her wrist. "All right," she said completing her pony tail, "let's play."

"I have to go to soccer tonight." Kim's parents decided the best way to handle their daughter who was always bounding, always happy, always angry, was to wear her out as much as possible. They found soccer especially effective as Kim would give her all if occupied.

"It's cold outside. Why are they making you go? Wait, why would the coaches even go? Who would play soccer now? You guys have games in the summer." Tommy was excitable a sure sign that he had nothing in his hand.

"We play indoors. I raise to ten." They played with actual money, although that money was dimes, nickels, pennies, and quarters.

"Call." Lissette drawled. She held up three fingers and resisted a groan as Tommy dealt her trash.

"Seriously, I had a pair. None of this helps. **None of it.**" Kimmy laughed and Tommy shrugged. "You're getting really into this Liss."

She lay on the ground, tracing the circles on the top of the button in the watch in her pocket. The design on the top of the button was a maze, weaving in and out until the circles reached a small dot in the middle. Tommy fidgeted and folded. Kim smiled and put her cards down. "I got a flush." She smirked.

Lissette waved the money toward her, as Kim giggled and grabbed the pile. "Hey, Liss." Tommy pooled the cards together, straightened them into a deck, and started shuffling. Lissette traced her way up the button on the watch and pushed. The watch clicked open and Lissette could see the hand of the time clock, dusky and copper, rather than gold. There were words, painted gold on the other side of the watch: Free at Last. Lissette thought it was gorgeous.

"Lissette." Lissette looked up. Tommy was watching her oddly. "It's your turn to deal."

Lissette nodded and took the card. Kim leaned forward over her pile of coins, which she had let loose covering the carpet like a stain, instead of stacked in neat piles like Lissette and Tommy. "Are you gonna sleep here tonight? Your mom's out of town again so..." Shut up. Lissette did not want to talk about that. Of course she was out of town, it wasn't like Kim had to bring it up every five minutes.

Lissette nodded again, her hair bouncing again, the white ribbon loosening and letting the dark hair spill and fall to the floor. "Yes. I'd like to stay here again, if you don't mind." "Also, I was wondering if your dad could drive me to see Mrs. Mel. I'm worried my bike will freeze up." Lissette dealt the last card and looked at her hand. No pairs, no flushes, no straights, nothing useful. She threw her hand down in disgust and Kim laughed.

"Cool." Kim's eyes widened and she looked like she was about to buzz around the room. "Hey, we just

rented this movie. We could watch it, if you want and--"

But Lissette wasn't listening. And she was wondering why Tommy looked at her strangely. She was tracing the watch in her hand and wondering how it said it was already six-thirty. She was thinking about what she was going to say to Mrs. Mel.

"More tea, dear?" "It will be a blessing;" Lissette thought, "when winter ends and I can stop drinking this stuff. Though, I do like this jacket."

She felt, atmospherically, there should be a fire or something equally homely, but fireplaces were not allowed in Saint Cecilia's Retirement Home, for fear of their resident's burning themselves and causing lawsuits. But the room was cozy enough on its own, so she felt happy enough. "No thank you, I have enough here. It's easier than you think, to have too much of a good thing."

As much as Lissette hoped beyond hope that Mrs. Mel would find nothing amiss, or at least not blame her for the disappearance of the precious watch, Lissette was strangely disappointed at her lack of response to the theft.

But Mrs. Mel just sat there as she always did. Unlike the others Lissette had visited, Mrs. Mel did not talk much. Instead, she let Lissette speak about school or her parents or Tommy and Kim. They sat in a strangely happy silence, eating sandwiches and talking about grades and cooking lessons and trivial things. When she did decide to talk, Mrs. Mel was a strangely active participant, encouraging Lissette to tell her more about everything. Her interests lay with history, which Mrs. Mel had little of, except in hints and object, so she wondered why she was so fond of visiting.

Mrs. Mel smiled, almost conspiratorially. "Oh, Lissette dear, you can never have too much of a good thing. I've thought so for a while now. I think."

The watch in her pocket was cool in her left hand, while the tea in her right hand was hot. There was something equal, hot and cold, left and right sort of balanced inside of her. "Is something missing, dear?"

Lissette's eyes opened and she prepared a statement that would certainly sound fake. Mrs. Mel looked genuinely confused. She looked down. Mrs. Mel looked like she was about to cry. "Lissette, I think my memory is failing me. You should never get old. Just...stay young forever."

Lissette would later claim she did not flee, but dashed out of the room quickly.

Kim made commentary later that night on some violent scene in a movie they certainly were not supposed to be watching. Tommy stopped by after hearing Lissette left her coat in a hurry at the retirement home. Lissette traced the words Free at Last on the side of the couch where Kim and she sat. They watch a man shoot another and Lissette thought, "I am going to paint Free at Last that exact color red on my wall. No, wait, that's creepy. I'll paint it gold."

The next day was three days before winter break ended. Kim whined and spun and sobbed and wished she got better presents for Christmas. Tommy looked even more uncomfortable than usual and shot fevered, unhappy glances and Lissette when she was and was not looking.

# 2012 FAULKNER-WISDOM COMPETITION

Lisette did not notice until finally he cornered her in Kim's living room. His head was slightly bowed and he bit his lip.

"You-you can't take advantage of people like that Liss. You can't take things that aren't yours, ok? You always do just whatever you want and, you can't, you just can't.

He looked at her, something pleadingly. It made her sad, for some reason, and she couldn't think to deny the accusation.

"You know, I think I'm going to paint my bedroom gold." Tommy stood there, frozen to the spot. "Yeah, when my mom gets back in town, I'll ask her to buy gold paint and I'll fall asleep looking at golden lights. The exact same color as my watch."

"Hey Tommy, I bet I can guess what your thinking right now. You're thinking, But Lisette, it's not your watch at all, you can't just say something's yours and make it yours because it belongs to Mrs. Mel and—No. No, no, no, no, no, no, you don't get to say that to me. You don't get to say that. I think it is mine and you can't stay anything to convince me otherwise. I don't want to hear you say anything like that."

Tommy looked like he didn't want to say anything in a very long time. Lisette continued. "It's easier than you think. Stealing. And it was exciting. Really properly exciting, like nothing I ever felt before. Like my body was made of tiny switches and at that moment they all lit up and made me twitch, but in such a nice way." Her fingers tugged at her elbows and she was smiling in a way that was dangerously close to crying.

Tommy opened his mouth and closed it. "Right." He said looking lost. "We are going to give that watch back to Mrs. Mel. We-you are going to apologize. And I-somebody is going to talk to you about that-that-that speech you just gave."

He reached forward to grab the watch out of Lisette's hands.

Kim was lying on her bed when she heard the yelling start. She rushed out of her room, completely convinced that Tommy had gotten his hand stuck in a paper shredder.

When she reached the room, Liss was kicking Tommy and Tommy was attempting to pry her fingers away from the watch she was holding.

Liss and Tommy didn't fight.

She fought with Liss. Liss fought with the other classmates. Tommy fought with Kim. But Liss and Tommy just did not fight. It was wrong.

**"Stop it."**

It was strange and surreal and she could not tell why she did it, but Kim grabbed the watch as her two closet friends looked at her in shock and threw it out the window second story window.

"It didn't even work in the first place." Tommy sat down next to Lisette who had crossed her fingers together, sat down, and not done anything else in the past thirty minutes. "I mean, it was stuck at six-thirty. It was stuck at six-thirty, and it was old, and it wasn't even yours in the first place." Tommy visibly backpedaled, worried that he had offended her but she didn't move at all. "I'm sure Mrs. Mel

will understand. You could say you were just curious. Or you could say she gave it to you, she has enough memory problems to believe that. Or, or, why am I even helping you?" Tommy was defeated. But not as much as Lisette who continued to stare at her fingers.

Kim and Tommy later decided it wasn't about the watch, not really. They also decided that Lisette learned entirely the wrong lesson about the experience. The lesson Kim would learn, she thought, would be not stealing. The lesson Tommy would learn, he thought would be not doing bad things, to which Kim laughed, for some reason or another and pulled Tommy onto the bed. The lesson Lisette seemed to learn was not to do anything. And she didn't, for the longest time.

Mrs. Mel went and died of perfectly natural causes a few years later. The pocket watch belonged to her father and was never that important to her. But Lisette did not know that.

Liss and Kim hugged each other at graduation.

"I mean, it's not such a bad thing."

"I know."

"To want to feel important."

"I know."

"I want to be important"

"I know."

"Why can't I be important?"

2009

Liss walked down the street. Her hands were in her pockets of her black coat. Her hair was tied back in a white ribbon. Her eyes were bright and hazel and she hadn't been to town in a while.

"I saw you at the wedding." She was sipping coffee. She smiled. "Thomas. Sit."

Her mother had gotten married. Thomas pulled out a chair. "So," he said. "You drink coffee now."

She smiled again. "I do indeed." Thomas never forgot the incident in the sixth grade were he saw his (former) best friend so empty.

"I hear you're an archeologist."

"I hear you're an IRS agent."

"That's me. Scum of the earth." Thomas didn't attempt to be in the IRS. He just sort of stumbled into it by accident.

"I also hear you're engaged. And...expecting, if I'm not incorrect." Liss swirled a packet of sugar into her coffee.

"Yeah. Great, isn't it?"

"Of course."

She only vaguely remembered taking a pocket watch back when she was twelve. Because it wasn't important. Not really. Not to her.

**Sophia Derbes** was raised in New Orleans until the levee failure of 2005 sent her to Wisconsin, and later to the north shore of Lake Pontracain. Sophia homeschools in the morning, then travels to her afternoon classes at her beloved New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts. She has work published in "The Experience" and "Umbra."



# Pan American Connections

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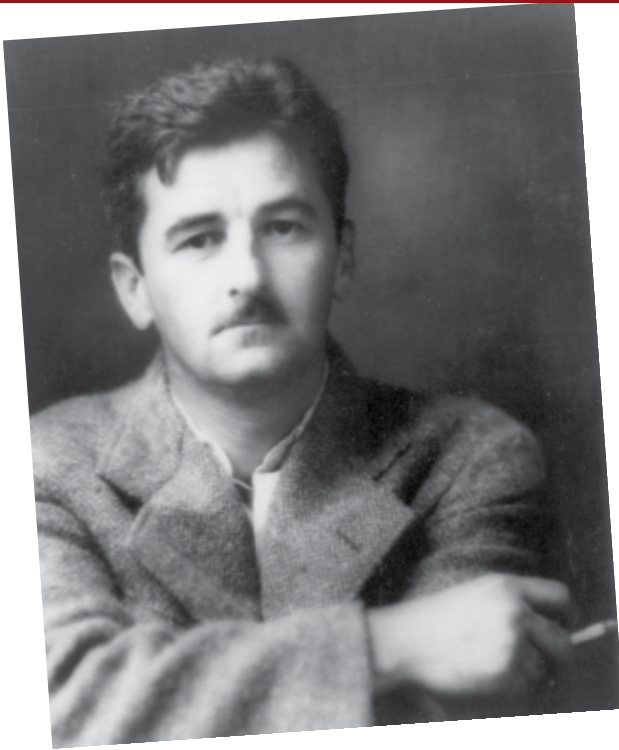
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WYLD Radio: Harold Ellis Clark



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## *Our Literary Icon*

William Faulkner was just a young man when he came to New Orleans and found his muse as a novelist. He was 27 when he wrote his first novel in the room that is now Faulkner House Books on the ground floor of 624 Pirate's Alley. He worried about the same things developing writers worry about today.

Will I get it right? Will a publisher think I got it right? Will anyone remember what I have written after I am gone? Is it all for naught?

He found strength in the freedom of our city's laid back, easygoing society and, oddly, the concurrent heartfelt nurturing he found in New Orleans, support he needed to become America's most celebrated fiction writer.

To all the readers visiting the pages of the 2012 *Double Dealer* we hope you will enjoy the talent exhibited by contributors. As for writers, we hope you find your way to New Orleans and here find a dose of the same kind of nurturing and inspiration Mr. Faulkner found.

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# DOUBLE DEALER

**PUBLISHED AT NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA**

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*The Double Dealer*, the Society's literary journal, was created in the image of the 1920s and 30s *Double Dealer*, a New Orleans journal, which was first publisher of the work of William Faulkner and the early work of such important authors as Ernest Hemingway. The original *Double Dealer* was founded by Albert Goldstein, Julius Weiss Friend, John McClure, and Basil Thompson, with the assistance of a dedicated group of Louisiana guarantors, who were tired of hearing the South described as a literary backwater by Eastern Establishment critics, including notably H. L. Menken (who became a cheerleader for the journal). The Society's goals in re-establishing the journal were to provide a forum for showcasing developing writers alongside established authors, and to provide a resource for teachers of English, literature, and creative writing.