

*Rooms  
of  
Gold*

2004 Summer Institute  
Fellows

Connecticut Writing Project  
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## Rose Petal Paper

Janice M. Brennan

"Here we are, Anna. Welcome to your new home," the nurse announced as she wheeled me to my new room.

"Kind of small," I said.

I looked at my new "home" - a bed, night stand, three-drawer dresser, and a chair next to a nice large window. After the nurse helped me settle in, I rested in my new chair for a spell. It was comfortable, and in a strange way, the room was, too. There was something about it that seemed familiar, comforting. I couldn't quite figure out what. But then it came to me.

"The wallpaper!" I said out loud in surprise.

It was the same rose petal wallpaper I had in my dear little house. The very wallpaper I was actually putting up in my bedroom that last day when. . .

I closed my eyes and saw myself up in my bedroom fifteen years ago.

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I had only two strips left to go, and I remember feeling pretty proud of myself. As I glanced around the room to check my work, I realized some of the strips weren't lined up perfectly, but I didn't mind. I loved my new rose petal paper, and, besides, I'd be the only one seeing it anyway. My John, having been the perfectionist that he was, would never have let me attempt this alone, but I remember thinking, *Not bad for an old lady.*

Then as I was preparing the next strip of paper, I heard a door slam downstairs.

"Frannie?" I called out. "Is that you?"

My daughter stopped by frequently. She was always fretting about my doing things alone. Especially lately. I swear she thinks eighty-year-old widows should spend their days sitting on their verandahs, sipping iced tea, and watching sunflowers grow. Frannie didn't answer, so I groped my way over to the blank patch of wall and patted the sticky strip in place. I wiped my hands on my apron, climbed over the pans of water and gloppy drop cloths, then looked out the window. The sky had an eerie green cast to it. The trees were being tousled about like seaweed in a churning current.

Sensing a storm, I closed the windows in the room and headed downstairs where I shut everything up nice and tight. I sat down in my living room. It was a hot and humid July afternoon, and with the house all closed up the way it was now, I felt a bit dizzy - almost feverish. And tired? Oh, my Lord, I was surprised at how tired I suddenly felt. I rested my head against the back of the davenport and closed my eyes for a spell. I had a strange sensation that the room was spinning around me. *Probably from my exhaustion and the fumes from the wallpaper,* I thought. But when I heard a wild howling, almost a sucking sound surrounding me, my eyes snapped open. The lace curtains were billowing out from the windows, and beyond them, well, outside was as dark as midnight, yet it was only dinnertime. Rain had started to fall, but unlike a gentle summer rain, it was monsoon-like.

This was not a typical Connecticut storm. I got up to turn on my radio. I wanted to check if any warning had been issued. But as I reached out for the knob, I was thrown to the floor by an enormous explosion. The two windows on the south side of the house blew in. Shards of glass like shrapnel flew all over the room.

Instinctively, I crawled away. I made it to my kitchen: my haven, where I loved to bake up a storm--cookies, cakes, pies--I made them all. I pulled myself up by grabbing the legs, then the cushioned seat of a chair. I gripped the back of the chair like it was a life vest and scanned the



kitchen for my Holy candle. Finding it over on the shelf by my kitchen sink, I gripped it in one hand and lit it. It blew out. I lit it again: the wind was fierce, blowing through the gaping holes in the living room. It blew out again, but I kept at it, all the time praying, *Lord, help me*. I put the candle on the counter and glanced out the window that faced north. The bird feeder that John had made and hung on the porch years ago was being whipped around like a carnival ride spinning out of control. But what shocked me beyond belief was the river. Oh, my Lord, the river that cut through our neighborhood was gone! Totally gone! The depression was there but the water wasn't. All I could see was unsightly debris: broken shopping carts, deflated old tires. Unable, or at least unwilling, to figure this out, I turned away. I was jarred by my reflection through a small antique mirror, cracked and dangling on its hook. Blood trickled down my ashen face; my eyes seemed like hazy blue slits, sunken behind a sea of wrinkles. My long, thin, gray hair, usually braided and tucked neatly in a bun, hung loosely around my shoulders. I pushed it back and rushed over to my kitchen table where I clutched the back of the chair. I stood there praying. The rain was pounding. The howling of the vicious wind was deafening, almost numbing to the point where I couldn't think. My senses were in shock; my brain felt blocked. I didn't know what to do next.

Then I saw it. Coming straight for me. Right out my window: the one facing my back yard. It was closing in and heading right for me. It looked like pictures of ones I'd seen in magazines, but more powerful, more massive. Its cone shape, twisting and gyrating as it plowed along, was swiping and claiming everything in its path. I saw cars, uprooted trees, garage doors, swing sets, all being sucked up then spit out. And this ravenous monster was planning to take me next, house and all. As it got closer everything got darker. I felt like I was being pulled: being sucked into a black hole. Then there was total blackness.

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"Anna, Anna, are you all right?! Anna!!"

It was my dear neighbor, Ruth. I thought I heard the faint sound of her voice calling out to me.

"Anna, are you in there?"

She sounded desperate. She must need help. I opened my eyes and rushed to go to her, but I didn't get very far. After pushing up on one elbow I collapsed back down from the searing pain in my head and the overwhelming nausea I felt. For a second I couldn't remember what had happened. Why was I in the middle of my kitchen, lying on the floor, among debris, . . . then it came back to me.

*Oh, my Lord, I'm still alive!* I realized.

"Ruth, I'm in the kitchen: I'm alive," I managed to call out before blacking out again.

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Hours later, Ruth was by my side, gently nudging me awake. She looked as bad as I felt, hair wild and unkempt, jagged gashes on her face, panic in her eyes. But we were both alive. She helped me sit up, slowly. I breathed deeply to counter the pain I felt, but I wanted to stay up. I needed to find out what had happened. Ruth told me she had seen everything. The tornado had really come right at me. She saw it literally lift my house up several feet in the air, then plop it back down, almost right on its foundation. I glanced around me: all the windows were caved in, doors were wrenched off, plaster lay on the floor in chunks, as well as everything that used to be neatly shelved. The peach pie that I had made earlier in the day lay near me, impaled by a leg of a chair. But I was alive. Sure, I had some pretty serious scrapes and bruises, but I'd be okay.

Ruth suggested we hurry and get out of the house; it really wasn't safe anymore. The roof was still on, but at any moment the entire structure could cave in.

*My house?* I thought. *Dear Lord, no! My home for 50 years.* I didn't want to believe Ruth, but I knew she was probably right. Ruth helped me stand up, then guided me towards the door. When we got to the threshold, we had to sit down and drop to the ground, since the house wasn't lined up with the back steps anymore. But eventually we made it to my backyard. What I saw brought tears to my eyes. It looked like a battlefield, littered with hefty branches, and my favorite old tree - the one that had my great grandson's swing tied to it - was uprooted and laying across the driveway. My vegetable garden was ripped apart, and planted right in the center of it were two television antennas, deposited there by the tornado. And my beautiful rose garden was completely destroyed. I bent down and picked up one pink petal and cradled it in my hand; it looked so frail, so tiny, so alone. My legs felt as heavy as those broken branches. I didn't think I could move.

Ruth put her arm around my shoulders and guided me away. We slowly climbed and crawled our way over to her yard. The danger of the storm was over, so there was no urgency other than to get some rest and medical attention. When we finally reached her front door, I stole a final glance back at my house.

"Oh, Ruth," I sobbed.

It was just too much to bear. So much had happened to my poor little house, I barely recognized it. I took a deep breath and slowly turned away, tears streaming down my cheeks. Holding my pink rose petal safely in my hand I followed Ruth into her house.

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"Anna, Anna dear, would you like some lunch?" the nurse asked, breaking my reverie. "We have peach pie for dessert."

I picked at my food, eating more pie than anything else. Somehow I just didn't feel that hungry. Reaching out to touch the rose petal paper I looked out my window and thought wistfully, *Oh, how life has changed.*



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## Grandma

Leslie L. Chausse

Whether my grandmother was at our house in Connecticut or hers in Massachusetts, the kitchen was filled with smells of cooking Armenian foods. She used the finest ingredients to prepare these delicacies. In her nightgown and robe, my grandmother would lovingly prepare her fine foods from morning until late afternoon. Perhaps even as much as preparing these foods, she enjoyed watching her large extended family eat them after they were done. Although her knuckles were swollen and deformed and walking was painful and difficult because of her severe arthritis, she could still enjoy the day cooking in the kitchen.

Unfortunately, shortly after her husband died, my grandmother began to show signs of dementia. Slowly she stopped reading, and she became confused about when we were visiting and if we had called to tell her we were coming. For years my mom and her siblings blamed her mental decline on her grief over my grandfather's death, but eventually it was clear to all of us that grief was not the problem.

One day when I was eleven years old, my sister and I were at my grandmother's house watching TV. My grandmother was humming in the kitchen preparing cheoregs: braided rolls. Suddenly we heard grandma shrieking in Armenian. "What's wrong?" I asked out loud.

My younger sister and I ran to the kitchen. My grandmother was swirling around on fire. The oven door was open, and one cookie sheet of freshly baked cheoregs sat on the stove top while another wobbled precariously on the oven door. For a moment I stopped. "What do I do?" My mind raced. Fortunately my sister pushed past me, and I was moving towards the horror once again. "Water," I said.

I grabbed a large mixing bowl in the sink. It was filled with some water. I threw it on her. My sister was filling something up, and we took turns throwing water and hitting her with a dish cloth. Soon the flames were out. My grandmother was no longer screaming, but sobbing quietly, "I'm alright."

We threw her burned terry robe aside, and I looked at the seared skin on her chest. It was smelly, green, raw looking. "Should I call an ambulance?" I wondered. I prayed that my mom and younger brother would return soon from their shopping trip.

My grandmother told us to get her the butter from her fridge. She held two sticks of butter to her damaged chest. She made it to the TV room, sat down on the couch and called the nearby pharmacy where my Uncle George worked. He would stop by on his way home from work and bring a salve for the burns.

"A salve for the burns?" I asked myself, "after work? Why isn't he coming now?" Unfortunately, my Uncle did not understand the seriousness of the situation. Over the past months, I knew my grandmother had called him at work many times claiming illness or house problems. He would leave work early only to discover that she needed no real assistance. She was just lonely or confused.

I should have known what to do, but I didn't. Instead I looked anxiously out the window for my mom. When my mom arrived, she looked at my grandmother's chest and arms. Even she did not seem to know what to do. "I don't think they can do anything for burns," she said.

"Shouldn't you take her to the doctors?" I asked.

"I'll call Bea." Bea was my mom's older sister. I wanted someone to take some action.

Bea arrived and decided they had better go to the hospital. Later they returned without my grandmother. Because of the third degree burns, she had to stay there. "The doctor said you should have rolled her on the ground." My mom's voice was shaking as she spoke.

"You did good." My Auntie Bea said in a cheery voice. "She was lucky you were here."

"How could we push her to the ground?" I wondered. My grandmother at five feet was not a huge woman, but for my small sister and me to get this arthritic, heavy woman to the floor seemed impossible.

I had failed. I was not one of those heroic children who knew exactly what to do in a crisis situation. After my grandmother came home, my Aunt and Uncle told her that she could not cook unless another adult was there to supervise. They made certain that the items she needed to prepare her dishes were not available unless one of them was around. Eventually her skin healed, but certainly the scars of the burning were still there.

Years later after she had been officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's, my family and I all went to visit my grandmother who now lived in an apartment. Unfortunately, the apartment residents and the maintenance staff had found her wandering aimlessly about the complex unsure of where she was. She also had continually called for instructions on how to turn on the oven or where to put her trash. My aunts and uncle were concerned, yet no one wanted to take her into their home.

On this particular afternoon we offered to take her out to lunch, but, as usual, she was insulted. "I have good food here," she said proudly. "Besides how do you know where that food has been?"

We went to the table and sat down. In the middle of the table was a small luncheon plate with one burnt pork chop on it. Beside it were a few pieces of flat Armenian bread, a container of frozen milk and a few dried up grapes. We all looked at each other. My brother said something about how he wished we had gone out to eat, and my mom passed the bread around the table. When we got up, my sister began to laugh. "Don't laugh!" I cried angrily.

Although my younger sister and brothers could laugh at my grandmother's demented behavior, I found it painful. Today I struggle to remember the grandmother who held me and rocked me when I was young. I want to remember her impatience when she showed me how to braid the cheoreg. Although I vaguely remember the food and love, it is the fire, the pork chop and, later, her quick deterioration and death in a convalescent home which haunt my memories.



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## Sunday Morning Breakfasts

*Maritherese Cuticelli*

Pete usually calls around nine in the morning, waking the house, assuring his attendance at the morning events. The sound of his phone call interrupts my dreams and causes me to pull the covers over my head, dreading the hour of preparation my mother requires of me and my younger sister. Finally dragging myself out of bed at about 9:30, I walk, after catching every last minute of sleep, down the stairs into the kitchen. My dad is standing in the corner of the kitchen with his oh-so-familiar blue sweatpants, white t-shirt and L.L. Bean slippers, measuring the filtered water for the much-needed coffee (at least the first pot), while my mom, with perfectly styled hair and make-up already applied, is finalizing a count of exactly who will be coming. "Ol' Blue Eyes" is singing in the background as I sit down to read the Sunday comics, awaiting my mother to come in with the list of chores. Once the assignments have been distributed and I begin to set the table, I catch my parents swept in a moment, then begin dancing in the kitchen, and my heart is warmed knowing how much they are still in love.

Just before 10:30, the back door swings open and in runs two of my mischievous yet adorable nephews, Jacob and Micahl, quickly greeting Grandma, Grandpa, myself and Auntie Catherine before running downstairs to Uncle Joe's room where boys can be boys. My jokester of a brother-in-law, Tom, comes in the house with the youngest of the three boys, Matthew, clung to his side. I reach out for a squeeze and am quickly denied, though I know he will eventually give in. With his contagious laugh and indescribable cuteness, this 2-year-old little boy distracts everyone around while Tom sneaks over to the plate of the sizzling sausages on the table, stealing one before anyone notices. My older sister, Ann, walks in looking cute with her pink Capri pants, brown blouse and designer sandals, which, come to think of it, look like they were one of the many pairs she once borrowed. She drops the diaper bag, purse and other various toys and books her boys threw to her on their race to the house and comes to relax at the table with her two sisters, catching up on the weekly gossip.

As the three of us sit there discussing the "boy scenarios," my parents busily prepare for the meal: frying eggs, baking the potato puffs and brewing the second pot of coffee. While the kitchen fills with this comforting aroma, one of my brothers, Joe, arrives at the house with his son, "Lil' Joe," wearing identical Polo shirts. "Little Man," being the more affectionate of the nephews, is sure to go around to everyone, giving a hug and a kiss before joining in the adventures downstairs with his cousins. Though we are now all ready to eat, we must wait for my brother Peter, who when saying will arrive at 10:30, isn't expected to appear until after 11. Surprisingly enough Peter and his wife, Lori, who are in the usual matching Old Navy t-shirts and jeans with their daughter, Olivia, covered from head to toe in pink make an entrance just as we all sit down to eat.

Once we all are seated, we take each other's hand and say grace. When we finish our prayer, the food begins to be passed. "Ann, are you having a sausage?" "Oh no Joe, I can't eat those, I'm on Weight Watchers." "You should be on Atkins. I've already lost 15 pounds." "Oh please. How's your blood pressure, not to mention your cholesterol?" "They're fine actually. Pete, have you heard about those new low carb, sugar-free and fat-free chocolate cookies?" "Oh yeah, I already ordered five boxes on line. They are much cheaper." As the diet discussion continues, with no one agreeing, yelling from the boys is heard from downstairs, and Tom rushes to see what could be the problem. As Micahl comes upstairs crying for Mom, "Lil' Joe" comes creeping behind him, informing the family of what Jacob has done *this* time. The conflict is settled and the boys grab a bagel and run back to their fun and games. Although the melodic chatter comes to halt with the boys' interruptions, it instantly starts exactly where it left off. There is nothing like having four conversations going on at once with everyone participating in each. Oh the joy of being Italian.

There is just something so wonderful about my family. No one can deny it, we are a special

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group. It is as simple as that. I do not know if I can pinpoint exactly what it is that I love the most, but these Sunday feasts we share together remind me of just how important family is.



## Robert Frost Goes Bodysurfing with B.D. and Friends

Robert S. Darragh

"The woods are lovely dark and deep  
and I have miles to go before I sleep . . .  
. . . I have promises to keep"  
from "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

I begin my run after stretching, gasping and groping through the first hundred yards or so; I start to regulate my breathing and my thinking takes free reign. Snippets of Robert Frost swirl through my mind. I am moving, now, past the reservoir, which is being dredged; it is early morning, and I am preoccupied with my week four essay. What format and hook am I going to use? I see and hear heavy equipment working in the heavy muck, and I smell the diesel fuel and rich, wet earth. What TIME this dirt represents, layer upon layer, season upon season, years overlaying and covering other years . . . The jaws of the crane crunch down into this dark, brown soil, which is being clawed and uncovered, and my thoughts turn to classmates--how they have been digging, drawing up the heavy earth of their pasts, laden with memories, covered over by and through time, layers and layers unfolding, set in motion, shifting and breaking free, rocks and sticks and pieces of life churning, turning, unsettling and settling again and reforming and taking on new shape, fertile, moist, fetid, teeming with life, unburied secrets and truth.

I make my first turn past the pine trees, and I realize I am returning consciously to my first essay format. I become unsettled and disappointed with myself--I wonder whether my classmates will forsake this newest effort as old and overused, a respinning of a previously used metaphor. Should I have embraced something new? I have the sensation that I am moving too quickly to analyze - I must just act or do, or be; I cannot ruminate too long, now, or preoccupy myself at this stage with metaphor selection. As I climb the hill that passes the horse meadow, I pass under the canopy of trees; their arms overarch me as I pass under, and the early morning sun dapples the ground beneath me, and I take this as a good omen. Frost's poem darts back into my head; it visits me all the time, but this time, this summer it seems different. Yes, I am in the water company woods where I usually go when I am home. Why? Perhaps the woods truly are lovely, dark and deep. It is my haven, my sanctuary. Wildlife abounds there, and cares and stress seem to disappear when I am here. Reflection, serenity and peace emerge from the earth and swell and gurgle from the winding brooks.

I am unable to censure my thinking process insofar as using running as a framework for my fourth essay; it is as if consciousness of what form I should use has disappeared, and ideas are spilling over; I have no control, they are pouring over the dam; the slow stream I saw back at the dredging when I first entered the water company gushes into a flood of thoughts. However, I am moving rhythmically, my breathing is steady, I am composed, there is no panic, no outward physical signs of this torrent of ideas I am thinking.

"I have miles to go" . . . it is as if my mind has so many thoughts about CWP and what it has meant to me that I am unconsciously gliding, traversing and treading over the ground. I have entered the deeper part of the woods, which is the trail raised above the trickling streams and lower woods; this part of the woods has the gnarled and grizzled trees that remind me of Tolkien's books.

Words that start with C start to pour from my brain, cascading like a waterfall. I am thinking simultaneously of myself and my classmates. The first "c" word that pours out is **Courage**; courage to take a risk, meet new people and come to UConn this summer. Courage will be needed to uphold and stay true to some of the lessons we have learned and been taught this summer by the

theorists, by the presenters, but, most importantly, by each other. I feel an interplay, an ebb and flow, voices are speaking--it is not a cacophony--it is measured and clear and balanced--I'm hearing Frost's voice and my own voice and my classmates' voices. I am hearing individuals speak, and I want to shout back and tell them that they have given me something that I cherish and will treasure forever. I won't forget them--I can't forget them--their comments, laughter and tearful stories are with me, so much of everyday now, as they are on this run with me; they are part of me. Do they know that? Perhaps that is one of the promises I must keep--to let them know by way of the Friday read-around. Perhaps I have let them know already. I hope they know how deserving they are of praise.

I am passing behind the condominiums now. Their proximity reminds me of how far I have come preoccupied, distracted, focused incredibly on topics that have caused me to lose track of time and surroundings--I check my footing on the hardscrabble and stay on the left side of the trail where the footing is clear and flat.

I hope I can have the courage to carry over my summer lessons. Will I be able to recognize when I am "Diving In" like Mina Shaughnessy says, or I will slip into the old familiar ways, "Guarding the tower" and losing my students with attempts to convert them forcibly to my will and misguided power issues?

**Continuity** is the next "c" word that pops into my mind. I am enveloped, again, by woods on either side of me, and I am cruising along through pine trees, with soft needles padding my feet as I slide along on another raised part of the trail. I think of the importance of developing continuity in my classroom and in my life; I know that September to June can be such a threat to continuity, but it doesn't have to be that way. I think of my workshop on Conferencing and how much angst I experienced (and that I caused my wife!) when I was putting it together. I labored over my continuity tool that I was assembling, and then things clicked--I felt pride in what I had assembled. Besides relief after presenting, the continuity I was feeling began to emerge in other facets of the summer institute as well. I imagined at first it was because I was done with the workshop and that I was just relieved, but I became aware that I was seeing and understanding the big picture.

I have come to the part of the trail where I turn and head back; now I am not even aware of how and when I am climbing small inclines or descending--I am circling back, swishing along, floating, conscious of so little, conscious only that I am; I am not thinking of having miles to go, or sleep, or promises, I just am; alternating arms legs, striding, pushing along. It doesn't feel rapid, it just feels right. I think of how this relates to teaching--I know when things feel right--it is a peaceful, good, natural feeling--I feel it when I am running today--there is no soreness, no strain; I think of my best classes--when they are working, I am feeling good. I am treating my students fairly, they are excited about the discussion we are having, we are all relaxed and the atmosphere is calm, productive and energizing. We are enjoying the moment and are not worried about the CAPT or so many external, larger forces--we are focused on the present and letting a particular individual share or make a point, and it feels so good and so right.

I am trotting up a small hill that curves back into the main trail, and I am amazed that I am heading back, going home. I can't remember the last time things felt so fluid; I make note of the fact that some amazing things can happen or be accomplished when one creates a plan and sticks to it. This brings me to the next "c," **Commitment**--I can keep no promises if I don't commit myself. I am reminded of how commitment is a backbone of the summer writing institute--commitment to the writing response groups, commitment to doing the readings and participation--and to success in the classroom. I have to be committed to helping my students write and conference better, even when I feel that I may not be asking the best questions and keeping records as efficiently as I should be. I have to be committed to every student.



I am passing trail marks and sections which I have been by most recently, and yet I am moving along, not heeding now, not remembering what I have recently seen. I think of how this is like the summer program--I am revisiting week one, two, but I am so immersed in today, this moment, that I am having trouble remembering specifics--I can remember an aura, a sense of place, but I can't come up with an exact quote, or section--I can remember quintessences of articles and people from the readings. I think that I will have to refer to the "blue whale" and Breakthroughs and workshops for sources and books and materials.

I go back through the Tolkien trees and downhill past the horse meadow--today I notice no deer, red-tail hawks, etc. Is it because my mind is so focused on the summer? Things are telescoping; I'm passing over a bridge--today I don't look down to the stream and rocks, nor do I look upward--I am looking inward, and I feel like I will run out of running room before this whole process reaches closure--I fear that I will be missing an ending--and then I breathe deeply and relax, and things begin to come into perspective.

I think "c" for **Creativity**, and a host of classmates and workshops and activities flood my brain--found poems, Mr. Squeeze, powerful musical titles, singers, object shares and a host of thoughts from Lynn Bloom, Aaron and Suzanne bombard me, and I think of the need to be creative--ever creative--it is what pulls together the other "c's". It energizes and shoots life into the unearthing stories--it rejuvenates and makes an everlasting contribution to continuity and is the supercharger of commitment. It extends the courage into new realms and reinforces risk taking.

I have made my last turn, and I am starting to climb the last hill--and I am shocked by a revelation that rocks my running metaphor--I realize that running is for me; it is not a metaphor for the program, for my classmates. Instead, the metaphor for all of us that has surged into my brain is swimming--we are all swimming together at the beach. During her workshop when Leslie asked what would you like to take lessons in, I thought swimming--I remember camp and never feeling the same confidence as I did with all land sports. After all, what other sport requires that you use your whole body--your arms, legs, etc., and regulate your breathing with such precision in order to succeed? Teaching is like swimming--one has to coordinate everything--breathing, legs, arms, etc., and then one achieves synchronicity.

This summer we are all together at the beach; we are extending far out into the surf, stretching, holding each other's hands and moving rhythmically in the cool, clear waves. Linked together, we are all able to stay afloat--each of us feels buoyant, calm, relaxed. When we return to school, we will go swimming with our students--they will join us as we all swim together . . .

I am steps away from finishing my run--it as if the water and waves have crashed into me, coldly jolting me back into reality. I leave the water company and sprint across the soft grass to the open fence which borders the parking lot. I leave a little left in my tank for tomorrow, and I am reminded of the running adage--There is no finish line! I will arise tomorrow, probably run again and remind myself that there is no stopping point with the race, as there doesn't seem to be an end to the sea. It stretches as far as the eye can see. We are all teachers, students and swimmers, and the ebb and flow of the sea extends forever.

As I walk slowly to my van, Frost's poem has been washed away, and the slow and deliberate tide of another stanza washes over me.

"The seawater is lovely, cool and deep,

But I have promises to keep,

And shells to gather before I sleep,

And shells to gather before I sleep."

## Tiffany Banks: The Real World

Verlina King

Tiffany is a spoiled, rich, jet-setting young woman comparable to Paris Hilton. While visiting relatives in a small town, she went to a local diner and demanded that the chef bone her trout before preparing it.

Is there such a culinary skill: to bone a trout? A turkey, yes, but a trout? Already Tiffany's lack of epicurean expertise was showing.

In a snippy and acerbic tone, Tiffany said to the waiter, "I'll have the rainbow trout, stuffed with crab, and, oh, yes, ask the chef to bone the trout, but don't take off the head nor remove the eye-balls." She continued with a smirk, "While consuming my victims, I like to look them in the eye." Her three dining companions laughed as she took the silverware and began crossing it back and forth in a motion one makes when sharpening a carving knife.

The waiter replied in his Midwestern manner, "Ma'am, we aren't one of those fancy places. The chef just pan fries the trout."

Before he could offer an alternative, she interrupted him with a louder tone: "I want my damn trout boned now! That is an order with order," she shouted!

"You go girl!" yelled Tiffany's entourage.

While showing no signs of stress, the waiter remained calm and polite. Again, he replied, "Ma'am the chef only prepares steaks and burgers to special request, but . . ."

As she was about to take a sip of diet pepsi with lemon, Tiffany turned to face the waiter and held her right hand up and positioned it as Dianna Ross did to her tune *Stop in the Love*.

"Oh, the hand!" the women laughed and cheered.

The waiter attempted to answer again; however, he was interrupted . . . this time by a tall, well-built man with a Jesse Ventura voice. "What seems to be the problem?" asked Kurt the owner.

Tiffany rose slowly from her chair like a CEO in an executive conference room. She asserted, "I am Tiffany Banks, and the trout I ordered I want boned. Now is that too damn much to ask for?" By now Tiffany was rapidly losing that authoritative composure.

"No ma'am," replied Kurt, "but, ma'am, we don't offer that kind of service here."

"Then start!" shouted Tiffany.

"No ma'am, this is my restaurant, and I will not make that decision," replied Kurt.

With Kurt refusing to give in, Tiffany really went over the edge.

She started yelling, "My father is going to buy this place and fire all of you!"

Kurt, smiling and shaking his head, replied, "Ma'am I ain't selling. My restaurant is not for sale." And he turned and walked away.

The other diners had long stopped eating and were focused on Kurt and Tiffany. In fact, the look on their faces seemed to imply, "Who is this little woman who is causing so much of a ruckus?"

Nancy Wallbanger, a reporter for the Stinging Bee society column, was also having lunch. Nancy's sleek physical appearance resembled that of a model. With aplomb, she stood, placing the napkin from her lap on the table, and walked toward Tiffany with a stern look on her face.

"Excuse me," she said in a pleasant yet cryptic tone. "I'm Nancy Wallbanger, and I couldn't but notice your frustration as you attempted to order."

"Yes," replied Tiffany, judging Nancy from appearance and thinking she was finally going to get her way. "I am used to getting what I want and this place is no exception."

"May I recommend a restaurant that is more experienced in catering to the needs of the 'in circle clientele'?" Nancy asked.



"Yes," replied Tiffany.

"Yeah!" said members of the entourage, sounding like a glee club in unison.

Standing tall and poised, Nancy replied, "Your home," she continued. "That's correct: home. You mentioned your chef is used to handling your family's needs . . ."

But before Nancy could finish her sentence, Tiffany rose and motioned to her friends to do the same. She said, "I get the picture," and walked past Nancy and out of the diner.

Two years later in a world-class New York hotel, Nancy was attending a MultiMedia Conference. While having lunch with another journalist, Nancy noticed a young woman approaching her table.

"Ms. Wallenbanger, I'm Tiffany Banks. We met a few years ago, and I, uh, I just want to thank you for introducing me to the real world."

Nancy smiled and nodded with approval. Tiffany turned and walked away.

## For Love and Mildew

Katharine M. Lawson

When it molds, throw it away. I can't remember now what possessed us, only that we had eaten five pounds of Twizzlers, and we loved him.

I don't know when our fixation with romance novels developed. First, I must qualify that we did not read the run-of-the-mill Fabio paperbacks. Please, we had some class. Generally, no hairless, rippling-muscled men grasped virtually bare-bosomed women on the outer or inner covers of our books. Yes, we had been known to read one or two with such high-quality art, but we preferred a semblance of plot to the serial sex of Harlequin or Regency novels. After all, we appreciated good literature.

Furthermore, I must qualify that our passion for these so-called "trashy" novels developed in high school, when, let's be honest, the boys were not so smooth, and we wanted to know about sex. I don't remember who bought the first book or how we found Judith McNaught, but she became our favorite author. Perhaps, because she was our first. Perhaps, because we desperately wanted Ian or to be as close to him as we could get in America.

At eighteen and after our first year of college, Jenny, Shannon, Meghan, Heather, and I took over Meghan's family cabin. We had been friends before we found Ian as juniors in high school and continue to be friends to this day. Perhaps then, the magic of Ian and Elizabeth's relationship in *Almost Heaven* prompted nostalgia for years passed and a collective laugh at our girlish fantasies. Now, the reasons don't really matter. What's important is that at the cabin, in that summer, we felt it necessary to build a shrine to what we considered Judith's finest work. Some people love their books; we worshipped them.

The creation of a monument to love, lust, and Ian's loins was conceived at the end of our week at the lake. We had spent five days baking and reading in the sun. We had eaten most of our food, including the five pounds of Twizzlers and all of the tortellini salad. We had smoked Swisher Sweets and Tarryton Ultra Lights to try to seem badass, even though no one inhaled, and we spent the majority of these "smoke breaks" just ashing into a ceramic sun. Mostly, we were going stir crazy on that island in the middle of Fox Lake, Illinois.

One night, after an abbreviated but dramatic reading of Ian and Elizabeth's reconciliation, the idea of the shrine began to obsess us. It was not enough that we had swooned repeatedly at the same passage (you know, the one where "he turns and locks the door with precision," then knows what to say to his dog Shadow but doesn't know what the hell to say to his wife). Even though it had been at least three years and countless other novels since we'd first read *Almost Heaven*, the brooding Scot--Ian Thornton--was still our favorite leading man. Initially, we had all read the same copy of the book, but successive re-readings necessitated the purchase of private copies. Truth be told, it was that good, and we wanted him for ourselves.

As evening turned into the wee hours of morning, we considered our options for the memorial. First, we thought that we could just put the book in the red licorice container. Too easy for the overachievers. Too plain for the masterpiece. After our badass alter-egos led us to crack open some Miller Lite that we'd found in the fridge, a new idea evolved. Ian and our love for him should be made known to the world. Besides, we had to get off of the island, and we were taking him with us.

Our mission became clear: improve the shrine itself and make it mobile. We stumbled around the cabin's interior, pretending that we could think to the screaming of Bon Jovi. We were shot through the heart, and Ian--or probably Miller--was to blame. It was not until Heather ceased her dancing and picked up her knitting that the adornment that we had been looking for surfaced. A blanket, we thought. A blanket to keep the lovers warm. Quickly, we realized--even through the cans of beer--that this idea was not just lame, it was inexcusably asinine. Finally, Heather concluded the ultimate destiny of her knitting.



"I can make . . . a doily."

"Oh . . . !" we all sighed with admiration. After all, nothing sets off a meaningful treasure better than a doily. Our mothers had taught us well.

Heather worked through the night, or at least until she passed out, to finish the circular rainbow doily on which to place Judith McNaught's influential work. True, the knit cushion barely showed beneath it, but she had contributed the book's pedestal.

When we awoke, we continued our mission, despite our headaches. Heather cased the completed doily off of her needles, taking great care to avoid dropping it on the floor. After making sure that it was perfectly centered on the red top, she used the remaining masking tape to secure both the doily and then the book. After all, we didn't want Ian to topple from this pedestal. We snapped on the clear top, and the shrine appeared to be ready. However, Jenny quickly convinced us that this was not the case.

"The top is loose," she informed us, demonstrating that if one simply grasped the shrine by the clear lid, the bottom fell away. We gasped as she nearly dropped Ian onto a floor covered in shoe-smashed pincher bugs. She looked at us scornfully as she clasped the book to her chest; she would never commit such a crime.

"The masking tape isn't going to do it," she stated "We need something stronger." The solution was already sitting on the kitchen table — duct tape. We had used it earlier in the week to fix a punctured inner tube. It could keep the plastic casing together and had the added bonus of keeping water out.

After waterproofing and securing the shrine, we knew that our second task was to make it mobile. The world, we knew, must witness its glory. Perhaps it was the mention of water-resistance, but Meghan immediately initiated our next move.

"To the rowboat," she directed.

The intensity of her decision prompted immediate action. Clothes were stripped off and exchanged for bikinis. Towels were collected in addition to a few Diet Cokes and the last remaining bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. After we had reassembled in the living room, we marched single file past the screen porch, out of the front door, and down to the rowboat tied to the end of the dock. I was responsible for the shrine. I moved slowly so as not to jostle the contents. Standing there on the shaky wooden planks, we made two of the most important decisions of our lives. We would row to the McDonald's on the other side of the lake, but the question remained--where would we put the shrine?

Shannon, who had been rather giggly the previous night and was generally more reserved, provided the plan. "Tie it to the rowboat, and then everyone will see it." Instantly, Jenny pulled out a pocket knife and leaned over to stab holes into the plastic, regardless of my hand, which happened to be in the way. Heather ran back to the house to grab the yellow rope that had been on the floor of the screened-in porch. Meghan prepared the rowboat. After saving my hand from imminent stab-wounds, Jenny and I put a hole in the front of the shrine and threaded the rope through it, which Meghan then tied to the back of the rowboat. She took great care to use the best Girl Scout knot that she knew.

I held the shrine on the dock, while the rest of the girls climbed into the rowboat. After handing it over to Jenny, I, too, climbed in; we looked at each other with nervous excitement. With five of us in the boat, the progress was slow, but as soon as the rowboat cleared the dock, Jenny set *Almost Heaven* gently upon the waves. It looked glorious floating in our wake, the noon sun reflecting off of the plastic. We watched it intently for about five minutes. We took pictures of it and worshipped it by quoting our favorite lines. Most importantly, we cheered Meghan the rower toward our destination. "Do it for Ian!" we cried passionately. "Do it for Ian!"

We had already finished the Diet Cokes and Doritos when tragedy struck. We had returned to

sunbathing and scoping for rock bodies, with feigned disinterest. Dismayed by the overwhelming number of be-speedoed men with hairy pot-bellies old enough to be our fathers, our vigilance had diminished. Later, we agreed that we should have appointed a guard. After a disturbing pelvic thrust by a drunken man in neon trunks, Shannon startled us with a yell. "Ian . . . he's floating away!"

Our heads snapped to the back of the boat. Apparently, the knot had loosened, and the waves had taken hold of the plastic container. As the moments of our astonished stupor passed by, the orange flowery cover of the book became less and less visible above the water. It was not until we heard Meghan yell "IAN!" and the splash that followed that time began again.

Oblivious to the increasingly choppy waters and the presence of steel blades churning around us, Meghan had jumped overboard and begun swimming. Shannon took hold of the oars to keep them from falling into the water and tried to guide the boat toward Meghan. Eventually, she and Jenny each took an oar, while Heather and I verbally guided their progress. Meghan soon caught up to the shrine and was holding it above her head, as we closed in. She passed our beloved book to the safety of the boat, then clinging to the side, she panted, "He's wet. Ian . . . is . . . wet."

The four of us in the boat looked at the container in Heather's lap. Although the juncture of the rope and the plastic casing had occasionally dipped beneath the water, we thought that the duct tape had protected the document within. Apparently, we were mistaken.

Heather gingerly extracted *Almost Heaven* from its enclosure to see how much damage had been done. She opened it to the sun, hoping that it would dry out on our journey home. By this time, Meghan had climbed back into the boat and stated soberly, "We should probably turn back now." Heather raised Ian above her head; the wind whistled through the saturated pages, and the sun dried them out.

After the boat had been secured at the dock and the five of us were back inside the cabin, we resumed our smoking on the porch. Perhaps this time, we actually inhaled, like a father in the waiting room before his child is born. Ian was resting inside on the plastic cover of the kitchen table. We prayed and hoped for the best; periodically, someone went inside to make sure that the pages were still open.

The next morning, the book's print was still legible, and there did not seem to be any lasting damage. As we packed up our bags to cross the lake, return to my '84 Buick Regal, and head home, we rejoiced in our success. We had exposed Ian to the world; our love for him was no longer a secret.

Three years later, I received a phone call. It was once again summertime, and I had been digging through my bookshelves for a romance novel that I had not already re-read since being home from college.

"Kate? It's me."

"Meghan . . . what's up?"

"I was looking through my books tonight for a romance. I had a craving."

"Jude? Judith? Not Kathleen?"

"I was looking for Ian."

I knew by her silence, a rarity for Meghan, that all was not right with her copy of Ian, the one we had built a shrine for years ago.

"What is it?" I asked her, anticipating that she had left it at school and thus, would soon be over to borrow my copy.

"Ian is molding."

For a second, I didn't know what to say.

"Are you sure?" I hoped that maybe she was mistaken. Maybe, it was just green pen or



something.

"It's fuzzy" she told me. We both knew what had to be done.

"I get off work at 4 tomorrow. Barnes and Noble at 5?"

She answered me with only a "Yes," but she hadn't even needed to say that much. I knew that she would meet me there tomorrow, and she would buy a new copy of *Almost Heaven*. But we both knew that she could never throw away that first copy. Sometimes, when things are moldy, it's impossible to throw them away.

## pennies in the bottle

*Claudia A. Lebel*

Eighteen dollars and ninety-nine cents. Where would I ever get eighteen dollars and ninety-nine cents? I had found the perfect dress for the eighth grade graduation dance: a soft, pale yellow satin dress, with a white lace overlay. I wanted to talk to my mom about it, but I already knew what she would say. "Honey, if I could afford that dress, it would be yours. Ask your father." Poor Mom, she worked all day at the factory, didn't seem to have a social life, and had a kid whose father couldn't afford child support.

A month earlier I had asked my dad if it would be okay to see him every other Sunday. Now that I was fourteen, I wanted to spend time with my friends, go to the movies, shop downtown at the plaza, have a coke at the drug store. He'd agreed. So on Sunday he picked me up, on time. No car problems. The radio was on, of course--the Yankees. They were playing the Chicago White Sox. This would actually be a fun afternoon. Since retiring from his job at the State Hospital, my grandfather lived with my dad. Grandpa was a White Sox fan. I asked him why once. He said it was because he liked Ted Kluszewski, a Polish slugger from Indiana. Grandpa liked anybody who was Polish or sounded Polish. Ted was traded at the end of the 1961 season, but Grandpa was still a White Sox fan.

"So, what'cha been up to this week?" I told him about the usual stuff--a math test and a research paper on oceanography for Mr. Stomski's class. He was my favorite teacher that year. I had never liked science before, but he did some really neat things. That's when I said it.

"And we have a graduation dance at the Y next Friday night and I don't have a dress." I couldn't believe I just blurted it out.

"Your mom told me." I wondered when. He called the day before to say he was picking me up, but he didn't talk to my mother. "I'm sorry Honey, but I'm broke. I had to put \$35.00 into this jalopy. It was the fuel pump, just like I said." I didn't want to be reminded. The last time he picked me up, the old black Studebaker stalled going up East Main Street. My dad turned the car around, put it in reverse and backed up the hill, all the way. It had to have been at least a mile. Something about how the fuel got to the engine using gravity. I didn't care. I wanted to die and had slouched down in my seat praying no one I knew would see me.

"Heh, wait a minute, you know that bottle of pennies on my bureau? You can have it." I knew what he was talking about--the big brown Seagrams V. O. bottle. Every night when he got home from work, he'd empty all the change from his pockets onto his bureau. He put the pennies in the whiskey bottle.

When I got home that night, my mother was, in her words, "fit to be tied."

"What was he thinking? What does he expect you to do with a whisky bottle full of pennies?"

"I'm going to take them to the bank. They have machines that count change."

"How are you going to get them there? The bank closes before I get home? I can't drive you."

"I'll bring them to school and go to the bank afterwards."

"Bring them to school? In that bottle? It must weigh at least ten pounds!"

"I don't care. I can do it." But I wondered how.

On Monday morning I planned to leave the house a half-hour earlier. I picked up the bottle with two hands. It felt like a bowling ball. I put it in a grocery bag. I had already decided if anyone asked, I would simply say . . . I didn't know what to say.

I walked as fast as I could, both arms wrapped tightly around the bottle in the bag. Ten minutes later at the light in front of the corner drug store, I was sure my arms were going to fall off. They insisted that I put the bottle down, but I ignored them. I just heaved that bottle up closer to my chin



and waited for the light to turn.

Now I had to decide which way to go. The back way? Up East Albert, to Wilson, up New Litchfield Street to Prospect? Too many hills. Water Street? Too steep. Through town and up Church Street seemed the best route. Besides, by going through town, I was pretty sure I wouldn't run into anyone, except maybe Ann. She liked to go to church before a test and pray for a good grade.

At some point it occurred to me that I was probably carrying the heaviest thing I had ever carried in my whole life, farther than I had ever carried anything this heavy before. The muscles in my neck and back and shoulders now joined the pain in my arms. In unison, they yelled, "put it down!" I ignored them. It started to slip, but I heaved it up with my knee.

In front of St. Francis Church I said a little prayer. "Thank you, God, for getting me this far. Please don't let me drop this bottle of pennies, and please . . . please make sure there are at least eighteen dollars and ninety-nine cents." I probably would have blessed myself if I had had a free hand.

I crossed the street and walked up Church Street. It suddenly dawned on me that I hadn't thought about where I was going to put the bottle when I got to school. I sure didn't want to carry it around to classes all day. We didn't have lockers, just a coatroom.

When I got to school, Mr. Stomski was walking into the building. He held the door for me.

"What have you got there? Looks heavy."

I hesitated. "It's a bottle of pennies. I'm going to bring it to the bank this afternoon on my way home."

"You can leave it in my office, if you want. Looks too heavy to carry around with you all day." I hadn't asked God for a place to put the pennies, but I was glad to know that he was looking out for me.

"Thanks, I'll do that."

I lugged the bottle up the stairs leading to the second floor. My legs started to give out, joining my arms and shoulders. They trembled with every step. But I ignored them, too. I braced myself against the railing and climbed the stairs. At the top I stopped, managed to pull the door open and staggered into Mr. Stomski's office. I'd made it. I put the bag with the whiskey bottle of pennies on his desk and went to class.

All day long I couldn't think of anything except that bottle of pennies. Would there be enough? Would I be able to carry it to the bank? My arms and legs were still weak. I started to worry. What if I dropped it? I imagined broken glass, pennies rolling everywhere, me, scooping them up from the sidewalk. No, I wouldn't drop it. I could do this.

The two fifteen bell announced the end of the school day. I climbed the stairs to Mr. Stomski's office. The bottle was exactly where I had left it. I wrapped both arms around the bottle in the bag and hugged it to my chest.

The bank wasn't very far--three blocks from school at the most. I trudged down the street until I came to the bank doors. I could either wait until someone went in or came out, or put the bottle of pennies down. I thought about it. I waited. And the door soon opened and I went inside.

I had never been in a bank by myself before. It was very big with marble floors and high counters. HIGH COUNTERS? I would never be able to lift the bottle that high. My eyes started to burn. I started biting my lip. I marched up to the teller. "I have a bottle full of pennies, but I can't lift it up."

"Joe, would you help this young lady?" The security guard walked over and took the bottle.

"Whoa, this is heavy. How did a little thing like you carry this in?" I just smiled.

It took forever to get all those pennies out of the bottle. In the beginning two people held it, shaking the pennies out through the neck of the bottle. The machine counted and I waited. My heart was pounding. How many? How much?

The teller walked over to the window.

"How would you like that? Ones? Fives? Tens? A twenty?"

A twenty? A twenty? "I'll take the twenty," and she handed me a twenty-dollar bill and four pennies. I looked at it. I couldn't believe my eyes. Twenty dollars and four cents.

"Do you want the bottle?" I hesitated for a second.

"Yes."

She handed it to me over the counter. I dropped the four pennies into the bottle. I couldn't wait to get home to tell my mother. I practically ran the whole way, listening to the jingle of the pennies in the bottle.



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## Stopping by the Beach

*Thomas F. Lee*

Standing on the dunes at dawn once more  
I mark the lines where sea and sky will break  
And hear the ocean whispering its roar:  
A lullaby that coaxes me awake.

My paper cup of coffee is warm,  
Despite the six-mile drive to bring it here  
Where I can stand to watch the daylight form  
And measure out the days that made the year.

The days, like waves, have washed themselves away  
A watery rhythm counting out the time;  
But now I watch as air ignites the day  
And I ignite the summer with a rhyme.

If promises were made one snowy night,  
They're reconsidered by this early light.

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## Cabbage Soup

*Bradley R. Magrey*

My wife Elaine and I have always been willing to try anything that would help us drop a few pounds. But nothing, nothing, compared to our encounter with the infamous Cabbage Soup Diet. It sounded cool and refreshing--quick weight loss in a week!--so we plunged in.

Supposedly it was started at some college in Oregon . . . a college that, as it turned out, never existed. Every other institution denied involvement, which should have been a clue. I think it had to have been created by a man. Sure, women can be nasty, but only a man could muster the cruel inhumanity to invent this diet.

It sounds like a simple plan: cabbage soup is the basis of your diet for a week. Besides all the soup you can eat, each day limits your eating to specific foods. It sounds doable; it's only for seven days, right?

The soup consists of a head of cabbage and various vegetables which contain few calories. The diet sheet reminds you in capital letters: EAT ALL YOU WANT WHENEVER YOU WANT! Bravely, we started.

On day one, you eat soup and all the fruit you want except for bananas. Why bananas? The soup is bearable, but it has the taste appeal of Styrofoam.

So far, so good.

Day two, you eat soup and all the vegetables you want, except you can't eat the vegetables that you would actually like to eat. No corn, no potatoes, no beans . . . just the tasteless compost that is already in the soup.

This is not an easy day. It's unbelievable that less than 48 hours after I started this diet, I had fantasies of jumping naked into a vat of mashed potatoes. Even road kill started to have some appeal.

Worse yet, we both had problems at Mission Control. You would think that with all this cabbage, bathroom sessions would be quick and easy. Wrong! We were bound tighter than unabridged dictionaries. We wondered, how can you lose any weight if food only goes in?

Elaine was not easy to live with by day two; neither, apparently, was I. The assembly operators who worked for me would look down at my daily ration of soup, snicker, and then stay the hell out of my way.

The next day was a mix of fruit and vegetables and, then, at the end of the day, a baked potato with butter! The diet sheet said a BIG potato, so Elaine and I went on a quest to Stop'n'Shop for potatoes the size of seat cushions. We came close. I reminisced with Elaine, and she agreed: those were the best potatoes we ever ate. And we were not stingy with the butter.

Day four: skim milk and up to eight bananas. There are those damned bananas that we couldn't eat on day one! And if you think a boatload of bananas improves your luck in the bathroom, think again.

On the fifth day, we could eat up to twenty ounces of beef and up to six tomatoes. At this point we wanted to flush the soup down the bowl. We probably should have, if only to test the toilets, since they weren't getting much use otherwise.

That night, probably because our systems were in shock from the animal fat, Elaine and I both needed toilets. A lot. It's fortunate that we had more than one, or things might have gotten ugly.

On day six, beef and vegetables. Deprived of calories, carbohydrates, and satisfaction, I had an incredible urge to bludgeon someone.

My employees no longer whispered about my Tupperware containers. They did not cross me. They did not take long breaks.



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Finally, the last day. Brown rice and unsweetened juice. I had a lusty craving for starches, but brown rice has the flavor of shredded linoleum and the texture of grass seed. I didn't care. I counted the minutes for the day to end.

So, what did we lose in that one week? Elaine lost eleven pounds, and I lost twelve. She noted bitterly, "Men always lose weight more easily than women." I've heard that song more often than I've heard "The Macarena," but I'm not stupid. I know when to shut up.

Of course, since we had been deprived for seven days of eating the way humans actually eat, we put the weight back on quickly. My employees sighed with relief. My marriage improved.

And if you came into my house and looked into my refrigerator today, twelve years later, trust me, you would not find a cabbage.

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## This Is Not a Cry for Help

*Katherine K. O'Sullivan*

I have experimented now, many times,  
cold metal against warm skin.  
Sharp blades are quick and make a perfect incision;  
scissors only scratch the surface,  
not adequate for the necessity of the situation,  
and both marks disappear as fast as I made them.  
Triple-blade razors are more common now  
than their single-blade counterparts.  
Men and women want silky smooth skin –  
a concept I do not understand.

I used a paper clip once, because there was nothing else  
and I had to make another mark on my list, a permanent record,  
of another time that I was wrong, or bad, or terrible,  
though I cannot really remember now exactly what it was.

I have found  
That serrated knives are my choice, leaving a wound which lasts the longest.  
A reminder of a life of self-hatred.



---

**Release**  
*Talina M. Posson*

Relentless aching that tears my mind,  
Muddles my thoughts and freezes my senses

it takes over and nothing is the same again.

My pen wrenches this way and that unable to stop putting down all and  
everything I have to say.

When I am finished there are a thousand marks on the page, but they are only a  
fraction of the ones scrawled across my heart.

Lead briefly touches but leaves the whiteness; clean, and pure so as not to mar it  
with words, phrases,

lines that convey too much. Even my eraser is silent as it helps me to cover up  
my thoughts,

and once more I am able to claim victory for all that I have not said.

Touching and raising the pen, I repeat this dance in rhythm with my hesitations. It  
goes on for hours, days, weeks, months and years.

But no matter how much I try to control the stakes –

I know the day will come when I will no longer feel the ache of it in my pen,

but just release.

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**Stray**  
*Susan L. Solomon*

Several years ago I fell in love with a homeless man. I don't know how or why I fell in love with  
him. Maybe I did because I was very lonely, because he talked to me and said nice things to me. We  
were both nineteen, but it seemed to both of us that he was older because I was away from home for  
the first time, and he had been homeless for years. So we had our age in common, but that hardly  
counted. I don't think he knew I loved him.

One of my friends from class saw him bite my shoulder and told some other kids from class. I  
remember they were all pretty concerned about it. People get concerned because they don't think I  
can take care of myself. They see a nineteen-year-old girl from Quaker Hill, Connecticut alone in  
the city, and they get worried because she lets a homeless kid bite her.

When Stray--that's his name--bit me, he always said, "You're so cute. I want to eat you." For  
some reason this did not scare me but made me blush.

He wore a thick chain--the kind that keeps fence doors shut--around his neck and held it closed  
with a big lock. He did not have a key to it, but it fit loosely enough so that he could take it off. He  
had no muscle really, he was thin and soft and he didn't like to wear a shirt. He shaved his head  
except for a thick line in the center. I think at one point he had two stripes, each beginning at his  
temples. I think I was probably afraid of him at first, but then he flirted with me and I became less  
afraid.

He had very sweet eyes. They were good, and when I think about them now, my stomach hurts.  
Not a sick hurt, but the hurt your stomach feels when your boyfriend in seventh grade dumps you.  
This is how it feels right now even though Stray never dumped me because we were never together.

I interviewed him for a project I was doing for class. A friend of his, Sal, who I really was afraid  
of but who also eventually became my friend, had a big problem with my including Stray in my  
project. I was filming Stray, and Sal said I was using him and objectifying him. That was not true  
because I was filming and interviewing all kinds of people, not just homeless ones who looked  
scary. To prove my point, I allowed Sal to film me. Looking back, it was really very stupid to hand  
over an expensive camera to a man I did not know in New York City. What matters now is that he  
didn't run away and pawn it. And that I became trusted and somewhat accepted.

To thank Stray for the interview, I took him out to dinner. I think it might have meant a lot to him  
for me to take him out (and spend a lot of money on a dinner for the two of us). He had two plates  
of calamari and two margaritas. We sat outside and spoke about our lives. It's strange that I never  
gave him anything but that dinner. He never asked me for money. Once he asked me to get a soda  
at McDonalds so he could use a bathroom. Once or twice he asked me to take him home with me to  
Connecticut. But it was always a joke, I think.

Before we went to the restaurant, he took me to K-mart and I watched him steal a new lock for  
the chain on his neck. The old one had broken. I was really touched that he brought me along  
shoplifting with him. Afterwards he went back to steal a hair trimmer. It was battery-operated, so  
he gave all of his other street friends haircuts.

I was not the only girl he hit on. He liked a lot of girls. I felt jealous; this was how I knew I did  
love him. But I would pretend I did not care. I mean, he was homeless and I was not supposed to  
like him like that. There was never the slightest potential for the kind of friendship that my stomach  
wanted.

A day or two after we had dinner, he told me he was leaving and I probably wouldn't see him  
again. I don't know if he was lying or if his plans just got screwed up when he was arrested by the  
police. I like to think that he knew, and he wanted to say goodbye. I think that he didn't want me to



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know that he had just raped a woman and knew she had turned him in. I want to think that he wanted me to think he was good.

This guy I knew told me Stray cried when they arrested him. Last time he was in jail, they stole all of his clothes. He used to cross dress, but he stopped when he lost his clothes. Stray was still pretty bent out of shape about that when he told me the story. I liked that Stray used to live as a woman. It made me feel as though he must understand me somehow. But really he was a freak. He showed me a picture, and he did not look like a woman but like a bald kid with makeup and a dress on.

I left the city. I came back to visit a few times, and I saw him. I thought I would not see him again and that if I did, I would turn around and not look back at him. But when I saw him, I walked towards him and hugged him. And we talked--but not about jail or the woman. I didn't ask why he was there and not in jail. I didn't indicate that I knew anything about it. Instead, we took my dog on a walk to a fountain where he could swim; he liked my dog a lot.

I had always sensed a violence under his skin. I was never convinced that I was safe near him. I had seen him angry before. In fact, that was the last way I did see him. After we returned to his place in the park, he had a confrontation with someone and left without saying goodbye, his face purple. I never thought that I was special to him. He might have hurt me if I were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I do not think he would remember me if he saw me now. Maybe he would. I don't know. I think he was much more important to me than I was to him.



