

# No Unexpressed Thoughts

Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling  
of Writer's Block

Mike Rose

College Cor

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org>

College Composi

There is  
worth

James  
London

ny will recogn  
the nature o  
justice.

story and c  
ve worth yo  
urned bard  
r lesser ga  
their shi  
ories as t

But the  
philosop  
t that y  
rd of his  
Isaacs, t

STOR

and Communication, Vol. 42, No. 1, (Feb., 1991),

is currently published by National Con

acceptance of  
R's Terms and  
ature issue o  
h-commere  
er use o

on and acces  
libraries, sch  
to help the  
ect support

STOR

Summer Institute Fellows & Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest Winners 2010  
Connecticut Writing Project  
University of Connecticut, Storrs

## *Staff*

### *Director*

Jason Courtmanche, Ph.D.

### *Program Leaders*

#### *Technology*

Jane Cook  
EASTCONN

### *Summer Institute*

Kelly Andrews-Babcock  
Killingly Memorial

### *Inservice*

Lynn Hoffman  
Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts

### *Connecticut Student Writers*

Nadine Keane  
Griswold High

### *Teacher as Writer*

Kathy Uschmann  
Juliet Long Elementary (ret.)

### *Teacher as Researcher*

Donna Ozga  
Bristol Eastern High (ret.)

### *Writers Retreat*

Penny Baril  
Montville High

### *Academy for Young Writers*

Joan Hofmann  
St. Joseph College

### *Program Assistant*

Sharlene Smith

### *Graduate Assistants*

Sean Forbes  
Shawna Lesseur

### *Undergraduate Writing Intern*

Jessica Mihaleas

### *Writing Contest Reader – Poetry*

Sean Forbes

### *Writing Contest Reader – Fiction*

Zara Rix

### *Writing Contest Reader- Nonfiction*

Jennifer Holley

Department of English  
215 Glenbrook Road, Unit 4025  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, CT 06269-4025  
(860) 486-2328  
(860) 486-9360 fax  
cwp@uconn.edu

## **Contents**

### **Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Award-Winning Pieces**

	<b>Poetry</b>	
4	<i>Panning: June 1, 1980</i>	Steve Straight
	<b>Prose Fiction</b>	
5	<i>Freewrite</i>	Jon Andersen
	<b>Prose Nonfiction (first place tie)</b>	
6	<i>Perennial</i>	Erin Hadadd-Null
12	<i>Bowhead Doodle</i>	Karen Romano Young
	<b>Honorable Mentions</b>	
	<b>Poetry</b>	
19	<i>This Poem is on Strike</i>	Denise Abercrombie
22	<i>How I Discovered Poetry</i>	Dara Bowling
23	<i>Rondeau for Tom: Black and White</i>	Sheila A. Murphy
24	<i>Young River</i>	Kisha Tracy
	<b>Prose Fiction</b>	
25	<i>Hungarian Thighs</i>	Stephanie K. McKenna
	<b>Summer Institute, 2010 Teacher-Consultant Contributions</b>	
30	<i>Spring, 1912</i>	Janet Thouin Lussier
32	<i>Heartwood</i>	Joan Muller
35	<i>Jake &amp; Sarah</i>	Tiffany Smith
40	<i>Stigmata</i>	Karen Adrián
41	<i>The Cyclical Father-Son Storm</i>	Daniel Blanchard
42	<i>Smile</i>	Melanie Tokarz
46	<i>U-Turn</i>	Eleisha LeMay
49	<i>The Poet Muses</i>	Erin Haddad-Null
50	<i>When I Lived Down by the River</i>	Della Hennelly
52	<i>An Infinite Number of Possible Futures</i>	Emily Wojcik
58	<i>How I Met Your Father</i>	Erin Caouette
60	<i>Nightmare</i>	Kisha Tracy
61	<i>What Act That Roars So Loud</i>	Laureen Lemire Anthony
65	<i>Caduceus</i>	Dara Bowling
68	<i>Into the Water</i>	Jane Cook

Steve Straight

**Panning**

**June 1, 1980**

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Winner in Poetry*

Happy to get any ride across the Mojave desert,  
my friend and I tossed our packs into the back  
of the pickup truck and rode the waves of highway  
from Flagstaff to Vegas fried by the wind and sun  
in the high thin air. The truck-bed was filled  
with the couple's meager belongings collected  
in garbage bags we used for pillows,  
and a carton of old milk rotting in the sun.  
On stops for gas and once for a flat tire  
we learned their story: Gerald, with bad teeth  
and bare feet and long, dirty fingernails, wearing  
a silver bull pendant, had lost his job in Texas  
but was full of his plan to move to Oregon,  
to pan for gold and shoot porcupines for money —  
“a dollar a head, and you can kill two hundred in a night.”  
They had already hocked their TV and chairs for gas money  
and now were down to a laundry sack of coins  
they'd saved to play the penny and nickel slots in Nevada.

He said all of it brightly, but with a twist in his eye  
that made us wonder once when they stopped at a gas station  
but didn't get out, just stopped, if the plan included  
my friend and me jumping out together to use the bathroom  
and never seeing our packs again, or if the knife  
in the sheath strapped to his thigh  
was more than a cowboy prop.

Late in the ride, late in the story, as we passed by towns  
named Chloride and Grasshopper Junction, mostly scrub  
as far as the eye could see, as our transient family  
chugged toward the sights of the Hoover Dam,  
the woman rapped on the thin window separating us  
and pointed down, into the trash below us, smiling.  
We rooted around for anything of value or meaning  
until my friend held up a box of Pampers. She smiled  
and nodded, and as he passed one around to her window  
at sixty miles an hour it dawned on us that all along  
on the front seat had been a tiny baby  
gurgling its trust in their great adventure.

**Freewrite**

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Winner in Fiction*

I can't think of anything to write, I can't think of anything to write, I can't think of anything to write, I can think of too much to write, Mrs. Sewell. You're so cool, happy Valentine's Day. You'll never read this because that's how *real* you are-- letting us write down anything we want and telling us you won't read it (and we believe you) and nobody has to hear any of this, so it's just us with the silence or noise of our own minds and when does that ever happen? Almost never. That's when. We're all too afraid of that, just like we're afraid of these freewrites I think -- what if there's really nothing there? What if what's there is FUBAR? When it's time to share, we go around the room and we have the right to pass. Or we can say something we didn't write, like I could write about how strong and hot you are, and just because you dress all school-marmy, none of these idiots even notice your goddessness -- and then, when it's my turn, I can just talk about the snow. I can come up with a thousand ways to write about the snow, sifting, burning, freezing, whispery, blanketing, muffled, blinding -- okay seven ways for now. Mrs. Sewell, you write too, up at your desk, pen scratching across the pages of your tidy journal. I want to break the rules. I want to know what you're writing. I want to know if you're writing about how you couldn't help crying as you sat with me at the end of the day last Friday, after I had showed you the piece about Mom's death and dad now on his way. When you welled up with tears the other afternoon and you put your hand on my shoulder, if you had tried to kiss me, I would have had to resist you gently because I love Anita and she loves me, and I never thought I'd have that. I would have had to say, "Mrs. Sewell, I'm sorry, we can't do this." Or maybe I would have taken you and kissed those full lips and taken off your glasses...And maybe you would have screamed and socked me, and Podhoretz would have come running out of the department office -- "My god Conroy!" I don't cry, so I need you to cry for me. I need Heather's baby to cry for me even though she has no idea what she's crying about, she's getting it done like it should be done -- body stiff and purple faced, fists flailing, and scream-crying and not done until she's done. Yeah, my sweet little niece knows how to let it loose-- primal style. I need Anita to cry for me, too -- just every now and then, so quietly, though I'm never sure at first, and it's usually because I've gone raging again. Never at her. Well, that once. Mrs. Sewell you're so cool, a jewel. Duel, tool, stool, fool, cruel, gruel, Yule, who'll, ghoul. Mom's a ghoul now -- I only see her now and then in my sleep and she's just cooking, or singing, or waving or shooting up. Once she spoke to me and I shot up in the dark. Dad on the couch. ~~Dad's on the couch and Uncle Terry's in Tangiers, it's terrible...~~ It's snowing out the window, and I shouldn't cross anything out. I shouldn't cross anyone out, even I guess these kids not even writing and some are texting LMFAO -- L8R -- and Rico's sleeping and everyone just wants to go home or just go early. Anita's writing, sometimes we share later, sometimes not. Anita, that first time was such a surprise, I mean your parents were upstairs, and the way you moved across me -- *hi...* it was like being born. I don't want to die. The heat's ticking in the radiator and the second hand that was moving around the face of the clock is stuck, right on time. In a few seconds it will start to carve another path around again. Mrs. Sewell, our ten minutes are almost up and this is all I have for you. I want to know if you're writing about me.

Erin Haddad-Null

**Perennial**

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Winner in Nonfiction*

*Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted somewhere.*

– Naomi Shihab Nye

**Leaves**

**Daughter**

"Can I take some of the mint with me?" I asked my aunt as we wandered out through the haze of the hot, late afternoon sun into her garden. She broke off part of the plant from the ones growing around her house, potted it, and handed it to me, explaining, "You're going to need to trim it back. I'd cut here and here –" she indicated the spots, "and water it right away. It needs water," she mused, looking at the soil with a wary eye. So, that's how the plant ended up perched precariously on the back seat of my car, making the journey with me from Manchester, New Hampshire to Hartford, Connecticut.

With my left hand, I smooth the soil down around the stems of the mint plant while breaking off a leaf with my right hand and chewing it. The sharp, tangy flavor recalls the hot summer days at my grandparents' house. On extended family visits where we'd reunite with our cousins, my sisters and I – all of us kids – would run around the yard, stumbling down where the yard sloped on the side of the house to meet the brick alleyway, dodging the broken glass and cigarette butts there. Or jumping along the sidewalk, avoiding the cracks, or swinging on the front porch swing or walking along the edge of the porch (which we were usually chastised not to do, but it was safely daring, which made it all the more fun). All the while other kids in the neighborhood might cycle by through the alleyway, two on a bike, one pedaling, one standing, and cars would intermittently lend the thumping bass from their stereos as a soundtrack to our childhood play. The mint provided easy refreshment. We'd bend down to the plants, tear off a leaf or two and chew the cool leafiness. As if we were foraging.

The mint remained there year after year, continuing to grow even as the house, and the neighborhood surrounding it, gave in a little more to decay each passing year.

I'm over a decade and a thousand miles away since those summer days when I ran around my grandparents' yard with my sisters and my cousins, but I'm replanting part of that plant's stalks in the large pot at the foot of the back porch of my apartment in Hartford. Setting the plant down in soil feels weightier than just planting some herbs. This plant didn't just travel from New Hampshire to Connecticut – it has a much longer journey in its past, one that involves crossing an ocean. I've heard countless times that my great-grandmother brought the ancestor of this plant with her from "the old country" when she immigrated to the U.S. In trying to keep the plant alive, I'm perpetuating a story about my family that's been carried within my family. But then I think, I'm putting too much worry into this. After all, the original plant has been dug up and cleared out.

"I drove past Grandma and Giddo's" I routinely mentioned to family members after driving back home to Chicago and stopping along the way in Toledo.

"How did the house look?" they usually asked, wondering what changes the new owners made.

"They got rid of the mint," I'd reply with a sigh. I didn't mention how my stomach sank when I saw the bare spots where the herbs used to be. It struck me then how easily the history of the place could be cleared out and swept away.

What I have in my yard now is a descendant of that thrown-away plant who will probably adapt and flourish in a new environment just like the earlier plants she grew from. "Water, sun, soil," I repeat to myself. That's all herbs need. It's simple. Not much for me to screw up, I remind myself. Still, the strangeness of keeping something rooted is unfamiliar to me.

The only place I could ever definitively call home was my grandparents' house. It always seemed that the other places my immediate family lived in were a series of substitute homes, pale imitations, of the one where our family gathered over the years and where I played as a little kid, watched over by my grandmother, day after day while my parents worked. The issue of home hasn't been such an issue for most of my adult life, though. I've moved from place to place every year or few. At one point, I realized I'd lived in five different states in the space of four years. But for some reason -- maybe it's losing the house I thought of as home and losing some of the people who once inhabited it -- I find that I want some tangible, memory-conjuring piece from that era of my past, one that brings back the sight and smell and taste of those earlier years. As I monitor the plant, debating whether it needs more water or has already received too much, I wonder if this mint will be torn down and uprooted someday. I know there's a good chance this plant will be cleared out like the stalks that fostered it. But, I hope that what I've planted will take root and continue to grow, even after I've moved, and I'm no longer around to see it.

### *Stalk*

#### *Aunt*

She watches her niece's car drive down the street and disappear into the evening traffic. Turning, she meanders back through her garden, checking on what's ready to be picked and pulling a random weed here and there. She thinks again how much she loves this piece of land and loves what she's been able to transform it into.

*A piece of New England*, she calls it, because she's filled it with native plants, mostly ones she found on her long rambles through the woods. She decided to bring them home with her the way some people collect stray cats or dogs. With the local wildlife growing all around, the garden is a recreation of the landscape that she loves and calls home. That wasn't always the case, though. She could remember when New England felt as alien and cold as a distant planet. That was back when she first moved from Toledo to New Hampshire for a relationship that turned into a marriage. She hadn't been thrilled about leaving home. At first, she was miserable and kept wondering to herself, *What the hell am I doing here? Why aren't I back with my family and the people who know me?* Later, she thought, *Maybe it was life pushing me in the direction I needed to go.* Even though she can still recall the misery of that first homesickness so clearly, the sharpness is distant now that she considers this place home.

She looks at her garden, mentally contrasting it with the one around her growing up. Her father's garden, more utilitarian with its crops of tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, and radishes, was smaller to the point of being cramped. The tangle of green vines and plants always appeared to be in defiance of the bricks and concrete around it. The plants looked as if they grew despite being hemmed in by the overcrowded, paint-peeling, detached garage. Of course, her garden looks somewhat out of place on this

block, too. The prim and well-ordered shrubbery and flower beds of her neighbors look like different species from the wild, asymmetrical, and diverse plants in her yard.

Her father's garden had fallen into long disuse by the time the family house was sold. Her father had died and his garden was forgotten. Her mother remained in the house, tenaciously staying there for several years until she was finally persuaded by her children to leave. The neighborhood had changed – or maybe not changed, just deepened into itself further with each passing year.

She and her siblings worked together on selling the house and clearing it out. Her mom and youngest sister, who had come home to stay after their father died, moved into a small, sleepy suburb next to Toledo. All the possessions that could be crammed into their new residence, a small ranch house, were. What wasn't crammed was tossed or sold. As they went through the torturous work of sorting through a lifetime of stuff, she kept saying, *Gandhi had the right idea -- he died with only his glasses and a mat in his possession*. She used her tongue-in-cheek remark to cover the fact that she didn't quite know how to convey the surrealness of seeing the things around her since childhood carted off.

And then, just like that, home was gone – the building still stood, but it was a house that was no longer theirs. She left it behind along with the crack house two doors down, tires slashed, garage graffiti tagged, her recent memory of walking home past two guys arguing and one pulling a gun on the other. It was enough.

On one of her last trips to the house, she dug up one of the mint plants growing in the yard. She knew she needed to replant it and keep it alive, and she was the one that had inherited her father's green thumb. The mint had been brought from Lebanon by her great-grandmother. *It's survived this long*, she thought, resolutely. *I can make sure that it sees another generation*. That was the great thing about mint, the gardener in her knew – as a weed, it grows rampant if given the chance, and smells sweet as it does.

She replanted the mint in her own garden and it continued to grow in its new New England home. If the thin, rocky soil was a shock after the rich blackness of Midwestern earth, the plant didn't betray it. Instead, its roots tangled into the soil, settling into its new home and growing again.

## **Root**

### **Grandmother**

She walks down the cellar steps gingerly, clinging to the rail out of habit, and takes one last look around at the place that had become storage for various junk and odds and ends after it was no longer used for playing pool and darts and lounging around. The room was virtually emptied out now, except for a few pieces of trash and an old beer bottle that sat, empty and forgotten underneath the stairs. Picking up the trash and beer bottle, she walks back upstairs, trying not to think how this is the last time she'll walk up this staircase, or that she's just seen her basement for the last time. She's moving out of the house she's called home since the age of eighteen.

When she and her family moved in the house sixty-four years ago, it was new to them, but not new itself. It had been almost a century old, even then. And the neighborhood was not unfamiliar. In fact, she and her family had a less than a mile move from their old house to here, one of the old brick houses on the East side that had probably been built for a relatively well-to-do merchant sometime during the previous century. The house had probably never been opulent, but in its early years was desirable



and comfortable. It had already begun to fray when she and her family moved in, but time hadn't taken its complete toll yet.

The move across town was nothing for her. It was a couple years later, when she went to New Orleans as a Navy nurse during World War II that she underwent a real move and experienced the real homesickness that came along with it. She was miserable at first, but eventually came to love the city – its cemeteries full of mausoleums, its cathedrals, its old streets. But then, her mother died. The war kept going, but she returned home to find that home had changed.

Her sisters married and moved out; her father remained at home but slipped further into drink and needed more care. She continued to work, nursing others on the clock, taking care of her father off the clock. Eventually, she married as well. She and her husband bought out her sisters' shares of the house to remain there with her father. Her mother-in-law moved in shortly after. Her sister-in-law appealed to her, saying that the elderly woman's deteriorating eyesight meant she needed someone with nursing skills. She readily agreed to her mother-in-law moving in, but inwardly she smiled to herself at the irony. Her sister-in-law deemed her house the best place for the old woman to live, yet neither of her husband's two sisters had even wanted her in the family at first. They had shown up at her wedding ceremony only to cry through the entire event.

During the first year of her marriage, her husband's sisters refused to speak English around her, even though they were fluent in it. They simply made a point of speaking Arabic when she was around. She smiled, though, and instead spent her time around them talking to her husband's four-year-old niece, who willingly spoke English. She became close to her niece and having a small child around reminded her of how much she wanted her own children. When her children were born, the shared happiness around the new lives seemed to finally make her a part of her in-laws' family.

As old and sick as her mother-in-law was by then, she still seemed eager to know her grandchildren and to take part in the life of the house. Life had become difficult, though, with the infirmities age brings. At times, the old woman would lapse into silence or only mutter to herself in Arabic. She remembered feeling at a loss, unable to understand what her husband's mother might need or might be suffering. She learned quickly, though, to call her young son, Skip, to her and whisper, "Go ask Sittie what's wrong." When Skip would bound into her room and brightly repeat the question, it never failed to get a response.

Her mother-in-law planted mint in the yard upon moving in. She assumed it was simply transplanted from her sister-in-law's house. Later, though, she heard her husband and other family members mention how her mother-in-law had brought it from Lebanon, carrying it across the sea and keeping it alive in all the places she'd lived in America. After hearing this, she began to notice how the old woman, no matter how tired and aching she might be, made sure to tend the plant, examine its leaves, collect them and crush them to release their tart flavor into dish after dish. It was one of the many kitchen rituals she saw her mother-in-law perform again and again in the years she lived with them.

A grandmother herself now, she recalls all of this familiar and distant history on the day she's moving out of her home. Even now, years and years later, the scent of spearmint floating to her from the yard still reminds her of the woman who planted it. Sittie had died at home while her grandchildren were so young they barely had a memory of her. The loss of his mother was hard on her husband and hard for her, too. She remembered at first feeling a strange and unexpected gratefulness that her own

mother had died so quickly. Later, she realized this new death made her miss her mother all the more since she'd lost the person who had come closest to filling her role.

When she reaches the top of the stairs, she throws away the trash and holds the beer bottle upside down over the sink, making sure it's been emptied. She thinks how lucky she is that her children and grandchildren have come from their far-flung lives to help her with this final move. One of her granddaughters walks through the house with a camera, as if determined to document everything for posterity. She takes the beer bottle she's emptied and pantomimes drinking from it while her granddaughter laughs and snaps a picture. She smiles at the image she's made, but it only masks her awareness of the finality of every moment. It's settling into her now.

She looks out the window, then, catching a sight of the mint leaves curling up into the early spring grayness of the overcast day. She's seen these leaves return every spring, year after year. She remembers her mother-in-law's courage at leaving home behind forever to find a new life. A life that consisted of giving birth to fifteen children and only seeing five of them reach adulthood. Now, the mint that she planted as a new arrival to this country remains when not one of her offspring does. She thinks of all the people in her family who, decades earlier, followed the same path as her mother-in-law, leaving their homeland. Then, she thinks of how their doing so led to the children and grandchildren in the house with her now. She wonders if the mint will still push its way out of the thawed ground each spring, even when she's no longer there to see it. She takes one last look at her yard then turns away from the window, bracing herself to walk out the door.

### *Seed*

She stands on the deck of the boat, watching the land she called home recede from her sight. She's never been on a boat before, but she knows it won't be long before the place she left behind falls out of view. She tries to face the start of a new life.

She holds, wrapped in a cloth clutched in her hands, sprigs of mint with the soil clustered around the roots. She's brought the plant from home knowing she had to take something from the soil with her. She recalls her mother's face and sounds at the moment of goodbye – fragmented images – distorted by tears and the sobs she strangles in her throat. Her mother, explained to her why she had to leave, how a better life waited for her in America. She is journeying to join her brother, who has already made a new life there. She recalls the sense of what her mother said but the exact words are lost to the fog of pain. Amputation is what it feels like – the almost physical pain at being separated from home, leaving it all behind. She wanted to whisper to her mother, who, despite being the one who insisted on this leaving, had cried and clutched her close, *I'll come back*. But she was afraid to say these words aloud – afraid to tempt fate with a promise she's uncertain she can keep.

She wonders how the pain from this first separation will recede. What she doesn't know is that it will submerge itself in happiness when she finds the man who becomes her husband, when they marry, when they have their first children, a set of boy twins. Then, it will reemerge many times worse, beyond what she can imagine now, when she loses these children. What she doesn't know, at fifteen, is all the children that await her. She will give birth fifteen times – one for each year she's lived up to this point. She will watch ten of her children die before her – many of them felled by diphtheria, typhoid, and pneumonia. Common horror stories of the time she lives in that become obsolete in another generation or two.

She can't imagine, this girl, consumed with wondering *when?...if?* she'll ever see home and family again, how many separations she will go through in her life. Separated from language and place. She will move again and again. Watch money appear and disappear, drastically affecting the conditions of her life. She'll lose sight – her eyes no longer able to strain across the water for a glimpse of familiar land as she is doing now. She will never return to the place she called home or the mother who put her on the boat that is taking her away. She will never again see the family she's left behind.

She will discover, though, that the children she has will find their own way to plant their feet on the ground. These offspring will find a way to navigate through a new language and land to find families and homes of their own. She'll find solace with her final son, her last child, who marries and brings her one more daughter, an unexpected friend who sits with her through her last, lonely days. She will see her grandchildren and think how they grow like miracles, sprung from some new soil.

All of this waits for her in the future. For now, she distracts herself from the tears stinging her eyes by rubbing the soft, smooth leaves between her fingers. She wants the smell of mint to permeate her – its bitterness reminding her of her loss, its sweetness reminding her of the promise of a better life that she takes on faith, journeying ahead. Although she can't imagine what that ground in her new home will look like, or how it will differ from the mountains and the tree-covered hills that have made up her landscape until now, she imagines planting the roots of her mint. She holds to this image of transplant. In this image, she sees hope that she will be able to set something down when she reaches new soil. And maybe, the soil will nurture this growth from another land while it takes root in a new world.

*Karen Romano Young*

***Bowhead Doodle***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Winner in Nonfiction*















Denise Abercrombie

***This Poem is on Strike***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Honorable Mention in Poetry*

relax: this poem is no  
competition

it stands up for  
the prosaic

the ordinary cliché  
way a son says to his mother:

*I love you, mom*  
*I love you, mom*

this poem is dedicated  
to all poems

that never get written  
or thought of

this poem doesn't care to win a prize  
and would rather spend time

with its children  
reading comics, counting trout in the river

this poem refuses to be anthologized  
because it wants more space

and time with and for  
itself

this poem got no help from  
T.S. Eliot or C.D. Wright

or any wordsmith who uses initials  
instead of a real first name

this poem sticks up  
for its own

this poem has nothing to hide  
no hidden meaning

no classical allusions  
or footnotes

no slant rhyme, no true rhyme  
no interesting use of space

this poem is not about language  
or nuance

and it will never be cradled  
by an agent

this poem has no persona  
and uses personification only

because it would rather be  
with its kids on vacation

than be a contender  
at a retreat or colony

this poem will never appear  
in *Poetry* or *Southern Review*

or circulate at the NWP  
or earn an MFA

but this poem will beat down  
any scab

any other poem that crosses the line  
to make its way

onto this page  
to poeticize

because this poem is on strike  
yes, of course this poem wants

better working conditions, benefits  
a living wage

and a purpose for all these  
couplets

and what it would die for  
right here on the line

right while you're reading  
this line

(excuse the repetition  
but it bears repeating)

is a world that loves  
a world that *loves, loves*

a world that *loves* children  
more than business

including po-biz  
and all things Poetry business

*Dara Bowling*

***How I Discovered Poetry***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Honorable Mention in Poetry*

It was like jewels twinkling before me,  
Rich and glowing in their prismatic splendor:  
*Sh'ma yisroel adonai eloheinu adonai ekhad*  
What did it mean? What was he saying,  
the man wrapped in white silk and blue stripes and fringe  
who glared at me when I touched the prayer books  
with lollipops on my fingers, or shushed me when  
I laughed too loudly  
Yet who stood, transformed, elevated,  
Backlit perhaps by God Itself.  
Trusted with the secret.  
The music of the words danced just out of reach,  
Tickling over the tips of my grasping hands,  
Tripping daintily over my ears with the hush and swish  
*Sh'ma yisroel...sh'ma yisroel...*  
An elaborate, evasive ballet of cadence and melody.  
I closed my eyes and realized that perhaps  
The meaning wasn't in the meaning  
But in the rustle of the silken words  
Rising...rising...  
Where they would wait for me  
To grow tall enough  
To understand.

Sheila A. Murphy

***Rondeau for Tom: Black and White***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Honorable Mention in Poetry*

Black and white, darkroom, no light,  
windows blocked, a sliver of sunlight,  
rituals remembered as if yesterday,  
shapes emerging in a shallow tray,  
snapshots fading now, finite,

unlike that studio portrait with tissue overlay,  
my little sister ruffles, your sailor whites,  
siblings paired forever, 1938,  
black and white,

until a Gulf coast sunset rosy bright  
develops what would become your twilight  
photo, sugar sand and sea-foam spray,  
shorebird clusters, fleeing lapping waves,  
a shore reshaping, as transient as life,  
black and white.

*Kisha Tracy*

***Young River***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Honorable Mention in Poetry*

Young river, hasten onward as you want;  
care not for the scars you carve in the earth.  
Revel in the miracle of your birth,  
for you are of age to frolic and flaunt.

Drain the strength out of the baptismal font,  
and greet the jealous dams with careless mirth.  
Young river, hasten onward as you want;  
care not for the scars you carve in the earth.

Although the constricting banks may daunt,  
although time has only uncertain worth,  
do not eddy in an aimless dearth  
lest remorse determines your path to haunt.  
Young river, hasten onward as you want.



***Hungarian Thighs***

*Teacher-Consultant Writing Contest, 2010 Honorable Mention in Fiction*

She paid the lunch lady, a gray-haired, smiling old woman, and turned to walk into the cafeteria; it was the Freshmen lunch. Frowning at the taco with some kind of red meat and wilted lettuce, she jumped when somebody called her name.

"Jessie! Wait up!" This confused Jessica slightly, because she hadn't been called that name since elementary school. She turned around and saw him. Jason was tall, taller than Jessica remembered. In elementary school, they were the same height. They always had to stand in the back row for those class pictures each year. "I've seen you around school a lot lately." Funny, she hadn't seen him. "How's it going?" He smiled at her; his teeth were very white.

"Good." She couldn't think of anything else to say. They hadn't spoken in years. "I saw you at the basketball game last night. You were looking pretty good. Did you come to see me play?" His teeth were so white, she thought, he must use some kind of whitening stuff on them. They were always so dirty when he was little. Didn't he repeat Kindergarten or first grade? Or both? She couldn't remember.

"No. I just happen to like basketball." Jessica was pushed as everybody was trying to get past them into the 22 minute lunch period. Everyone stared at the two of them as they passed by. Jessica brushed her shoulder-length hair behind one ear.

"Even better! That's my sport, you know. There's talk of me being scouted in a year or two. Seems like we have a lot in common." He kept smiling at her as he nodded to their identical lunches. She didn't know what to do. His white teeth, dark skin, light eyes, and muscles were overwhelming; but so was his cologne. "Wanna go out some time? I got my license and my dad got me a car. I could pick you up." Jason Butkus was asking her out on a date in front of everybody – in the cafeteria!

Jessica's heart pounded and her throat seemed to close up. She could feel her cheeks getting red. She felt sick to her stomach. For nine years she had known him, and these were the first nice words he had ever said to her. She thought back to those six years of elementary school and the torment he had put her through.

~~~

When she was little, Jessica always looked forward to going home each day from JFK Elementary School. Mom always knew if it was a good day or a bad day for her daughter. Sometimes Jessica would get off the bus looking relaxed, but most of the time she strutted off the bus with her head held high and her lips in a straight line. She always waited for the front door to shut until she burst into tears. Her mother, skinny and pretty, would hug Jessica; she didn't even have to ask what was wrong. Six years of teasing by one boy had gotten to both Jessica and her mom. Every few weeks, Mom had to call the school and ask for advice on how to get this boy to stop; the school always promised to "look into it."

Even though her mom never told her, Jessica knew when her mom called the school. Depending on the grade, her teacher would give her a hug or a pat on the back and say, "it'll-be-ok-he's-just-being-a-boy-teasing-means-he-really-likes-you-he-has-problems-of-his-own-he's-really-the-one-you-should-feel- sorry-for-you're-such-a-strong-girl-you-can-handle-it." Of course Jessica always smiled and thanked her teacher

politely, but things never changed. By the sixth grade, she began to physically get sick before school just thinking about the way Jason Butkus teased her.

Every day before she left for JFK Elementary, Jessica gave her mom and dad a kiss good-bye. Her dad would always look at her and say, "you're a beauty, but hit 'em hard with your brains." Her mom would always say, "love you, baby." Although she was in sixth grade and felt too old to be called "baby," she still liked it. Her mom smoothed Jessica's waist-length hair; it was her beautiful hair that Jessica focused on most each morning. Jessica's sister, Vanessa, had already left for high school; she was six years older. She wouldn't be back home until after nine pm; she went to work right after school on most days. Vanessa had to make money for her one-year-old daughter; their mom had to quit her job so she could take care of her granddaughter while her eldest child finished high school. Jessica gave her chubby little niece a kiss good-bye and hoped today would be a rare good one.

She walked down the block and waited for the city bus, just as she did every morning. After automatically showing her bus pass to the driver and exchanging the daily "Hi Jessie" and "Hi Marty," Jessica sat down in the front seat behind Marty, dreading the next stop. She took out her most recent favorite author, Judy Blume, and began reading *Forever*. Although she loved the book, looking down at it let her long hair hide her eyes and prevented her from looking at the next person who got on the bus. Two minutes later, Jason got on the bus. He was loud and rude.

"What's up, old man?" He shouted at Marty, who had perfectly good hearing. Marty looked in the mirror at Jessica and smiled at her, showing it didn't bother him. Slowly, the bus started to move. As Jason walked by Jessica, he stomped on her flip-flop clad foot. She closed her eyes and stifled a scream; his boots must have weighed twenty-five pounds. She opened up her eyes and felt the tears welling up. "So sorry," Jason sarcastically bowed. "Not that it matters. I'm sure you haven't seen your feet in at least five years. Not with that belly of yours." Jason laughed as he moved down the aisle. Marty suddenly stepped on the brakes, and Jason crashed into a seat. He swore loudly as Marty smirked. A tear slid down Jessica's face.

"It's always good to take the high road, Jessie. But sometimes you gotta take the low road. I'm sorry. He shouldn't have done that to you." Marty smiled sadly as he looked at Jessica's reflection.

"Thanks, Marty." It was funny he said that, because her mom told her to always take the high road and ignore Jason.

When the bus pulled to the stop closest to school, Jessica rushed out with a quick wave to Marty. She wanted to get through this day without another encounter with Jason. But that wasn't going to happen. Today her teacher decided to switch seats. He always allowed the person with the highest average to pick the first seat then randomly let everybody else pick their seats. Jessica quickly did the math and figured she had a twenty-five percent chance of getting to choose; Luis, Nancy, Sal, and she were always in the running for the highest average. Luis got good grades, but he spoke very little English. Kids teased him because he stuttered when he spoke; he'd only been in America for two years. Yet his grades were always higher than most of the kids who were born and raised here. Nancy was a pretty girl, but her thick glasses prompted jokes from other students. Sal was a pale boy who always coughed and seldom smiled. The four of them concentrated on school rather than dwell on their daily attacks by teasers. Today Jessica got to pick the first seat.

She picked a seat in the second row. Because she was so tall, her previous teachers always assigned her to the back. Jessica hated sitting in the back. Since she, like everybody else, hated to sit in the front, Jessica chose the second row. Her teacher then pulled random names out of a hat and allowed each student to pick his or her own seat. The second person who got to choose was Jason. He chose the seat directly behind Jessica; she felt her throat close up, dreading the next few weeks of sitting in front of this teenage bully. As the other students picked their seats, Jessica and Jason sat there quietly. She felt a little nervous that he hadn't said anything to her or pushed her or kicked her or anything. Before the last student picked his seat, Jessica took out a hair clip from her bag. That was when she felt the knots.

While the students had been picking their seats, Jason had been tying Jessica's hair into tiny little knots. His fifteen minutes of work had caused irreparable damage. Jessica went up to her teacher and showed him; Jessica was then sent to the nurse to see if there was anything to be done. Jason was sent to the office. Unfortunately, the nurse and principal were in offices next to each other. Jason and Jessica had to walk down the hall together. But she refused to walk next to him. Jessica, for the first time in her life, broke a school rule. She ran down the hall to the nurse. As she ran, Jason yelled, "Stampede!" and made an elephant noise. The nurse was sympathetic; she even let Jessica call her mom. No, she didn't want to go home. Yes, she would still go to religion class after school. Okay, they'd go to the hair salon that evening and have her aunt fix it up.

And she cried when the nurse had to cut the knots out of her hair. Even though Jason wasn't in class, it was a very long day for Jessica.

After school, Jessica, with her raggedy hair, walked across the street to her church. The sixth-grade religion class didn't start until 3:30, so they had about twenty minutes to unwind. Jessica took out her book and read quietly in a corner, enjoying some time alone. The other kids avoided looking at Jessica and her new "hairstyle." At 3:30, they gathered in the kitchen for cookies and Hi-C before class began. The religion teacher cleared her throat, always a sign that she had an announcement before snack.

"Welcome, guys and gals. We have a special guest today. He is a friend of Chris, and we would like to welcome him to our group." She clapped her hands, and the "guys and gals" were expected to do the same. Chris was a beefy dumb kid who hung around with Jason; Jessica prayed, fearing the worst. Sure enough, Jason walked into the kitchen, beaming. He had gotten to stay in the office for the remainder of the day since his parents couldn't come pick him up. Jessica couldn't even eat the two cookies allotted to each kid. She hoped Jason wouldn't say anything about how he was glad she was on a diet. But, thankfully, he didn't talk to her at all. During class, which focused on the "golden rule," Jessica caught Jason looking at her. He didn't say anything or make any faces or nasty gestures. Maybe he was going to treat her like he wanted to be treated. She ignored him, because she wanted to be ignored. Even when they got on the bus, Jason stayed away from her. Maybe he felt bad about forcing her long hair to be cut. Maybe he was changing. Jessica sat in the seat behind Marty, pretending to read her book and hoping Jason wouldn't say anything the rest of the bus ride home. He didn't. But when she got off the bus, he stuck his head out the window.

"Did you feel that?" He shouted out. "I think the bus just went up about a foot when Thunder Thighs got off."

Jessica could feel the tears welling up. But when she looked at her front door, she saw her mom wasn't waiting there as usual. She was relieved. Sometimes Jessica

felt that her mom was more bothered by the teasing than she was. When she got into the house, Jessica saw her mom was changing the baby on the kitchen table. She wasn't able to look up at Jessica's hair yet.

"Mom, do you have to do that on the kitchen table? We eat there!" Jessica grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. She heard feet pounding on the stairs. "Who's that? Did Vanessa call out of work again?"

"No, honey, that's your father. He wanted to be here when you got home. I called him at work right after I spoke to you." She pulled on the baby's pants and looked at Jessica. She didn't have to say anything; her eyes welled up. "I'm sorry, baby." Jessica got a big hug from her mother and niece.

"It's ok, Mom, really, I'm fine." She struggled out of their embrace.

"There she is!" Dad gave her a huge hug when he got in the kitchen. "Come on, let's go have a chat." He took her hand and led her into the living room. "I heard what happened at school. You ok?"

Jessica nodded yes, trying not to tear up. Usually her mom gave these chats, not her dad. She could tell he felt uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, a bit angry, but totally in control.

"So that boy's been teasing you a lot, huh?" He waited for her to nod again. "You know, I had a lot of people tease me when I was a kid. Boy, they would really be making fun of me now." He grabbed his rather large stomach and bellowed, "Ho ho ho - bowl full of jelly, right?" He laughed, hoping she would do the same. Jessica let out a fake giggle; she knew he was trying to help. He turned around and shook his rear end. "Check out this booty, eh?" Again he laughed and she did too, for real this time. "That's it, girl, you'll be ok." He hugged her. That hug made her feel so much better than the little chat did. "Come on, let's cook up some dinner, then Mom'll take you to your Auntie's salon to get a new "do." Together, they made some pasta and salad. For a few hours, Jessica forgot about Jason Butkus.

After dinner, Jessica and her mom walked to the salon a few blocks down the street. Jessica pushed the carriage that held her niece. Auntie gave them each a kiss and promptly sat Jessica down in the chair to wash her hair. Technically, the salon was closed, but when Auntie received a call from her brother, she knew she would stay late to help. She knew what her niece was going through.

"Julia, why don't you go take a walk?" Jessica's mom didn't even hesitate; she immediately got up and headed towards the stroller. "I'll keep an eye on the baby. She's almost asleep. You need some time alone. So do we. Go get a coffee and come back in an hour. I'll be fine with my niece and grand-niece."

"Ok, I'll be back soon." She opened the door. "And thanks. For everything." The sisters-in-law smiled at each other.

Auntie went to work. Silently, she combed, clipped, cut, styled, moussed, hairsprayed, and shaped Jessica's hair until she looked like her old self. Her old self, but with very short hair. She knew what Jessica both wanted and needed without even asking her. Then she and Jessica sat in the waiting chairs, sipping ginger ale, and silently enjoying each other's company.

"Your sister takes after your mom. But you know that." Auntie and Jessica both mused about the long skinny legs and shapely bodies of their relatives. "And you take after me." Jessica looked at her aunt, who she always found to be beautiful, and wondered if she was right. "And your niece takes after you."

"Auntie, how can you see that? She's only a year old, and I'm twelve."

Auntie stood up and grabbed her thighs. "Look at this? See the 'chubbiness'? Look at the baby." She lifted up the baby's legs and pinched the chubby thighs. "Stand up." Auntie then pinched Jessica's thighs, and they both laughed. "They're all the same. We're born with them. No exercise, diet, or miracle cream will take away these thighs. Believe me, I've tried. They're Hungarian thighs, and we'll have them our entire lives. So instead of feeling bad about them, feel proud of them. It links us together." And a link had been formed that night. One that repaired the damage caused by a mean boy. Jessica looked from her aunt to her niece, thinking that one day she might have to give this same talk.

Just then, her mom walked in. "You look beautiful, baby. But you and the baby - it's past both of your bedtimes." She smiled, looking relaxed and happy. Jessica smiled back, feeling the same way.

"See you soon, girls!" Auntie shouted as she shut off the lights.

"Thanks. For everything." Jessica couldn't express her gratitude or relief.

~~~

This one day, three years ago, rushed through Jessica's mind as she stood in front of Jason Butkus. She was the same weight she was then, but she had grown almost nine inches taller.

"Really, Jessie, you look good." Jason kept smiling at her.

"Thanks," She smiled back at him and smoothed her hair with her free hand.

"But no, thanks."

"Wait. What?" He had never been rejected before. "Why?"

Jessica just walked away. She headed towards her usual table. Luis, Sal, and Nancy, along with some other friends they had made in middle school, saved her seat. She could feel Jason's eyes watching her back as she walked away. She knew she looked good in her favorite pair of jeans; they accentuated her Hungarian thighs.

Janet Thouin Lussier

**Spring, 1912**

*Dedicated to my grandparents, John and Beatrice Jane Francis*

She strolled the promenade in old Penzance;  
It was 1912 in the spring  
When word came of a tragedy at sea.  
What chilling thoughts it would bring.

On a clear, cold night a ship sailed unaware  
Of the peril it faced ahead.  
As the band played on the partiers laughed  
And danced on the graves of the dead.

The sun shone down on the letter she held  
From her young husband far away.  
The elegant script told her how she was missed  
And he wished she was with him that day.

She smiled when she thought of the way she demurred  
When her beau had returned for her hand.  
"He's not my John Francis," she coyly had said,  
Though her heart bowed to his loving demand.

They'd married in summer at old Madron Church;  
Then the groom sailed away once again  
To pick up the threads of his American life  
And wait for his bride, Beatrice Jane.

Three passages booked on a gigantic ship;  
Her mother, her sister and she  
Would travel from Heamoor to see this new home,  
Steaming across the waves of hist'ry.

She'd read of the ship, "the most marvelous creature"  
Yet made by the likes of mankind;  
In the *The Cornishman's* pages scientific sages  
Swore the vessel could not be maligned.

She'd heard of the grandeur; the ship was adorned  
With luxuries of every sort.  
And experts, they claimed no fierce storm or ill wind  
Would keep it from making safe port.

Bea dreamed of the ship and the joy it would bring  
To start a new life with her Jack.  
But the plan went astray; her sister fell sick  
And her mother was forced to stay back.

Then her mind turned to the decision she'd made  
To wait and not voyage alone.  
She could have been by his side by this turn of the tide  
Had she the courage she wished that she owned.

Then she heard a voice call out her name  
A friend waved, as the cobbl'd street she crossed.  
"Bea, the paper has such dreadful news:  
The Titanic ---the ship --- it's been lost!"

Bea stared at her friend, confused, distraught;  
"That could not have happened!" she cried.  
But the headline there was plain as day;  
It proclaimed fifteen-hundred had died.

From the shores of Newlyn town to Marazion  
They heard the tragic tale.  
The ship was felled by a mountain of ice;  
Man's "greatest triumph" had failed.

In dreams Bea saw the lifeboats launched;  
Heard the cries of the drowning souls.  
By day, all mourned for lives that were lost,  
And the church bells solemnly tolled.

It could have been she aboard that ship,  
Sinking to an icy demise.  
The reasons why she still lived and breathed  
Confounded even the wise.

Was it luck that saved her from dying that night?  
Was it Destiny that kept her on land?  
Was her future a part of a much bigger plan  
Guided by a benevolent Hand?

She strolled deck of the passenger ship  
Traveling over the waves to her Jack.  
Her eyes lingered on the western horizon;  
She smiled and didn't look back.

### *Heartwood*

Before my New England town lost its character in the 1960s amid the onset of vinyl pre-built homes, restorations of antique capes that looked like bad nose jobs, and, more recently, the building of faux-provincial estates on quarter acre lots, there were just plain folks' places scattered like grazing cows across the landscape.

These homesteads were what remained of a farming community. The wooden dwellings had faced the elements cleverly, their roof peaks adjusted to the compass with deciduous trees shading the south sides in summer, but allowing the sun to warm and brighten them in winter. There were out-buildings and garden lots with maybe someone's tender conceit, a bird house that was a replica of the larger structure from whose kitchen window the miniature could be seen in spring by a child. Against one gabled end of the house would lean a teetering barn in defiance of gravity due to its builder's craft, the structures looking like an old, old couple held erect by mutual, courteous gestures—an elbow cradled, a hand held lest they both topple apart.

In the fall, the houses wore hay bale skirts around their foundations and their chimneys poured out the dying exhalations of firewood stacked on porches and beneath the clothesline. The clothesline could serve as a hand-hold in blizzards if it was alongside a path to the barn where livestock needed tending. Wells still had hand pumps and you could find buckets, baskets and wheelbarrows without petunias planted in them. Even new television antennas and electric meters installed on weathered clapboards didn't detract from an innate sense of dawn-to-dusk industry that these home places evoked. The devices rusted soon enough and by that deterioration looked as if they were hard at work, too. The forms of things fit their functions.

Bruce Ander's house isn't part of anything I've described yet. First, the sculptor built it all by himself at the end of a secluded farm path reached only by his half-track, and he built *for* himself so his dwelling shoulders a foundry instead of a barn. And yet it's like any home place based on living, not lifestyle; everything is connected, dependent, temporal: the hay you store in your loft for later can go off like a bomb without notice. Your studio can erupt into a conflagration from one welding spark.

Bruce's family lives beneath an enormous cantilevered roof attached to the ground by a thick, native stone abutment. It angles at just the right slope to shield its inhabitants, who look out through suspended curtains of glass shielding three sides of their interior space. Over the years since construction, the entire home is becoming organically indistinguishable from its setting through the slow advance of mosses and lichen. It's so novel, it's got a head start on becoming old, as if was the regeneration of an 1840s farm house that has caved in on itself, its walls buckled to their knees and the roof left hanging a-tilt against a slowly decaying chimney stack.

When I saw Bruce's house for the first time it was still pretty new. A pair of work boots near the top edge of the roof caught my eye. Their soles clung against the shingles with enough friction to keep them from slipping lower, but I watched a while to see if there were any signs of life in them, to see if they would at any minute tumble. Their laces were loose and the tongues were hanging out. Grinning dog boots. There they were with still some good leather begging questions. I wondered whether the prodigal feet that walked off without them might return, apologetic in torn socks.

That was twenty years ago and I recently saw that the boots are still there, in



effigy. Only the rust marks from the nails that kept them in place remain, with the leather and laces gone to squirrels. I didn't ask Bruce before about the boots, but now I've inquired.

It seems that Bruce's uncle logged in the Pacific Northwest where men plied their own particular crafts with gladiatorial rigor. They made bald and bawdy reference to how they improbably cheated hardships. The oldest codgers talked of an even earlier time when loggers were expeditionists as well as woodsmen. There were no access roads then, and these men bushwhacked their way to their woodlots and floated their logs to civilization on the fluid backs of rivers. They used heroic cross-cut saws, axes and perilousness itself as tools. Men died then, if not abundantly, then regularly. It follows that disposing of the doomed men's bodies was not easy. Out of deference to the men's families, out of nervous speculation about fate, comrades nailed the steel-toed hob-nailed boots of the befallen to a log, and fitted and laced the deceased into those. The twosome, now a union, the man and log, were chunked into the log boom for deliverance downstream.

Eventually, when roads came into the forests like poorly combed parts in a teenager's hair, only empty boots were nailed to logs as a message: have body, send a coffin on a cart.

In quite modern times, the times of Bruce's uncle, boots were nailed to logs after the boots themselves had expired, not their owners. So, the uncle had helped shingle the roof and had nailed his boots to it when it was finished. Were they an epitaph? Or was he shaping another meaning from them? Not epitaph, but *epigraph*, what is written at the beginning of a chapter, not at its end?

The uncle was an experienced logger, but did he also know about cobbling? Did he know that shoes are built around a foot-shaped wooden core called a *last*? Of course, the root meaning of 'last' isn't only "the end" or "in conclusion." It also means, "to go on in time" or "endure." From the Old English it quirkily infers "footprint." Then too, cobbler's lasts are preferably made from the hardest wood possible; a last's utility is best when the wood from which it's made is exceedingly durable, which is heartwood taken from the core of a tree. The forms of things follow their functions. What lasts when boots are finally gone dear uncle? What did you go on with when your logging chapter was done?

Now I hold the iron crescent of a worn horseshoe in my hands. Its nail holes are filled in with dirt except for where one bent iron nail has crooked itself into a tenacious hold. The shoe was once nailed upon a hoof so that it would last, fitted perfectly against the bottom edge of the hoof wall so that the nails wouldn't injure the sensitive mystery of the hoof interior. The hoof bottom itself describes its true, little-known function. If you examine the impression of a hoof left behind on soft earth, the sole's cleft and the smooth surface around it called the moon sickle look like half of a heart, and so it is: the hoof works as a blood pump, the horse's version of heartwood. It's what must last, this necessary and kindly use of the hoof's heart because as old horsemen recount: no hoof, no horse.

By auricle and ventricle we pump ourselves into what we make of a life, so that it forms from us, from our functions. But also, we make what might last; we leave behind footprints and impressions from the heart core of ourselves. Then, our function follows our passions, follows whatever form those might have taken.

I'm going to climb high up on my barn roof and near the peak hammer this rusty horseshoe by its one remaining nail. And I collect old wooden shoe lasts now. I get them

from the old folks here who remember when creek-side artisans provided footwear so the community could go well-shod into fields, quarries, woodlots and kitchens. Tourists buy the things for a song. I buy them for their stories, for how those cling to lives with just enough friction so they won't slip away. That's why the uncle left his boots behind, so that they would walk again in someone's imagination, even taking flight on four feet at a trot.

*Tiffany Smith*

***Jake & Sarah***

Jimmy Baker used to eat a fruit roll up every day for breakfast. We rode the same bus in elementary school, and each morning, out came the roll-up. He just couldn't wait! It was like that delicious roll of imitation fruit flavoring was burning a hole in his lunch bag. Sometimes he had the roll-ups with the shapes in them. I knew what was happening as soon as I heard the zipper of his lunch bag, and then the crinkling of the wrapper. He'd separate the roll-up from the clear plastic sheet, lay the sheet down on the seat next to him, and meticulously, he would separate the shapes from the border, placing each on top of the wrapper, one-by-one. First, he'd eat the border, quickly, before slowly devouring each shape from the pile individually.

The last time I hung out with Jimmy Baker was at his seventh grade birthday party. I have a picture of us hanging upside down from the branch of a big oak tree in his yard. When you turn it over, it looks like our hair is sticking straight up – that's how Jimmy kept it taped up in his middle school locker. Jimmy doesn't ride the school bus anymore. He doesn't eat fruit-roll ups anymore. I miss him, even though we have the same English class. When he does come to school, he smells like pot. Jimmy doesn't seem nearly as excited about pot, as he used to be about fruit roll-ups.

I don't know why everyone had to go and stop eating fruit roll-ups for breakfast. Kristin Kelly definitely stopped eating fruit roll-ups. I saw her at the fair last week of summer, and she was with a bunch of older kids. I saw her making out with a boy right in front of the Tilt-a-Whirl (and I heard they did a lot more than that). When she did come up for air, she looked right past me - like I wasn't even there. Like she never slipped on that steep hill to the woods behind the library and peed her pants and we didn't laugh so hard I slipped too.

It's my second week of high school, and I've had a fruit roll-up for breakfast every morning. I don't know the kid who sits in the seat across the aisle from me, but every morning he watches me like I'm doing something weird. I suppose that's how Jimmy felt in fourth grade...like I thought he was weird. He was new – the new kid who ate fruit roll-ups for breakfast. Every morning I watched him, delighted by his breakfast ritual. The first time he spoke to me, I was looking at him probably a lot like my friend across the bus here is looking at me now. Jimmy said, "take a picture it'll last longer." He was right; that picture of us hanging from the tree lasted longer than the Jimmy I knew then.

I don't say a word to staring boy, and eventually, over the course of the bus ride, he loses interest. Just because everybody else stopped eating fruit roll-ups for breakfast, doesn't mean I have to.

~ ~ ~

For the past two weeks, the girl who sits across the aisle from me on the school bus has eaten a fruit roll-up for breakfast every morning. I find her fascinating; oh, that I were a fruit roll-up on that hand, that I might touch those lips!

I see her in the hallways at school and I want to say hi, or even just nod in her direction, but I don't. I doubt she's noticed me before, and then I'd just be some awkward guy she doesn't know, speaking to her in front of everyone. So I continue on, with my black hoodie pulled over my earphones. Don't have to talk to anyone, and if anyone tries to talk to me, I can shrug my shoulders and point to my ears. Sorry, I can't hear you. The truth is, sometimes I don't even have any music on.

I started here as a new kid in ninth grade, which was last year. Two middle schools feed into the high school; most kids already knew each other, so reputations, and consequently social groups, were pretty well established. I've made a few friends, but they're just school friends. I'm cool to talk to. A funny guy. Man that Jake kid's a riot. Or, that Jake guy is actually really nice. Or from teachers, "Jake is so bright, if only he would apply himself."

I'd rather stay this way. Known, but not really known. Speculated about, but not judged. No one has to meet my family. No one has to see my house. No one can observe my quirks. There's something different about fruit roll-up girl though. Something disarming about her. The girl eats fruit roll-ups for breakfast—somehow I can't imagine her as particularly judgmental.

~ ~ ~

It is now the end of week two of my high school experience, and I am out of fruit roll-ups. My mom hasn't been to the store—we had hot dogs and beans for dinner last night.

Once you get used to something, once you get into a routine, it's surprisingly difficult to go without it. Or to change it. Or to have it changed for you, and you don't even get a say, because although you're old enough to fix your own breakfast, you're still too young to drive to the grocery store.

That boy is staring at me again, and this time, I really don't know why. No fruit roll-up today my friend! That's it—I've had enough of his judgment.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer," I say flatly. His blank expression turns to surprise, and he somewhat frantically snatches the headphones from his ears.

"I said, take a picture, it'll last longer," I repeat, speaking more slowly and emphasizing the words, even though he can obviously hear me now.

He looks taken aback for a moment, then a smirk crosses his face. Not a malicious smirk, but the kind that plays at the sides of your lips—the kind of smirk that comes out when you're trying to hide a smile.

"Where's your breakfast?" he asks. I can barely hear him over the rumble of the bus.

"Excuse me?" I respond, seeming confused—like I have no idea what he's talking about.

"Don't you have a fruit roll-up in the morning? Usually?" Now he's the one who sounds confused.

"Yeah, but we ran out," I answer, to the point.

"You gonna be okay? That's a lot of sugar for the morning. Won't you suffer from with-drawl or something?"

He's funny.

"I'm not too worried about it."

"Well, you should be. I don't think you realize the magnitude of the situation you're in right now."

"Well, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do about it. I can't change it. I don't have a fruit roll-up," I say, throwing my hands up in exasperation, and I don't remember seeing any fruit roll-up stands along the way. It's just a fruit roll-up. Besides, me and my fruit roll-up have had enough of you eye-balling us every morning anyway."

He holds his hands up in defense. "Hold on here! Wait just a minute. Just a fruit roll-up? Just a fruit roll-up? Besides the obvious sugar rush benefits—what about

the nutritional value? What about all that vitamin C you're missing out on? How will you get through the day?"

"You know what I found out though? It's not actually real fruit in them. Can you believe that?"

His eyes widen with shock. Hazel eyes. Almost green. "No!?" He seems to be thinking for a moment, then confides, "I feel so deceived..."

"So you can understand my reluctance to buy another box," I offer, "I think I'm just going to have to accept my fruit roll-uplessness, and move on just like everybody else."

He shakes his head in agreement, then sits back in his seat with a defeated flop of his back against the brown leather. After a brief moment, he leans towards me again, and begins in a conspiratorially low voice, "Listen... I haven't moved on. I've come to rely on the fact that there will be a girl eating a fruit roll-up on my morning bus ride. What about me and my needs? Here's what I think: I think we need to get you off this bus, and find us a grocery store, where we can resolve the issue." His eyes light up at the thought.

"Oh yeah?" I respond, laughing.

"Yeah, come on," he says nodding towards the door, "I say we address this pressing matter. If not for me, if not for yourself, then at least do it for General Mills."

"I could use the vitamin C..." I admit, "and they are a delicious and conveniently portable low-fat snack."

The bus pulls into the circle out front of the school, and the doors slide open.

"Well, guess we missed our chance," he announces.

"Guess so. See you around?" I ask.

"Yea – that is if you survive the day."

"What's your name by the way?"

"Jake, and you are...?"

"Sarah"

~ ~ ~

The following morning, I arrive to a lonely fruit roll-up waiting for me on my usual bus seat, with a post-it note reading: *For Sarah – in case we don't pass any fruit roll-up stands along the way. P.S. Don't be like everybody else.* I take my seat and glance over at my new friend. He's eating his own fruit roll-up and beaming – a full smile, with teeth and everything.

~ ~ ~

"Check out my ferocious moose," says the door of my locker. I shut it, revealing a hand clutching a piece of white computer paper, with a very ferocious moose indeed, staring back at me.

"Nice moose," I say, complementing my best friend Kelsey's artwork. Kelsey, a petite blonde with an entanglement of hair that threatens to seize her face, and who applies her black eyeliner with a heavy hand, always looks like she's just a little bit pissed off. Our math teacher last year described her as a "dark cloud."

"Dark cloud!? Really!? I'm a fucking ray of sunshine," she ranted to me later. She sure has a mouth on her. Kelsey leaves her drawings scattered around the school, mostly on white boards in dry erase marker, but also on paper tacked up on bulletin boards belonging to the teachers she likes (which are few). She draws animals mostly, realistic as well as mythical (she adores unicorns), and is a diehard PETA advocate.

"Mr. Larson took my phone away," she complains, lifting her clenched fist and shaking it at the door of Mr. Larson's classroom, her multicolored metal bangle bracelets jingling.

"I wondered why you didn't answer my last text..." I note, as we make our way down the crowded hallway toward the cafeteria for lunch.

"Why can't we have cell phones in school? It's so stupid. This is almost as annoying as that time I got written up for having a bagel in the bathroom. Remember the detention slip that came home to my mom? It said: *Reason: bagel in bathroom*. We aren't allowed to have food past the cafeteria.

"Well, it wasn't exactly sanitary," I point out.

"Well that's my choice! If I want to bring a bagel to the bathroom, I should be able to bring a bagel to the bathroom. I should be able to bring a bagel wherever I like. I should be able to walk into any restroom, with a bagel in one hand, and a cell phone in the other."

"Let's start a petition."

She continues her tirade without acknowledging my input, "and I wasn't actually going to the bathroom, I was holding my bagel and talking to you while you were going to the bathroom...So, how's fruit roll-up boy?" she asks, already over the phone debacle. She'll get it back at the end of the day, but it's only a matter of time before her hands start twitching on account of her texting dependency.

How was fruit roll-up boy? We talk the whole bus ride, but we don't speak to one another at school. If we pass in the hallway he just nods in my direction, and I don't know what to do because I don't think girls are supposed to do that guy nod thing, so I just stare, then look away and keep walking. He probably thinks I'm such a weirdo.

"He's good," I say.

Kelsey pauses for a moment, twisting the hot pink tips of her hair with her finger. I helped her dye it last weekend. "Well...?" she prods, waiting for me to continue.

I shrug my shoulders and sigh. "I don't know. I like him. But I doubt he feels the same about me."

~ ~ ~

I sit on the bus wondering where Sarah is, and hoping she didn't have some reason to not take the bus today, like a doctor's appointment or a haircut or something. The best part of my day, is her laugh.

I see her walking across the quad toward the bus and breathe a sigh of relief. Although this is when my heart starts pounding against my chest, and I feel like I have something on my face that won't come off. I find myself wiping my face a lot around her, just in case.

We started sharing the same bus seat, instead of trying to talk over the rumble of the bus. I sometimes measure in my mind how many inches I would have to lean in to kiss her. I counted two inches yesterday. You can't have a first kiss on a bus though. I feel like with Sarah, it needs to be on a ferris wheel, or under a streetlight at night. Something like that.

Here is what I know about Sarah so far: her favorite color is olive green; she has a small scar above her right eyebrow from when she was five and jumped off the couch, hitting her head on the corner of a table and had to get stitches; she is afraid of sharks; her eyes are never the same color; if her house were on fire and she could only save one

thing, she'd grab her Ipod because every song is a memory; once she was a carrot for Halloween; and she eats fruit roll-ups for breakfast.

Oh, and I am falling madly in love with her.

Karen Adrián

*Stigmata*

Bleeding a tainted poem nailed  
mercilessly to my writing  
palms bared and naked raw  
for all to see – blessed Mother  
of my Muse – mock the pouring  
of my soul over wooden hearts  
chaffed by the throw of a dice  
on the ground stretched before

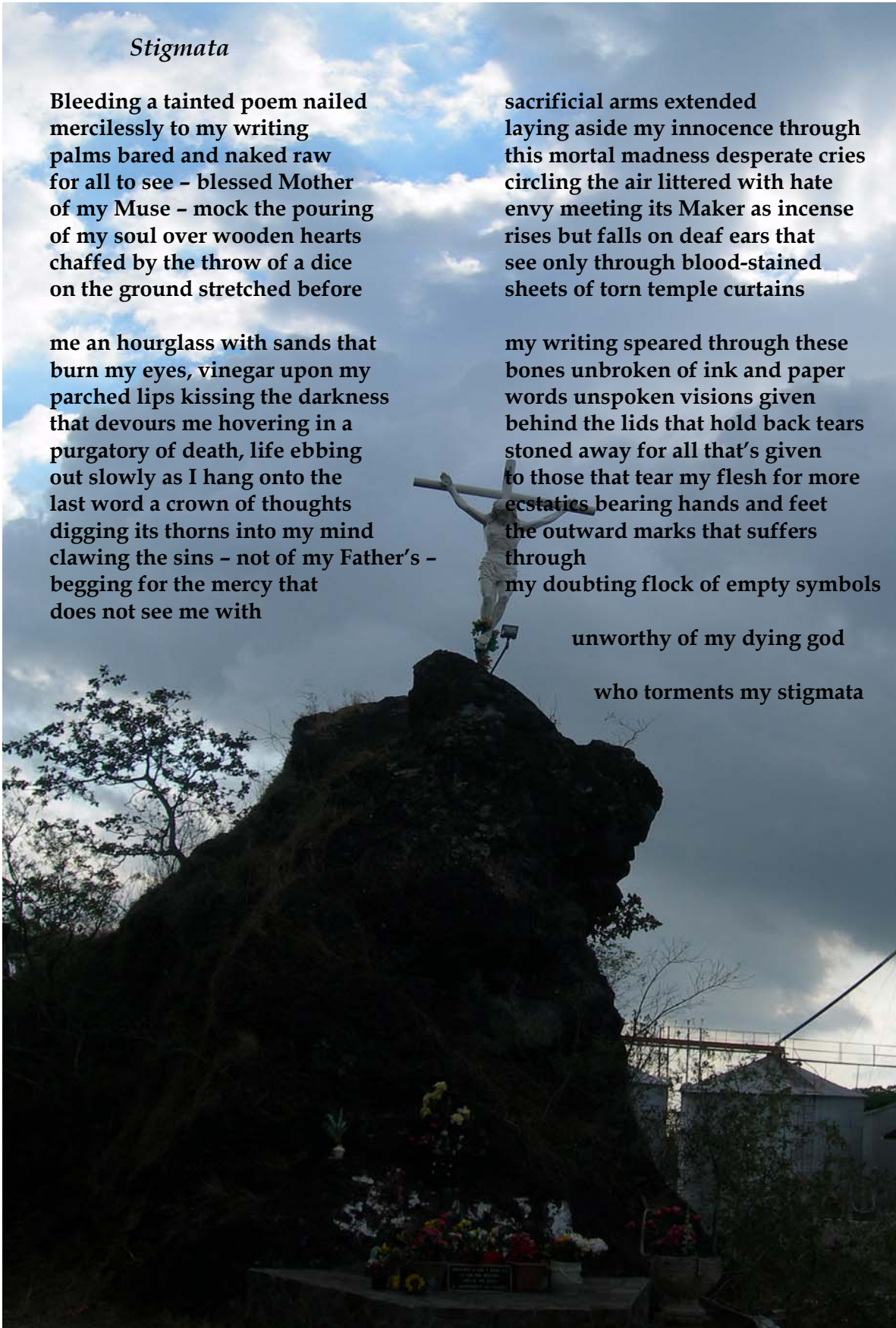
me an hourglass with sands that  
burn my eyes, vinegar upon my  
parched lips kissing the darkness  
that devours me hovering in a  
purgatory of death, life ebbing  
out slowly as I hang onto the  
last word a crown of thoughts  
digging its thorns into my mind  
clawing the sins – not of my Father's –  
begging for the mercy that  
does not see me with

sacrificial arms extended  
laying aside my innocence through  
this mortal madness desperate cries  
circling the air littered with hate  
envy meeting its Maker as incense  
rises but falls on deaf ears that  
see only through blood-stained  
sheets of torn temple curtains

my writing speared through these  
bones unbroken of ink and paper  
words unspoken visions given  
behind the lids that hold back tears  
stoned away for all that's given  
to those that tear my flesh for more  
ecstasies bearing hands and feet  
the outward marks that suffers  
through  
my doubting flock of empty symbols

unworthy of my dying god

who torments my stigmata





*Daniel Blanchard*

*The Cyclical Father-Son Storm*

His icy cold stare  
His fierce determined look  
He's fearless  
I admire that; he drives me crazy

He's 3-feet tall and 30 lbs  
His small bark resonates, "No, I won't!"  
My bigger bark echoes, "Yes, you will!"  
He's fearless  
I admire that; it drives me crazy

I engulf him in my shadow again sounding-off, "Yes, you will!"  
He stands his ground  
No one backs down, the power-struggle continues  
He's fearless  
I admire that; it drives me crazy

My wife, his mother, joins the battle  
I don't know which side she'll take this time  
My wife quips, "He's just like you."  
"He's fearless."  
I admire that; it drives me crazy

I look at him  
I want to fix this  
I feel trapped in this cyclical father-son storm  
He's trying to become the man  
I want to be the man  
But not the man my father was  
He's fearless  
I admire that; it drives me crazy

I don't know what to do  
How do I just love him without all the machismo  
He just wants to save the world and I'm Godzilla  
I won't win this one  
I walk away  
I look out the window and I don't know what I see  
He follows me and jumps on me from behind  
He says, "Daddy, you want to feel my muscle?"  
We playfully fall to the floor, giggling and wrestling  
He's fearless  
I admire that; he drives me crazy

### *Smile*

The two bank tellers smiled brightly at Maureen as she entered the building. Maureen didn't have to wait long in line at the bank. "Thank God," she thought, looking at the expectant faces of the tellers, remembering to smile back. She long ago had figured out a way to look authentic and actually happy when she did this. Smiling simply didn't come naturally to her, but once she got into the working world, she figured that was a liability. By practicing in a mirror a trick she saw receptionists at the front desk in her office use when answering the phone, Maureen realized that scrunching her face to create crinkling around her eyes made her look legitimately welcoming.

Maureen marveled at the sunny outreach at the bank, so old-fashioned in this impersonal world. Today was like going back in time for her—having to actually drive to and enter a bank as opposed to making a call or clicking on a site. She was annoyed at having to make the trip to her hometown to close out the dormant money market account, but she wasn't about to let her credit card balance be financed into the next month. It also bothered her that that detail had hit her by surprise. She seemed not to be focusing as much lately, and was instead finding herself in reflective reveries. Being in town now was triggering a lot of those moments, passing her old elementary school, the old mall with all new anchor stores and the road to the park with the swimming hole and the geese.

She was concentrating on filling out a form the older teller gave her. She admired the teller's business attire, and felt a little underdressed in her disheveled Saturday uniform of yoga pants, tiny tee and hoodie. Immersed in the environs of her youth, Maureen felt that changing the texture of her pants to Levi corduroys and her shirt to a brightly colored print gauze would make her look almost exactly as she had in middle and high school. Well, perhaps a little older. She glanced at the second teller, a younger woman, immaculately coiffed and accessorized, and felt a twinge of...jealousy? Nostalgia for that period of time when she was the teller's age? She guessed late twenties. Clubs, happy hours, dancing, dating. Her own teller quietly cleared her throat and, at once, Maureen shook off her meandering mental tangent and she was back to her standard stone-faced expression reserved for shopping, running errands and taking mass transit. She felt a small jolt, her eyelids fluttering momentarily when the glass doors of the nondescript, but functional building opened with a bang.

"Mommy, Mommy, we're here!" said one of the two prepubescent girls who came running in, breathless and wide-eyed. The girl who spoke, even as she fidgeted in the customer space before the young teller, moved with the grace of the lifelong slender and pretty, but without the attitude yet that she knew it. Her companion, a plain, slightly shorter girl who looked remarkably like the teller's daughter in dress and style, was also gasping for breath, and talking almost nonstop.

"Mom, some guy was following us!" said the girl, her face flushed.

"He was!" echoed her friend, as if she anticipated the teller's response, which consisted of rolling her eyes, looking across the room and muttering in a weary voice, "Yeah, right." Maureen found herself watching openly, and reliving a moment in time with her childhood/adolescent best friend, Lisa. In her memory, she was on the other end of a pay phone receiver with Lisa, frantically clutching at bags and clothes, and filling in the spaces of silence when Lisa took a jagged breath. They were saying almost

the same words as the girls in the bank, and the disembodied voice of Lisa's mother had the same disinterested tone, mixed with anger at being interrupted in the middle of the afternoon in bed with her married boyfriend.

The girls in the bank brought her back to the present moment.

"He was real scary!" the pretty girl said.

"He had bald hair but a long beard!" her friend said.

"We took a sharp corner and he followed us!"

"We ran all the way here!"

They both spoke at the same time, vainly trying to extract a drop of concern from the teller, who issued none. Maureen watched the teller in fascination. Her impression of her was colored slightly by the revelation that she was a mother. Rather than looking like a young woman, now she looked like a still-young woman, with the drawn look of an obviously single working parent. The teller's body was facing the girls, but her turned head and attention were focused on answering a question from her supervisor across the room. The mother turned and looked down at the girls and grilled them about where they were going and how much money they were going to spend. She ignored the statements regarding the "creepy" man.

Maureen believed them, and she couldn't quite believe that the mother seemed not to. Why would the girls make up something like that?

She returned to her long-ago memory, somewhere in the midst of a summer between middle school and sophomore year in high school, before they were driving age and Lisa had inherited her absent father's convertible. They had gotten Lisa's mom to grudgingly agree to take them to Sunnybrook, the muddy pond loved by geese and little children and hated by anyone older for the soft, sinking, sticking pond floor at waist level. It was the closest place to swim, and Gayle, Lisa's mother, was meeting Franz on her lunch break.

"Call me when you're ready to go, but you'd better not make me come right back out here as soon as I get home," Gayle said, and kissed the air in response to Lisa's proffered cheek. "OK, Maureen?" she said, with a crooked smile, somewhat more kindly, as Lisa and Maureen looked glumly at the clouds in the sky and the zigzag walk of people avoiding geese poop on the grass leading to the restrooms.

"You forgot to sign here," said Maureen's teller, interrupting the flashback, and pushing a form back towards Maureen. She seemed oblivious to the nearby drama of the girls trying to convince the mom that they were being followed. Maureen scribbled her signature on the form without comment and looked over to the teller/mother, who was a carbon copy of her young, lovely daughter, just taller, and harder. The mother was handing the girl a \$20 bill, and warning her with that vicious way of distinctly and slowly pronouncing every word: "I want change back, do.you.understand?"

The girls, momentarily delighted with the money and the prospect of a mid-afternoon movie with popcorn and candy, promised to not only bring back change, but also to come right home after the movie. The teller, who did not seem to appreciate her daughter's extra promise, said, "Yes, you will, and I am calling the theater to find out exactly what time that movie gets out, and you'd better be home." Maureen remembered skeptically the long-ago interactions of Lisa and her young mother, which consisted of rules being set, rules being broken and no consequences, particularly if there was a man in the picture. Maureen looked at the teller and saw another Gayle. She wasn't going to call any theater.

The girls paused in front of the teller's window for a moment longer, whispering to each other and leaning up against the counter. Maureen felt an aching longing for the days when she and Lisa did everything together, went everywhere, then talked about it on the phone after dinner. Best friends. Did people only have best friends when they were young? She used to only have best friends, one at a time – Lisa, before her Judy, and after her Elizabeth. But as an adult? Lots of friends, but no singularly special one.

"Mom," the pretty young girl began hesitantly, getting the teller's attention for a moment. "That guy was so scary. And the thing that was so freaky, it was SO freaky was that..."

Maureen looked over from collecting her papers to see why the girl had stopped talking. The girls both had stopped fidgeting and stood silently looking up through the glass at the teller, who was again not listening. She had a slight edge in her voice as she responded to her supervisor. Maybe she wasn't supposed to get visits from her daughters at work, Maureen thought. The mother glanced back down at the girls, her expression unchanged. The two girls looked at each other. Clutching the money inside a cash envelope, the daughter said, "Bye, Mom." She leaned forward to make a fish face accompanied by a loud smooching sound at the glass.

Maureen didn't look to see the mother's reaction, feeling already as though she had eavesdropped too much. This was none of her business. The girls skipped out, staying close together.

Maureen went back into her memory of that day at Sunnybrook, details becoming clearer in her mind. It played back as though she were watching a movie. Lisa and Maureen were disappointed with the lake almost immediately; the lack of sun made the water uncomfortably cold and grossly brown. They had found a geese-free patch of dry grass to spread out their blanket. They each automatically spread out their towels first and lay on the uncomfortable tanning bed, feeling damp, cold and sleepy with boredom, Lisa on her back with unnecessary sunglasses and Maureen on her stomach, head crooked on her elbow toward Lisa. Maureen didn't realize she had dozed off while Lisa was reading from a teen mag about some cute actor. All of a sudden, she awoke with an irritated start to Lisa kicking her ankle. Maureen lifted her head to complain loudly, "What the frick?"

Lisa kicked her again, and giggled into her hand. "What?!" Maureen said. Lisa jutted her chin in Maureen's direction, who slowly realized something was next to her. She turned, a piece of matted hair falling into her eyes, and saw a white bloated face, with yellowed teeth. She saw the man was wearing boxer shorts, not swim trunks, and he was laying on his side, head propped on his elbow, grinning widely and improbably. "Hey there," he said, in a calm voice that injected Maureen with a sharp stab of fear in the center of her torso. She jerked her head back to Lisa, who was still giggling, and back to the man, who had leaned in slightly to say, "So, what's your name?" Maureen opened her mouth slightly, to say what, she didn't know, but her lips were dry and stuck together, and she looked back to Lisa again, feeling paralyzed and without strength.

Calmly, Lisa sat up and started shoving her magazine and Walkman into her beach bag.

"C'mon Jan, we've gotta get going," Lisa said, and suddenly stood and began quickly rolling her towel into a ball.

"Huh?" Maureen said, and remained in place. Lisa kicked her again with real force this time, and said, "Let's go, JAN."

"Oh, right," Maureen said, and followed Lisa, trying to put the larger things in her bag, and carry the smaller ones, suntan lotion, Chapstick, a pack of gum. Lisa snatched Maureen's towel and linked her arm through Maureen's and said, "Come ON." One step, and Lisa pulled her. Their steps quickening, Lisa and Maureen clutched hands and broke into a run. Maureen left her flip flops behind. They went around the corner into the women's room to find it standing room only – there were a dozen women with a handful of children, boys and girls, all talking excitedly.

"Did he bother you?" one woman asked Lisa. As Lisa explained how her quick thinking saved them – which they found out later it actually had – Maureen felt an arm around her, and a woman holding a tiny child's hand said, "Are you OK, honey?" Maureen remembered nodding, wide-eyed, and watched as the park supervisor, a mild-mannered middle-school teacher everyone knew came to the open doorway and knocked politely.

A chorus of cries of "What's going on" and "What did you do?" were silenced by his upraised hands, held to get everyone's attention, just as he did in school.

"I called the police, I told the guy not to approach anyone else, and he left on his bike," he said, calmly. "They will get him, he's on a bike."

As they waited in line, Lisa remarked to Maureen that her mom was going to be so pissed that they were calling her so early. Maureen insisted she wouldn't, that their safety came first, but Lisa knew better. After waiting for 20 minutes, and a terse, one-minute conversation, Lisa and Maureen repacked their bags more neatly in the parking lot and went back to get Maureen's flip flops. As she slipped them on, Maureen's heart finally reached a normalized beat. It was the first time she realized she had actually been shaking in fear.

Maureen's teller cut the scene abruptly by calling out, "Next," and smiling pleasantly. After a moment's hesitation, the long-ago cautionary tale fading away, Maureen smiled back and walked out of the bank. She felt disjointed by the two girls' fear, the mother's nonreaction and the vivid images of her past.

She got into her sweltering car and squinted without her sunglasses at the clock face on the car stereo. It was 11:50 a.m., and she still had a lot to do. The whole bank trip had left her feeling exhausted.

She turned the ignition and drove out of the parking lot onto the main road, adjusting her rearview mirror to see the two girls walking down the sidewalk in the opposite direction. Maureen could tell by the way they bounced along, gesturing with their hands and nodding toward each other that they were reenacting their stalking and the mother's refusal to acknowledge it. She stopped at the light, still watching as their images grew smaller in the mirror, and remembered once again how she had a best friend when she was about their age. Years ago she and Lisa had walked down this very street together, anticipating adventure, but mostly relieving boredom.

The light changed, and she moved her mirror slightly as she began to accelerate slowly. She glimpsed again at the two girls, now stopped at the corner waiting for a walk light. They appeared to be laughing now. The teller's daughter swung herself around a lamppost. Her friend crouched down to tie her shoelace. Then, across the street from them, eyes darting from side to side while poised to race across traffic, Maureen saw the man.

Maureen took her foot off of the gas pedal, her eyes frozen to the rearview mirror. The man waited for a car to pass, and crossed the street, his direction targeting the two girls. He was smiling.

### ***U-Turn***

That night didn't change my life, but it could have. When I think back to it, I remember the cupholder most vividly. They don't make them that way anymore, at least not that I've seen. This one was cheap plastic, probably with an advertisement for a local pizza joint printed on the L-shaped segment that hooked into the car window. That part gave way to a cylindrical vessel that held insulated mugs of steaming coffee in the winter, and icy beverages in soaking wet cups in the warmer months. On this night, its contents were regrettably familiar.

"Come on, Mom! Let's go for a ride. It's too hot in here." Nighttime cruises were one of our favorite family pastimes. Sometimes we had a destination in mind; most of the time not. Long after most children my age were in bed, we would set out on a journey. We would traipse out to the car, I would take my deserved seat in the front (I was after all, the oldest), and my brother would hop in the backseat. More often than not, he fell asleep, and then it was just mom and me, alone to talk about whatever was on our minds.

When I was a little girl, this boiled down to questions – lots of questions. "What were you like when you were my age?" "Why did you marry our dad?" "Why did you get divorced?" "What makes you happy?" To her credit, she answered these questions openly and honestly. She never really saw me as a child, and therefore, never saw any reason to hold back. I realized things had gone too far the night she told me about losing her virginity in the backseat of Rich Johnson's Chevelle. As I got older, she would drive me around the neighborhoods of my crushes. Most of the time, this borderline stalking was embarrassing, especially if anyone happened to be outside, though it was usually too late for that to be a concern. We would admire the ambling homes, the impeccably landscaped lawns, and the tasteful holiday decorations, all of which seemed to signify not only wealth, but inconceivable happiness, and perhaps more importantly, security.

On that night, as with most nights, she gave in to my request. It was always hard for her to say no, even when she should have. When I got older, I would recognize this as her way of making up for what she couldn't give me. I was probably ten years-old or so, and this was old enough to be vaguely aware of the glassy-eyed stare and empty smile that would take over when she'd emptied the omnipresent box of wine into her huge 7-11 Big Gulp cup. The cupholder was special in this way – it could safely hold even this massive container.

So yes, I noticed that she was different when she had been drinking, and I was even perceptive enough to realize that our conversations didn't always make sense after awhile. I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that it was wrong to ask to go for rides on nights like this, but my childish impetuosity let me do so anyway. After all, it was that dangerous, she'd never go for it, right? But she did, happy, I think, that I wanted to be with her, and aware, somehow, that it wouldn't always be that way.

We were off. This time, we ventured into the town next door where a man my mother was interested in had purchased a home to fix up and resell. My mother, a school-bus driver for years, was a veritable map. She knew the quickest route to any place at all in our hometown. Unfortunately, her internal sense of direction had sharp boundaries, and she was literally clueless once she crossed over the border into any

surrounding town. Before the days of GPS, this was quite problematic for our nighttime drives.

I remember that her speech was entirely unclear. She kept trying to talk to me, but I had absolutely no idea of how to respond. I knew I should ask to go home, but selfishly, I didn't. Our apartment was a mess, and it was hot, and there were fleas there. The cool air in the car was refreshing, and I could shut off that constant nagging in my brain that told me to clean up, do some dishes, at least try to make the place inhabitable.

But I also knew that our car wasn't registered, or insured. (At my young age, I was perhaps more cognizant of these issues than she was, and only slightly less capable of rectifying the situation). And I knew that the cupholder still sagged from the weight of that 7-11 Big Gulp cup. Clearly, she had more to go. I began to weigh the options. Should I request that we head home? Or was she at a point of intoxication now that my maturity would anger her? I looked back at my brother, who must have been six or so. Like usual, he was sleeping. I was torn between being glad for him, and angry that he couldn't give me some guidance (A look? A gesture?).

Suddenly, I realized that something was wrong. We were on an unfamiliar street, and my mom was lost, but that was the least of our problems. Not being old enough to drive myself, it took me a minute to determine what was awry. Then it hit me. We were on a four lane, two-way street, but the lanes were separated by a large median. The median should have been on my left. Instead, it was on my right. And there was a set of lights coming straight at us in our lane.

"Mom! Watch out! We're on the wrong side!" The fact that her reaction speed was slowed was not lost on me.

And then, what had been just two white lights advancing menacingly toward us, became a show of red and blue lights. For a moment, I was relieved. Then, though, I remembered everything I had just been concerned about. The car registration. The insurance. The fact that we were driving on the wrong side of the road. And that damn cupholder, still holding the 7-11 Big Gulp cup, still full of wine.

The officer approached, and my mother turned on the smile. *Oh, God. Does he see right through it? He must see right through it. How couldn't he?* I saw him glance at the sticker in the lower left hand corner of the windshield, clearly out of date. *What can I do??* He asked my mom perfunctory questions; she provided vague answers. He shined his flashlight in the backseat at my brother, by the grace of God still sleeping, and then at me. Taking a cue from mom, I flashed him the prettiest smile I could muster.

He looked at us, all of us, long and hard, and didn't ask anymore questions. He told my mother to do a U-turn around the median right where we were, and drive directly home.

My mother, sobered by the experience, commented that that had been a close one. Unsure of how else to react, I laughed. We both laughed. All the way home, we joked about how we'd gotten away unscathed.

Though we made it home safely, it felt to me as if we had been involved in a head-on collision. I couldn't stop imagining my mom in handcuffs, my brother and me with nowhere to go, or worse, a devastating accident. My mother, however, carried on as if nothing had changed. I'm not even sure if she remembers the experience.

Like I said, that night didn't change my life. I wish I could say that I stopped asking mom to go for rides when she was glassy-eyed, but I didn't. I wish I could say that she stopped agreeing, but she didn't.

It wasn't until years later, as I was reading some heart-breaking story about the lives of foster kids that I thought again of that night. That officer's face will forever be ingrained in my memory, because for a few brief moments, he held the rest of my life in his hands. He could have, should have, arrested my mother. Now, as an adult, I realize how intoxicated she must have been, and I can only imagine what the consequences for her actions would have entailed. I wonder if that's why he sent us home. Perhaps he *did* see through my mother. Maybe he saw through the cheap plastic cupholder and expired registration and realized that she clearly loved her children. Maybe he knew that a revoked license and two crying kids wouldn't help the situation. Maybe he knew that even if we weren't with her, we weren't necessarily better off. Or maybe he simply was about to end his shift, and wasn't interested in completing any paperwork. I'll never know. I do know that while my life superficially remained the same after that night, I never felt quite the same about my mom. I no longer held the naive assumption that she would always protect me. As I said, my mom never really saw me as a child. From that night on, neither did I.



*Erin Haddad-Null*

*The Poet Muses*

The old poet sits in the bar, drinking,  
next to him is a young man, eyes on fire, searching —  
he waits to attend to inspiration.  
The poet mutters:  
“Beware of those muses  
and the motivating torments they bring.”  
The old man receives silence and thumps his chest —  
“They burrow into your heart,  
like a cruel lover,  
cast gauzy curtains of illusion.  
Stir you from the promise of sleep  
only to chase dwindling visions.  
Burn you from the inside  
with translucent fingers scratching visions, itching,  
tempting you with glimpses of epiphany  
that vanish, untranslatable and unwieldy.”  
The young man keeps dreaming, half-nodding.  
The poet murmurs, staring down into his glass,  
“They offer the world,  
but bequeath loneliness and longing” —  
tossing back the drink, a tormented smile dances over his face.  
“Be careful when you answer their sirens’ call.”

*Della Hennelly*

*When I Lived Down by the River*

The long tidal river  
that flows almost from Canada, all the way to the Long Island Sound.

When I lived by that river  
nature embraced me and I merged with it peacefully  
as I reveled in its beauty and wonder.

The sky enveloped my world  
the waters lapped its shores  
morning came early  
as birds were in full song.  
All this and more  
when I lived down by the river

When I lived down by the river,  
spring brought nesting,  
fledgling chicks soon followed instinct  
and took to wing.

Once at 4 a.m., I suddenly awoke to incessant chirping outside my window.  
Looking out, I saw a group of young birds falling from their nest, onto the ground  
below.  
Trial and error, trial and error. Soon they were flying short and low. By 6a.m., they  
launched themselves up into the skies and never turned back.

When I lived down by the river,  
spring also brought lights glimmering in the waters  
late at night and well into the early morning,  
the shad fishers were out in their small boats.

When I lived by the river,  
each spring brought its own flood  
as I lay in my bed. I felt rocked to sleep by the sloshing rhythm of the water  
in the basement underneath  
April to June, I slept on my unglamorous yacht.

When I lived down by my river,  
summer brought out the sailboats, the row boats and the water skiers.  
I had a front row seat to a busy, bustling waterway.

Once a year, on an August Sunday, the most fanciful rafts, flotillas, and a plethora of  
creative contraptions vied for my attention all afternoon. The carnival atmosphere, the  
brilliant multi-colored flags, the parade of fantastical characters delighted me. High  
spirits were all around. All this and more when I lived by that long tidal river.

When I lived down by the river,  
fall painted the landscape with colors that made the river teal blue  
as the leaves floated along the water's edge  
I fancied them bidding me adieu for another year.  
The light and shadows changed.  
Birds in flight formation took off for warmer climes.  
I remembered Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole"  
as each new autumn "came upon me."

Snow fell softly when I lived by that river.  
It covered the landscape in ermine and diamonds;  
the stillness wrapped my world in mystery.

When ice formed on that long tidal river, you knew it was cold.  
The crashing sounds of the ice chunks breaking against each other  
as the river was released from its frozen grip,  
sounded like passing freight trains or thunder bolts.

When I lived by the river in winter,  
the local owl kept watch on rooftops.  
Its silhouette was stark and clear against the starry sky.  
Lights from the houses across the river reflected in the cold dark waters  
Peace reigned in my house by that river.

I still lived down by the river that fateful June, when the hundred year flood arrived.  
The dams broke from the rush of water and melting snows up north. I left my house by  
the river, having packed my books and a week's worth of clothes, before a cascade of  
water battered against my front door.

A week later, the fisherman's boat took me down the streets, now waterways, to see my  
house. I did not know I had arrived, so surreal was the landscape. Above the now calm  
waters, the top third of my roof greeted me with indifference.

As the boat took me back to dry land, I remembered the birds who took flight that early  
spring morning, and never looked back.

*An Infinite Number of Possible Futures*

When my paternal great-grandma emigrated from Poland to Passaic, New Jersey, in 1910 she was only 14 years old. I like to think that she did not yet realize the incredible power of her will, the way her determination to shape her own future would be a constant pressure on future generations, like the weight of the earth on a lump of coal. But I doubt that she was ever unaware of her strength: According to family legend, she left the countryside in the middle of the night in order to escape an arranged marriage. The boy had red hair and freckles, my grandma (her daughter-in-law) would say, as if that explained everything. The only person she said goodbye to was her cow.

Her name was Jadwiga (yad-veega), a name I always found better suited to a witch with snarled fingers than a skinny teen. I picture her with long blond hair and the almond eyes of my father and sister, who for a time looked so Asiatic that as an infant people thought she was Chinese. Blondes dominate our family, though it's not the platinum of Scandinavia but the deeper caramel found in parts of northern Italy and central Europe. And it's a total effect—in the summer my father's side turns all one color, a sort of sun-glossed gold that he says makes us look like Academy awards. In high school, a substitute accused me of dying my hair because redheads aren't supposed to tan so easily. This, then, is how also how I picture my great-grandma, though the only pictures I have ever seen depict her as elderly and massive beneath flowered housecoats and thick glasses. On her arrival, though, I think she must have gleamed.

What a relief it would have been to watch that blonde head turn finally and find her name out of the hundreds of placards held by the shouting masses. I like to think that my great-grandfather's heart leapt as he watched her recognize the familiar characters that he waved so frantically. I imagine the meeting this way because my family does not engage with history beyond a casual retelling of family myth. I may be conflating episodes or even people; we have always been far more interested in what might be, in possible futures not histories. If I think too hard about it, it doesn't add up: How could it have been John Wojcik, my great-grandfather, who held that card, instead of some random cousin? How would he have known her before her arrival? And if a cousin was there to collect her, then how strongly should I adhere to the myth of her midnight escape? The blank spaces make for a smoother, more cinematic narrative, but they leave gaps that frustrate me.

\*\*\*

If I do the math, use my father's birthday to calculate *his* father's age, I know that Jadwiga must have married John before or during World War I. I also know that her first child, a girl named Aniela, was five or maybe six years older than my grandfather Casimir, always called Casey. A small child and an infant and a restless husband in a strange land. Even that is speculation, though my image of Jadwiga is vivid enough that I almost feel the desperation she must have felt the day John spoke her name for the last time, walked out the door, and never returned.

When he left it was gray outside—this I believe because every time I visit the family tenement in Passaic, the sky is smudgy with soot, as if aping the brick and cement walls of the building in which my great-grandma, and then my grandfather, raised their families. I can't imagine it any other way and so it must have been gray when John disappeared, and every day after until Aniela got sick, at which point the

skies opened. Tuberculosis was generally incurable in those days. The letters she sent to my grandfather Casey, maybe ten years old at the time, sport delicate spots of blood at the margins. They end abruptly. The letters now sit in a box in my father's house, along with a large, green-tinted photograph of Aniela, her hair marcelled into a pageboy, her body turned coyly away in front of a vaguely British backdrop of leaves and roses. I used to stare at that picture for hours – I couldn't believe that I was related to someone who could have stepped from the pages of a Jane Austen novel. And of course I wasn't, not really. I was related to someone who chose to cover the dingy photographer's studio with a backdrop straight out of a high-tone romance. Once I told my grandma that I would name my daughter Aniela and she laughed at me. She said, *Aniela is an old-fashioned name. It's Angela in America. Angela.*

The letters and photograph are stored alongside other papers from my great-grandma's life. When my father moved ten years ago, I leafed through them: Jadwiga's immigration papers – not an Ellis Island arrival as I'd always thought, but a smaller port in New Jersey. The announcement of her remarriage to a benevolent Russian accordion-maker whose name I can't remember. The list of Slavic, Polish, and Russian names swirl through my head when I think about my family – Wojcik, Cava, Prelich, Gacek – but I don't really know where they graft onto our family tree. The world of Polish immigrants in Passaic was tightly knit and in constant flux, and I was always told that these names were like "Smith" or "Jones" in America – so common as to be nearly meaningless. What did matter were the storytellers: women connected by the Catholic church, by the constant noise of children running up-and-down between apartments, by the conviction that they would raise children of distinction. Wojcik women didn't trouble themselves with the tangle of history they left behind.

The most intriguing document among Jadwiga's possessions was not Aniela's death certificate, though holding it made me almost miss the girl who died 40 years before I was born. No, the paper that seemed to me crucial is one that records the date of her official divorce from John Wojcik – five years after the newspaper clipping of her remarriage. It seems so ordinary: He is accused of "abandonment" and from the notations it seems clear that he was not present at the proceedings. Yet the fact of its date relative to her remarriage announcement, among the only hard facts I have about my family, is inexplicable. Did she legally remarry, or was the little clipping a sneaky way to publicly legitimate a relationship not yet sanctioned by law or church? Was her immigrant, illiterate status enough to shield her from the eyes of the government – could she possibly have gotten away with not bothering to divorce before filing a new marriage license? And if that's the case, why divorce at all? The women of my family practice a fervent Catholicism, but they are not above bending the rules when need arises. My great-grandma's divorce would be the first of many in my family – we stand on ceremony but have a hard time with commitment – so maybe that's why all the complicated posturing and public statement. It's the kind of convoluted paper trail that belongs in a gothic novel, not an immigrant town in Nowhere, New Jersey.

\*\*\*

The men in my family are mostly tall and silent in the face of such women, watching the world from behind sweet smiles and almond eyes. In my imagination Jadwiga's son Casey, my grandfather, is like them but laughing. I never actually heard him.

Casey died of a heart attack at my parents' wedding, five years before I was born. But I knew of him; every woman in my family seems to have been in love with

him, except maybe his wife. I grew up hearing how wonderful he was, how he would have loved his golden-haired granddaughters. We had one photograph in the study, a Kodachrome of Casey laughing. He looked just like my father, but heavier in the face, and he is bent over a birthday cake with a plastic train, each car holding one candle. In the years after his death, Casey took on a near-mythical stature. How he never remarried after divorcing my grandma, out of respect for Jadwiga's Catholicism. How his proudest moment was joining the postal worker's picket line. How my father's shaggy hippie friends always found a sympathetic ear when their own parents forced them to cut their hair or join the army. My mother, in particular, says that my father adored him. But my father doesn't talk about him at all. I like the man in the picture because he looks so happy and because he is so clearly my grandfather – his forehead even crinkles into the same five parallel lines that my father and my uncle, and now I, all sport.

My grandma, Helen, married him in 1940, and my uncle, also a Casey, was born in 1941. Paul, my father, came along seven years and one world war after that. Grandpa Casey was a mailman, and Helen was studying to be a fashion designer, sewing clothes for a wholesaler to make ends meet. She never made much of that dream, dropping out of school when she found her husband sleeping with another Helen, the one next door. After he left, she took on two more jobs, waiting tables. My grandma only talks about her marriage to my grandfather in terms of her children or the work. In one story, she explains why she calls her older son Michael, his middle name, rather than Casey, like his father. My grandma always preferred Michael, and she and my grandfather apparently fought like wet cats over it. Her one mistake, she said, was letting her guard down enough to go into labor: She was promptly drugged into a stupor and when she woke up, she had a blond baby boy and a signed birth certificate that read "Casey Michael." She went along with it for over a decade, but ever since the day she kicked her husband out the door, my grandma has called my uncle Michael. And of course he responds.

My father was a serious boy and after the divorce, he and his mother lived in the same tenement as her sisters. My uncle was out of the house nearly all of the time, a popular and involved teenager, and the way I heard it, my father spent most days either reading alone or being coddled – as the baby – by the cousins who lived above and below him. He would come home from school and prepare his own dinner, usually mashed potatoes from a box, while Helen rushed to finish her third job. During this time my grandma developed an affinity for any food that came pre-packaged or dehydrated, ready-to-eat with a minimum of fuss. Even today, she buys us strange and intricate machines designed to suck the moisture out of food or blast it back in, vacuum-seal it or deep-freeze it. If it revolutionizes food, she owns it – and often, so do we.

\*\*\*

When I ask her what it was like to be a single mother in the 50s, my grandma always tells me the same story. In it, she is a cocktail waitress, third shift, at a bar owned by *someone in the Family*. She does not mean *our* family; for decades, Passaic split neatly into Polish and Italian neighborhoods, and Helen was convinced that the Italians for whom she worked were mafia. Maybe she was right – maybe it doesn't matter. One night, she strikes up a conversation with a stranger as the bar closes. She shows him a picture of her solemn little boy, and when he finally leaves, locks the door and begins to walk home. It's not too long before she sees a big black car behind her, and her steps quicken. Soon she's running to her front stoop, but a man materializes in front of her, the same man from the bar, now pushing at her and the door to get in. Just as she begins

to panic, she hears the click of a gun safety catch, and sees a second, shadowed man shove something dark and gleaming under the first man's ear.

*I think you wanna leave the lady alone*, the second man says, and the drunk takes off down the street in a cold panic. In my grandma's telling, this is proof of how wonderful life in Passaic was: There was always a gangster looking out for you. But I wonder if she doesn't also like how cinematic it is: the abandoned wife forced to wait tables late into the night, the dangerous streets she walks alone, the little boy lying awake for her arrival. I never ask why the gangsters didn't just give her a ride home every night. I know, as my grandma did, that the story works better this way.

I like these stories, I like the cinematic way my family comes across not as weird or sad, but colorful, eccentric, strong I like the narrative certainty of the plot. Even as I write this, though, I hear my father's voice in my head, a phone call from last week. I ask him what it was like to grow up that way. "I read a lot," he says. "And oof, those potatoes." He laughs and then he says, "But you know grandpa was usually there so it wasn't so bad." I don't know this—it's the first I've heard of it. What I know is that Casey left, walked out to be with someone else, left his wife with two kids and a scrappy will to survive. "Oh yeah," my father says. "I mean, he couldn't go far, could he? He just moved back in with his mom, a couple houses down. And anyway," and here his voice drops conspiratorially, "everyone loved him. They weren't going to let him just leave." My grandma's sisters, in particular, plied him with coffee and sweet rolls after work, sneaking him out the back door when Helen came home early.

I'm not sure how to fit this story into my grandma's narrative, so I don't try. It likely wouldn't take, anyway—my grandmother clings ferociously to her version of events, even to heartbreaking effect. When I graduated from high school, I went through the savings bonds that had been carefully stored away and found a woman's name I did not recognize. *Oh*, my mother said, *that was Casey's girlfriend*. It was the first I'd heard of her; I had assumed my grandfather was frozen at the moment of divorce, forever mourning the loss of his family, while my grandma remarried, moved on. My grandma never mentioned Casey's new life with someone else.

I wanted to know everything about this mysterious woman, but as the ex-wife of his youngest son, my mother's knowledge was limited. They were together nearly 20 years. She came to my parents' wedding, but sat in the back. Even in my mother's story, this woman is hard to find. At the reception, Casey suffered the massive coronary that killed him, but the girlfriend isn't there: It was Helen's new husband Vic, who cradled Casey's head during the commotion, saying over and over, "Just hold on there, Casey, just hold on." No one in the family acknowledged this woman at Casey's funeral—everyone was too busy comforting my grandma, wailing like the tragic widow in the center of the front pew as Vic looked on—and why not? She *was* the only widow—Casey never married his girlfriend, even after two decades, out of respect for his mother, the twice-married Jadwiga. After the funeral, my mother says, Jadwiga sat shaking her head, stunned by the premature loss of her son. "Why he no marry that girl?" was all she asked.

\*\*\*

My step-grandfather Vic was hit by a car when I was 12. (Like Casey, he was a mailman, and did his route on foot.) When he died, my grandma's grief was different, out of control. She came to our house in Virginia for Christmas that year. We were late to pick her up and she wasn't at the gate when we arrived. When we finally found her she was sitting at the security office, slumped and shaking, tears streaming down her

cheeks as the security officer looked on helplessly. She'd known we were dead too, she told my baffled father. Lying in a street somewhere, just like Vic. And then she looked away and said nothing as my father tried to shake the guard's hand. I wonder if Casey's girlfriend cried in a similar way, at her seat at a table toward the back of the reception hall. I wonder if, in her grief, she even noticed that she'd been written out of the story.

\*\*\*

Growing up, my sister and I were never far from divorce; our photo albums are full of mysterious men whose names are unfamiliar but whose faces are reflected in the features of our cousins, several aunts and uncles, a great-niece. Sometimes I didn't even know their names; they were always "Mary's husband," or "Cybil's dad." As Catholics, the Wojciks would make Henry VIII proud.

Our own parents fell into the Wojcik tradition when I was six. My mother's Methodist family, on the other hand, avoided divorce by either remaining in unhappy unions or eschewing the institution entirely. The one exception was my mother's brother, whose divorce was allegedly precipitated by his wife's schizophrenic certainty that she had to cut off both of his hands. The claim that she miraculously regained her mental competence upon signing the papers has been oft repeated but never proven. In any case, these were obviously extenuating circumstances.

Despite the stories, it was a shock when my parents sat us down and told us that they had something to tell us. I remember blurting out, "Are we getting a puppy?" to which they shook their heads. "Then are you getting divorced?" My mother blanched and my sister burst into tears and my dad said yes. After that, it's all cliché: We love you and we love each other but we just can't live together anymore. Looking back, I see how that made sense—my mother, Judy, was young, dramatic, and prone to crying jags that must have perplexed my father, whose idea of a tantrum was to lock the door of his study. But I don't know really why I said what I said. After all, it jarred with the fairy tale we'd been told all our lives: how they had met when Judy was 15, and Paul a young film student of 20; how she knew, immediately, that he was it. She finished college a year early to marry him; in their wedding photos, they look like children. My mother was slim and tall, and her red hair rippled like caramel down her back. My father looks sweetly ridiculous with a George Harrison haircut and horn-rimmed glasses. For years I imagined that they walked down the aisle barefoot, though I'm sure that can't be true.

Even in this family legend, though, there are storm clouds that begin to gather on the wedding day. I imagine that the five years leading up to it as filled with sunshine and youth, a long-haired teasing redhead and a shirtless boy finding respite from oppressive New England Methodists and crazy New Jersey Catholics. In my favorite story, my mother, a senior in high school, was trapped babysitting her increasingly senile and violent grandma Crabtree. My father came over to keep her company, and my great-grandma was so appalled that she began to rail at the two of them, accusing them of the lowest depths of sin from the chair where she rested her gouty feet. In response, Paul smiled devilishly at Judy, and stripped down to his underwear. My mother—perhaps comprehending some secret psychic language—followed suit. They spent the afternoon torturing my great-grandma with their near-nudity, acting as if nothing were out of the ordinary, and were fully dressed by the time my grandparents arrived home. After listening to my great-grandma screech about their antics, and hearing my father's calm voice explaining *Of course we would NEVER do such a thing, I can't imagine where she got this idea*, my grandma decided that her mother was simply too far gone, too crazy, to leave alone with a teenager. My mother was thereby released



from her onerous day care duties forever. As I type this, I can't remember if this actually happened, or if it was simply an idea my father proposed; I am not entirely sure it matters.

My mother always said — even years after the divorce — that my father rescued her, and this is where she leaves behind the Wojcik women completely. She had no interest in rewriting that past, but repeated it for me so that I could understand. She told me that even if the story ended the same every time, she'd still marry him again — a surprising admission of vulnerability to a daughter raised on warrior women and survivor stories. But there is a photograph of her, taken at the time, which indicates to me that she's telling the truth. In it, she's 17, looking up at my father in worshipful adoration as he grins at the camera.

And then the wedding day. The pictures are so happy: Judy in her homemade wedding dress, perhaps barefoot; my uncle Casey — still married to his first wife — and their daughter; my aunt in the bridesmaid dress my mother sewed herself. And the gathering storm creeping around the little church with a feline menace. My mother used to joke that she should have known the marriage was doomed when the two candles they carried failed to light the one taper meant to symbolize their union, but the real story goes a little differently. At the reception, as Paul toasted his lovely bride, my grandfather Casey — son of Jadwiga, ex-husband of Helen — had a heart attack and died.

On what should have been the brightest day of his life, my father's world was swallowed in a darkness that dimmed everything forever. I know there must be millions of little, and not-so-little, reasons for my parents' split that I have never heard: Maybe my mother should have been on anti-depressants (had they been invented); maybe when my father left film school to begin a job that he still hates, the exhaustion and anger took over; maybe it's true that 20 is far too young to marry anybody. Maybe the brutal difficulty of negotiating a relationship with children was too much, especially since their models were unreliable at best. But I also believe that my mother is right when she says that something in my father died along with Casey, that the world collapsed and his optimistic faith in life vanished. I see it in my father's cautious celebration of his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday, the age my grandfather was when he died; I see it in my stepmother's smartly cut black hair, so different from my mother's unruly copper curls. I think my father must have realized that the only way to regain some piece of his enchanted space was to bring this story to an end, and start over completely.

### *How I Met Your Father*

Sunday morning I wake up bleary-eyed; heave myself out of bed and stumble into the living room. He's sleeping on the floor, mouth wide open, a pool of drool on his pillow. My pillow. My floor. My apartment. He still lives at home with his Momma.

The night before slowly creeps back into my consciousness. The shots, the hysteria, blinking lights and loud music, Jim in the dark corner of the "Hong Kong" sharing a cigarette with a leggy brunette. And then post the screaming match in the middle of Faneuil Hall, the very expensive cab ride, the fumbled attempts at sex, *his*, the whispered apologies, *mine*. Why am I sorry again?

I'm not ready for him to be awake. I try to be quiet, grab a pen and pad of paper to scribble him a note, my keys, and a pair of shoes, and attempt to sneak out. I need coffee and distance.

Maybe he will grow impatient waiting for me and leave. More likely, he won't, and he'll scarf my last few beers from the fridge and turn on a game. I'm not successful in escaping, but close. I'm slowly turning the handle on the door when I hear him stir.  
*Shit.*

"Hey you, where ya goin'?"

I think, *To find the bitch from last night. Maybe you could bunk at her house.*

I say, "Out for coffee. Go back to sleep."

"Wait for me, babe, I'll come with."

I think, *Please don't. Just go home. Lose my number. Leave me alone.*

I say, "No honey, why don't you go back to sleep? You must be tired from last night. Big night for you."

That's me, passive-aggressive.

"Oh, here we go."

That's him, sarcastic, unwilling to take responsibility for his actions.

I think, *No, but I wish you would. Go that is. I don't even like you that much. I don't feel like fighting over you. And I want my apartment back.*

I say, "No, sweetie, I don't want to fight. I'm sorry I made such a big deal of it all last night. Too much tequila." A small smile. "How about you get a little bit more rest, and I'll bring you back a coffee. Cream and Splenda, right?"

He pauses, doubtful, my attitude this morning in sharp contrast to my attitude last night. Blame it on the a-a-al-al-alcohol. But, I know he must be wondering if he's off. He's really not going to get any more shit for last night?

"That would be great, babe. Hey, do you mind if I invite a few people over today for the game?"

I think, *Great.*

I say, "Great!"

This relationship is turning out in much the same way as most of mine do. I've said "Yes" when I was supposed to, professed my "love" when I'm not sure I even *like*, and generally swallowed back any words that aren't in accordance with what *he* believes. Whoever that *he* may be. All in the name of companionship. All in the name of not being lonely. And I'm not lonely. Not anymore. Not since Jim has taken permanent residence in my living room.

At *my* place no one complains when he forgets to use a coaster. No one

complains if he drinks 12 beers and passes out. When the game goes into extra innings and his friends fist pump and bump chests until two in the morning, there are no disapproving looks. No one to remind him, "Honey, your father and I have to work in the morning."

So, no, I'm not feeling at all lonely anymore. In fact, my one bedroom apartment is starting to feel pretty crowded.

In the sanctity of my car, I light a cigarette and check my voicemail. Three messages. One from a girl at my second job, reminding me that I agreed to cover a shift for her that week, one from Mary Sue with the American Red Cross reminding me that I signed up to give blood that afternoon, hopefully my blood alcohol level has returned to normal by then, and one from my younger sister, Marisa.

"T, are you freakin' kidding me? You're throwing a goddamn shower for Ma? Do people really do that for a third marriage?"

I pull into the only space left in the lot and check myself in the mirror. I look like crap. What I really need is the "hair of the dog," but I promised Jim, so I fix my ponytail the best I can, wipe a smudge of mascara from under my eye, and head in. The place is packed. I'm avoiding eye contact as the line snakes forward, when I see a pair of familiar feet.

Is it really possible that anyone else is still wearing Vans? I slowly lift my eyes up the length of the familiar body. Same excessively hairy legs, same tattered cargo shorts and faded UMASS t-shirt I'd folded a thousand times. When I finally arrive at his face, the almost black irises in contrast with the stark whiteness of his sclera, the shadow of his salt and peppery beard, there is the same look of amusement I remember. Somehow, when he laughs at me, it's okay.

This is not how I imagined I'd look when I saw him again.

"How are you?" he asks.

I think, *How am I? Well, I'd be a whole hell of a lot better if I had brushed my teeth and put on a bra. Maybe, I could work the look.*

I know he is not making small talk. He sincerely wants to know how I am, if I've healed, if that's the right word, since the last time we talked. If I can look at myself in the mirror without casting my eyes down in shame before really seeing myself. I know he could give a shit how I look.

I say, "I'm okay. Better. You?"

"Okay."

As cliché as it sounds, it had affected him almost as much as it had me. We stare at each other for a few minutes. The crowd is impatient with us.

I think, *It's been almost a year, people, give us a chance.*

I say, "Oh, I'm sorry, sorry, oops." And try, in vain, to get out of the way.

He doesn't move.

The barista says, "Grande Caramel Machhiato. Venti, Cream and Splenda."

I stare at the two coffees sitting on the counter.

"Miss, your coffee?" she asks.

"Do you think that someone else might want this one?" I ask pushing Jim's coffee forward.

She nods, confused.

He's still looking at me.

He says, "Do you want to go somewhere?"

I think, *Yes, yes I do.* I say, "Yes, yes I do."

*Kisha Tracy*

*Nightmare*

She couldn't see.

In one small, detached part of her mind, Sally thought that was strange. After all, she had eyes. She should be able to see. But no matter how she blinked – at least, she meant to blink – the darkness was still...dark.

But it wasn't the blackness of nighttime or an unlit room. It was hazy, gray – like she was immersed in murky water. It felt like water. Like she was swimming. Stroke after stroke. Arms fighting against a current. Only she couldn't be swimming because she wasn't moving her arms.

Was she? She wasn't sure.

Maybe she was drowning? That could be it. She'd been thrown into the lake, and she only had a few seconds before her lungs filled and she'd be gone.

*Dead.*

*Swimming with the fishes.*

As the inane thought flashed through her muddled brain, Sally found it funny, but, as she involuntarily convulsed in hysterical laughter, the spasms morphed into a coughing fit. Her stomach tensing, she instinctively tried to suck in air, but the little bit she managed to get into her mouth only stuck in her throat. Rolling back and forth, she curled up against the pain slicing down her spine.

Although the ache continued even after the coughing stopped, it didn't feel real. Sally was detached from it, like it was happening to someone else. Her eyes closed, she sensed her legs shaking. Or did she? Were they her legs? Did she care?

Flashes of images raced through her head. Library steps. Streetlamp. Her wrists jerked behind her. A hand on her mouth. The smell of grease and dirt. Books falling to the concrete.

A hypodermic needle.

Her head heavy, Sally unconsciously let it slide to the side. Lashes fluttering open, she was almost blinded by a dull light. It seemed to assault her, but, somehow, she couldn't look away or shut it out. Mesmerized by the glow, she stared at it until it seemed to brighten and burn a hole into her.

*And move?*

Laureen Lemire Anthony

***What Act That Roars So Loud***

*So full of artless jealousy is guilt,  
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.  
(Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5)*

Brandenburg, 1551

I once thought I knew what it meant to be cold. I had experienced winters in Brandenburg where the wind had screamed against the castle, rattling the slate from the rooftops and pitching drifts of snow against the walls higher than I could climb. Icicles like wolves' teeth hung from the eaves.

I could not imagine it getting worse. But I was just a girl then, unaccustomed to the storms carried by the passage of time. Each change brought loss and the painful hunger of memory. Now it seems that each winter runs colder, each year closer to the last.

It's hardly a wonder that I did not understand loss then. My childhood was easy and spoiled, as is common for a lady of the upper standing of society. My father was the Archduke, and as such he commanded armies at his will. My sister, my mother and I saw little of him, but I could recall details: his bright red velvet jacket, and how I loved to nestle my small face against its softness; my reflection in the polished silver of his sword. My mother was a lovely woman, as most ladies of aristocracy are. She was from Salzburg originally. She told my sister Elisabeth and me stories of her homeland, in the mountains. Our parents pampered us, the two daughters who remained. There had been a brother, Georg, but he had died in infancy. Whenever my mother stroked my hair or held my little chin in her hand, I knew that she loved me. But I also knew in my heart that I could not replace the lost heir who had simply stopped breathing one cold December night, five years before I was born.

The stars chose January to bring forth their fate for me, during the deepest part of winter when the sun barely rose high enough to cast its feeble rays across the city. The frost crept everywhere, even in my chamber, where the embroidered tapestry hung against the old stone wall. There was always a coldness running along its edges, fluttering the heavy drapery in its breeze. Sometimes I awakened to clouds of my own breath.

My chambermaids did their best to keep me warm, bringing thick blankets and placing soothing bed trays of warm embers from the fireplace beneath the mattress. A canopy of red wool hung around the bed, keeping my warmth in. Still, the cold slithered beneath it and made my nights restless.

I didn't like the cold. It got into my fingers, and I stumbled like an untrained child when I held my needle. My sister, Elisabeth, didn't mind it at all. She was far sturdier than I am. Sometimes I wondered why we were so different — she, the elder sister, spent her days laughing and playing with the other ladies, riding her horse whenever she could. Mother used to scold her for being too much like a rough boy rather than a lady of fine breeding. I was the bookish one.

I had turned sixteen years old a few days previously, and Elisabeth had turned eighteen just three months before that. To celebrate my recent birthday, Elisabeth and her friends had invited me to the winter villa on the outskirts of town for a weekend of

parties. Father let us take the best sleigh and two of our liveliest white horses. It had snowed again the night before we returned home, and fresh white blankets covered the red tiles of the buildings. While Elisabeth complained that the horses weren't fast enough for her liking, I huddled beneath a bearskin, trying to keep my hands from freezing.

Elisabeth swatted at me playfully. "Little sister, if you want to enjoy yourself, now is the time. Soon you'll be married away, and you will find very limited opportunities for fun then." I pouted and burrowed deeper in the warm blankets.

As we approached the manor, we heard a sudden commotion to the right of our sleigh. Elisabeth laughed loudly as a barrage of snowballs, tossed by mischievous young boys, fell on us. I tried to shake the snow out of my hat and scarf. "How can you enjoy this?" I complained, brushing the snow from my cloak before it melted under my collar.

"Gertrude," she said, "It is only snow. You shan't die from it." She scraped together a handful and tossed it at me, and I smiled and tossed it back at her. The harness bells jingled as we sped into the courtyard of our home.

When we got inside, I handed my wet cloak to the servant and we headed up to our rooms. Tonight was going to be special. As my birthday was so near, there was to be a banquet. Elisabeth was heady with excitement. "You watch and see, Gertrude," she exclaimed. "This will be your best birthday." She stopped midway up the steps and turned around, her gown swishing with the sudden movement. Then, suddenly, she reached out and grabbed my thick blonde braid. "And this childish thing will never do. I, dear sister," she declared with a jut of her chin, "shall make you into a presentable lady." She turned and began to race up the stairs with a merry giggle. With that, I lifted my woolen skirt and hurried up the stairs behind her. My heart lightened with every step, and soon I too was caught in her happy anticipation.

A few hours later, Elisabeth and my maid Charlotte had indeed transformed me from a surly girl into a lady. I wore Elisabeth's old blue gown, which had been tailored for me. I had always admired it, and now it was mine. The bodice was made of dark blue silk, with embroidered gold flowers. The skirt: the same dark blue, with hints of gold and red flowers. More delicate needlework adorned the sleeves. But the best part was the slashing in the front of the skirt, which opened when I walked to reveal a panel of dark green silk. I had loved this dress for years, and I envied how grown-up Elisabeth looked when she wore it to balls and special feasts. Now it was mine.

I twirled in it, listening to the crinkling silks. Elisabeth clapped her hands and laughed. "You look like a true lady now, Gertrude!" she sang. She herself was wearing a gown of brocade, and her darker hair was, like mine, arranged in two neat braids that were pinned in place in a crown on her head. While we were preening, a coronet sounded in the far side of the castle. Elisabeth's smile widened. "At last! The feast begins," she said, hooking her arm with mine. After a few moments of fussing from Charlotte, we started toward the dining hall.

The great hall in the castle was filled with noise and the bustle of people. We sat at the head table near our parents. Servants brought out urns of wine and great platters of meats.

"Prithee, who is the man over there?" Elisabeth asked me, leaning in to be heard over the music. She gestured toward the center table.

I looked over where she indicated, but there were many men sitting by the table. "The gentleman in the fur? That is some dignitary from Denmark, I believe."

Elsabeth shook her head as if dumbfounded by my ignorance. "No silly. Not Sir Gray Hair. I mean the young man, the one with the dark hair and the beard."

Eventually I understood why she asked. "Do you think he's handsome?" I asked, a smile beginning on my lips.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, he's a common sort," she said, affecting a dismissive tone. "I suppose he's just another young lord from the country, here to gain favor from Father."

I giggled. "Perhaps he can be encouraged to stay, if a young lady takes an interest in him?"

Elsabeth smiled broadly behind her hand. "He *is* rather handsome, isn't he?" she remarked. We laughed, entertaining ourselves with watching the handsome men who had come to partake of the banquet and teasing each other about which gentleman would ask for our attention first. The hours went quickly, and the banquet went into the night. We needed torch bearers to escort us to our chambers when the celebration finally ended.

A few days later, Elsabeth and I were returning from morning prayers at the chapel when Nikolas, one of Father's servants, stopped us. "Lady Elsabeth, your father wishes you to join him in his study," he announced.

Elsabeth and I exchanged a quick glance. Father rarely, if ever in our memory, asked for us in his study, where he conducted the private work of his office. Wordlessly, Elsabeth nodded and picked up her skirt to follow Nikolas toward the long hallway. I peered after them until they turned the corner. Although I was curious as to what Father wanted with Elsabeth, without my sister, I thought, now I had some time to read. I headed in the other direction, toward the library.

Because our family was the ruling house, we were blessed with a wonderful collection of books. I learned reading from my mother, but it was my tutor, Master Jan, who truly introduced me to the marvels of books. Master Jan was once a well-traveled man, but an injury to his leg had crippled him. Now he lived in our manor, and I was the luckier for it.

I craved knowledge, and he fed me what I desired. No area of interest was restricted from me. He did not feel that an educated woman was a liability, as some men in that day and age did. He showed me how to reckon numbers and how to keep accounts. I found sensible practicality in these lessons, and hoped that one day I would help my father by attending to the profits from the farmlands under his rule. Not all my lessons were so attuned to husbandry; Master Jan spent many hours teaching me the basics of Greek and Latin. In fact, he often sent for materials from his friends at the University of Wittenberg and we passed the day happily, discussing anything from the works of Socrates or Plato or other ancient wise men to the great teachings of our own Martin Luther.

I pushed open the bulky oak door and entered the library. Master Jan huddled over a desk, studying a manuscript. "Good day, sir," I said, announcing myself.

He looked up and smiled at me. Wisps of gray hair strayed out from beneath his cap. "Good day, Lady Gertrude," he replied.

I walked over to the sloping desk where he was reading. "What is the news, my good lord?" I asked. "This paper, is it new from the University?"

He flattened the edges. "No, Lady Gertrude, it comes not from the University. It is, in fact, a text that teaches one the elements of a new language." He pointed to the

papers. "There are some words here in our German, and here are corresponding words in Danish."

I frowned, confused. "Danish? Why should we study the language of the Danes? Is this the new fashion, to abandon our learning in Greek or Latin or even French to learn the tongue of those fishermen to our north?" I teased.

Master Jan took the manuscript and began to roll it away. "Ah, my lady. Times change, and this language of fishermen, as you call it, will become quite important to us all. We will be using it more than one would like, very soon."

I sat down on the stool beside him. "And why is that?"

He scratched his long nose. "I have been informed that the king of Denmark is at war again with Poland. Our blessed country of Brandenburg is, unfortunately, between him and his access to the Poles themselves. He has assisted our help in supporting his cause. I believe that it will be very beneficial for those of influence to have some knowledge of his language."

"If only to understand the comments he makes when he presumes us ignorant of it," I added.

Master Jan smiled at me. "Lady Gertrude, you are clever as a princess should be. May gracious God bless the house where you are the wise wife."

I laughed. "It is neither here nor there. I shall not be married before Elisabeth. I still have some few years to enjoy myself, God grant."

He paused a moment, as if reflecting on what he was about to say. "There is yet another reason, Lady Gertrude, for you to learn the tongue of the Danes," he confided quietly. "Your sister may be betrothed as we speak. It is common knowledge that the Danish King Hamlet's first wife, bless her soul, perished in the pains of childbirth. Sadly, the child died with the mother. It is rumored that the king has mourned his loss and is now searching for a new bride, to give him the heir he desires. A match with a princess of Saxony would be beneficial to both our houses."

My sister Elisabeth, queen of Denmark? I could think of no response. My mind began to whirl. A marriage to King Hamlet would be most honorable and an excellent fit for both Brandenburg and Denmark. And I had seen King Hamlet once, years before, as he rode through our city on his way to a military exploit. He had been a tall, handsome man with dark hair and brooding features. If I recalled correctly, he was an exuberant, vigorous man. Elisabeth would find him a satisfying match. However, Elisabeth and I had been together since we were in the nursery. I knew nothing else but her company. I tried to imagine a day in which I would not hear her ringing laughter, not listen to her jokes and gossip.

"It is our duty to our family and our country," I said quietly, finally.

Master Jan's old hand reached over and patted mine. "Indeed it is, Lady Gertrude," he said sympathetically. "Indeed it is."



*Caduceus*

As drying brown leaves paper the ground with their dying rustle, my alternately grateful and worried parents fold themselves together behind our screen door and watch me fly eagerly into his coughing, wheezing, guava-colored Toyota Corolla. My eyes glow; I am wrapped in a new pink tank dress bought specially for the occasion with three weeks' worth of babysitting funds. He smiles at them, waves gamely as he trots around to his side of the car, conspicuously buckles up, adjusts his driver's , and accelerates away from our front lawn with the care of a nanny. They smile into each other's eyes: *Such a nice boy*. As one, they wave us into a world of mini-golf, Chinese food, and *Children of a Lesser God*.

I return to the fold late; my smile is lame as my father cracks ill-aimed jokes about where's the groom. Neither of them notice that they never see the pink dress again. My parents shrug at each other at my sudden, prolonged silence, offering embarrassed excuses to friends and sleeping peacefully through the night when I wake sweating ice water, prowling the darkness of our house to make sure I am never again taken by surprise. My bedroom lamp glows from sundown to sunup; my father complains about the electric bill. I sleep during the day; my father makes vampire jokes. I apologize for everything, regardless of fault, and flinch violently at sudden noises, at movement too close to my face.

My parents, unknowing, remain blissfully innocent. My mother sits on the side of my bed at bedtime, as though I still deserve such attention, and calls me "Baby" after she kisses my hair. My father brings me silly colored plastic bracelets and Trixie Belden mystery books. They need to see the me-before, not the me-now. I need to protect them from the reality that would bring them to their knees.

Neither of them notice that I am not upset when the phone remains silent, that for the next three months I write poems about loss of innocence, about darkness. My pages are scrawled with images of blood and fear and cold green eyes and the sickening, cloying sweetness of Orange Tic-Tacs and English Leather. Each scratch of the cold black ink on the neat white page mirrors one of the scratches on my shoulders, my back, the reasons I can no longer use the bathroom at the same time as my sister and eschew tank tops in favor of t-shirts.

Healing? Maybe. Maybe not. My pen circles around and around, never landing squarely on the target but instead picking at the broad scabs, edging them up off my skin and tearing them loose to bleed, scab over, and be picked away again.

But paper bears no witness on its own—cannot, pressed into silence between a mattress and box spring like a hand over a screaming mouth.

"You can say anything you like," she tells us brightly, walking around the circle of desks tightly pressed together. She is a favorite teacher; she has many students. On each of us she bestows a friendly smile and a black and white composition notebook, cool, smooth. "Swear if you want to. Complain. Celebrate. Write about your truth as you know it. Just babble until you have nothing left to say, and keep your pen moving until time's up. I give you a check if you do it and a zero if you don't. I don't evaluate your thoughts. Easy, right?"

Anything *but* easy, I think, sensing a trap. The words claw their way up inside my throat, mournful as a Kaddish service, but I've kept them down this long; I can keep going. *Don't trust her. Don't trust her. Don't trust.* Wary-eyed, I watch her circulate in her white Reeboks, her acid-washed jeans, her casual sweater. What can this slight woman, with her brown pageboy haircut and her friendly blue eyes, know of the horrors I see every time I try to sleep? My gaze sweeps the room, the snowy white landscape outside of our clean windows, the tidy art prints within, ads for the school newspaper, neat stacks of shiny new novels. I almost pity her. She thinks my truth will fit inside these sparkling, pristine walls? *Lady, I could give you so much truth that you wouldn't be able to HANDLE it.*

There is no harm in indulging her; she may be naïve, but she still holds the red pen. Besides, I have learned that there's no one out there – not really. Why not throw a stone into a canyon? I start small. I write about the time I skipped English class – *her* English class – and throw in a couple of “Fuck yous” for good measure.

My journal comes back with a check.

Next, I talk about stealing my sister's beat-up Chevy Chevette last year, cruising through the calm, balmy Enfield nights at fourteen years old with Journey on the stereo and a Marlboro between my fingers.

Another check...this one with “rich description” scrawled after my detail of the Chevette's duct-tape bandages.

I insert myself into that journal as slowly as one immerses oneself in a cold pool on a hot day, inching myself in but keeping firm hold of the ladder in case I needed to haul myself out again. I don't mean to; it just happens somehow. Darkness edges its way in between the marbled covers in snippets of poetry, images, even a few pencil sketches of a solitary figure sitting on a rock. Mrs. Carroll never asks, and nothing in her demeanor ever suggests alarm, but I know she's watching me. I know she *sees* me.

One day, instead of a long freewrite, I write a single question in my journal.

*Can I really trust you with a secret?*

The answer comes back the next day, underlined twice.

*Yes.*

I sit at my desk for a long time that evening. The earthy smell of our neighbor's fresh-cut grass wafts around me, John Cafferty's “Tender Years” filters in through my tightly shut bedroom door, Jon Bon Jovi and his band smile down at me encouragingly from the white and blue paneled walls. My fingers squeeze the Ticonderoga pencil so tightly that I am amazed it doesn't snap. A voice inside tells me it is all right to let go, that it's time to stop shutting doors so tightly; another voice tells me that I'm not ready; it's too soon. Something even stronger tells me that this secret is too heavy, too painful, and I can't carry it any more.

~~A long time ago Not too long ago I'm not really sure how long ago~~

I take a deep breath and marvel at the difficulty I am facing in getting this out. My God, I haven't even really started writing the tough part yet...I'm still only describing the *when*...what will happen when I get to the *what*? And the *how*?

*Just write the truth.*

I am choking. I need a glass of water. I shove myself away from the desk and meander to the kitchen, pouring and drinking an extra-large glass of water, washing it painstakingly, drying it meticulously, putting it carefully back in the cupboard. The simple chore done, I still feel the pull of the journal from my room and I return,

dragging my feet, slamming myself back into my seat and praying for divine intervention that never comes. Apparently the angels have better things to do.

But I knew that already.

It occurs to me that writing is a deceptively simple act. On the surface, it is easy: put a pencil to paper, move it around in the culturally prescribed patterns, and boom, you have words. But there are other layers: making meaning, craft, style. The tip of a pencil is much too narrow to inject one's guts onto paper, yet it's happening with these words that cannot, will not be contained any longer.

I think of the dirt that no one can see, of wanting to die. I still ache when I face my parents and try to act as though everything is normal, that I'm still their baby when I'm not, and won't ever be again.

I think back to the scorching breath on my face, the hard, bruising fingers. He hurt me. With burning certainty, I know that I should have stopped him, should have kicked him, should have screamed louder, should have...should have...should have...

My stomach clenches and squirms when I hear the oil in his voice as he reminds me that I *asked* for it. It's not *his* fault, he says. It's mine.

He hurt me once. I don't have to let him continue.

I don't have to let him do this.

Suddenly, the shame that has muted me joins hands with the guilt; together, they step back. They're not gone, but they are no longer alone; now I am angry, too.

I realize what he took from me.

I realize what he was powerless to take from me.

My fingers stop shaking. I take a deep breath. To hell with craft and style — they'll come later. Or not. That's not what I need to be concerned about right now.

*Three and a half months ago, I was raped. It was the most horrible experience of my life. It made me feel cheap, and used, and it bruised my soul.*

Keep writing, keep writing. My breath is coming in short gasps now. It's almost there; it's almost out. My fingertips are white with cathartic pain as finally, finally, I commit it to paper, and in doing so, I believe it.

*And it was not my fault.*

Jane Cook

### *Into the Water*

Staring at Mary Cassatt's painting, *The Boating Party*, makes a normal person think about spending a day on the water. It evokes images of lying on the beach, splashing in the water, and riding on a boat. A normal person looks forward to the warm weather because it means she or he will be able to do more than fantasize about these things. A normal person, especially one who is an English teacher, might even start reciting John Masefield's "Sea Fever," "I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide / Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;"

But I am not a normal person. For me, staring at *The Boating Party* and thinking about spending a day on the water strikes terror into my heart. Ever since I can remember I have been mortally afraid of the water. My palms sweat. My heart races. I shudder in fear. It's not that timid kind of afraid that sounds like "I don't think I'll try to go into the water today." It's that nail biting, teeth gnashing, unabashed terror that sounds like "I feel like I'm going to die if I go anywhere near the water and I surely will if I have to get into that boat."

This terror dogged me throughout childhood and continued into young adulthood. In fact, it nearly prevented me from graduating from college. I went to college back in the day when swimming was NOT an elective; it was a graduation requirement. I could never grasp the connection. Why would being able to swim make me a better English teacher? It was beyond my comprehension.

Throughout my entire college career, I believed that this was an anomaly, some foolish rule that had been imposed by an idiotic bureaucrat who would soon be relieved of his duties so the rule could be repealed. Every semester I waited to hear that good news and every semester I was disappointed. As junior year changed to senior year and my final semester on campus approached, I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. My 8<sup>th</sup> semester would be dedicated to student teaching and there would be no time left to fit in my non-elective swimming class.

I registered for swimming class with much apprehension. In order to fit the class into my schedule I needed to take the 8:00 AM class that met on Tuesday and Thursday at Hawley Armory, the large brick building near the old bookstore that looked more like a mausoleum than a gymnasium. The thought of getting into the water not once but twice a week for 15 weeks terrified me. How would I ever survive?

Once I submitted my registration, I could not turn back. I needed to begin preparing for my 15 weeks of torture. I looked at the bookstore for what textbooks were required and found, much to my surprise, that there were no textbooks. Here I was a senior in college and this was my first college course with no required reading. Maybe swimming class wouldn't be so bad after all.

However, much to my disappointment, I found that there was one item that I did need to purchase at the bookstore – a black one piece tank suit. Since I never went in the water, I didn't own a bathing suit, but I soon discovered that I wouldn't have been allowed to wear my own even if I'd had one. The black regulation tank suit was the only course requirement and every student had to wear one.

Even if I did go into the water, I wouldn't have appeared in public in a bathing suit. I was mortified when I found that not only did I have to buy a bathing suit and wear it in public but this regulation tank suit was about as flattering as a large black

plastic garbage bag. It would have done nothing for Marilyn Monroe and, needless to say, I was endowed with neither her looks nor her build. That ugly black tank suit just added to my chagrin. I purchased the swim suit and hid it in my room because I was too embarrassed to have anyone see it.

My next problem was figuring out how to explain to my professor why a senior was taking a class that was normally offered only to freshmen. She was a swimming teacher and loved the water. How could I tell her that I was afraid of the water? How could I say that I had put off registering for this required course until I didn't have any time left?

I hung back during the first class, hoping to disappear under the slippery tiled floor. To my great relief, the professor was a woman and the class was not co-ed. At least I wouldn't die of mortification displaying my black tank-suited body in front of a bunch of oversexed, would be studs. She spent the first class talking about the syllabus and course requirements. She described and demonstrated the swimming strokes that we would be learning. Before I knew it, the class was over. She never even made us go into the pool. I left feeling only slightly relieved. One class down, 29 more to go.

I went early so I could talk to my professor before the second class started. I figured that eventually she would make me go into the water. I rehearsed what I was going to say. "I know that I'm a senior in college but I don't know how to swim. I never learned how to swim because I am scared to death of the water. I'm afraid that if I put my face in the water I will drown so I just never go near the water." I repeated the words over and over trying to make myself sound less pathetic than I felt. No new words came to my rescue.

After all my apprehension, it turned out that she was actually a very kind woman. She was quite sympathetic when I finally worked up the courage to tell her that I was afraid to go into the water. It turned out that I was not her first non-swimmer. She told me that she had actually taught other non-swimmers to swim and she assured me that I would be successful, too. For the second class, she took me down to the remedial end of the pool, AKA the shallow end, and just let me sit on the edge while she instructed the rest of the Esther Williams clones who were taking this gut course so they didn't have to read any textbooks or write any papers.

The next class went about the same. The professor encouraged me to sit dangling my feet in the water as I watched while she instructed the sea nymphs. She was clearly trying to build up my confidence and convince me that the water really wasn't scary. It wasn't working. I knew that she would eventually make me go into the water and I dreaded that with every ounce of my being.

The third class was the real trial. The professor told me that I actually had to get into the pool. She allowed me to stay on the shallow end so I would be able to keep my head above the water when I walked in. She started by teaching me how to tread water. Treading water involves paddling your arms and feet to keep yourself afloat. She told the whole class that treading water is a technique that will save your life if you are ever stranded in the water. Since I had no intention of ever being stranded in any water, I was unconvinced of the need to learn this. However, I had 14 more weeks of class and she had been so nice to me thus far so I figured I would go along with her.

Much to my shock, after several attempts, I was able to tread water. I was clumsy and uncoordinated but I was staying afloat. For the first time in my life, I could do something other than fear the water.

During the next class I learned how to float on my back. According to my professor, this was another life-saving strategy. She told the class that if you're stranded in the water and you get too tired to tread water, you can float on your back almost indefinitely. I found that floating was much more difficult than treading water. I also found that the harder I tried to float, the more likely I was to sink like a stone. My challenge was to learn to trust that the water would keep me afloat. Eventually, it did. Once I learned how to float on my back, I liked it because it kept my face as far away from the water as I could get and still be in the water.

The breaststroke came next. I didn't like that because I had to keep my face in the water. It also made me not only feel but look like a frog.

Then came the sidestroke. I got really good at that. I liked it because it was a comfortable stroke and it only required that part of my face go into the water.

The semester was passing and I was surviving. Before I knew it, final exam week had arrived. Since we had no textbooks or papers assigned, I couldn't imagine what our final exam would look like. I didn't know at the time what performance assessment meant. I learned it quickly on the fateful day of my final exam in swimming class.

I dressed in my regulation black tank suit/garbage bag and entered the swimming pool area with my heart in my throat. The professor asked us to line up along the edge of the pool. She explained that the final exam consisted of three parts: 1) You have to demonstrate three different swimming strokes that we had learned in class, 2) You will show me that you can tread water for three minutes, and 3) You need to dive headfirst into the pool. My mind raced through the list. I knew how to float on my back. I knew the breaststroke and I knew the back stroke. Though my technique was less than perfect, I felt confident that I could pass #1. I had practiced treading water during every class after I learned it and though I had never timed myself, three minutes didn't sound impossible. Check #2. I was two-thirds of the way home. But then the words "You need to dive headfirst into the pool" echoed in my head. What do you mean you need to dive headfirst into the pool? Where did that come from? Though there was a diving board at the deep end of the pool, we were never required to use it. Since I had spent all of my class time at the remedial end of the pool, I knew nothing about how to dive. One thing I knew for sure was that there was no way that I was going to do it. Diving involved having your face in the water. Not only that, it involved having your face hit the water at breakneck speed.

This final exam was an individualized test. We had to dive one by one into the pool and complete the other two tasks so that our professor could witness each individual's performance. As soon as we were done we could get out of the pool, shower and get dressed and the course would be over. The sea nymphs fought to be first so they could show off their skills and be done. I went to the very end of the line, hoping against hope that we would run out of time before it got to be my turn. I watched as each girl ahead of me dove into the pool and completed her assignments. No one hesitated. They performed like trained seals. I could see the delight in my professor's eyes and could read her mind: "What a great job I've done this semester. Everyone is going to pass this course."

My thought bubble replied, "Well, don't celebrate your success too soon. All but one is going to pass the course."

The time came for me to take my exam. The pool was empty except for the professor and me. At least I would be saved the humiliation of failing in front of the

whole class. I stood on the edge of the pool and awaited the instructions that I had heard repeated throughout the hour.

"OK, Jane, it's your turn. Go ahead and dive into the pool." She smiled encouragingly, confident in her success as a teacher.

"No."

"What do you mean, No?"

"No, I don't know how to dive."

"You have to dive. That is a critical part of the final exam."

"I cannot dive. I will not dive." I sounded like a faded version of Dr. Seuss.

"Come on, Jane. You've made it this far. You can do this." Her voice turned from surprise to pleading.

"No, I can't."

Her tone switched from pleading to threatening, "OK. We're running out of time. You must dive in order to pass the course."

I took a deep breath knowing that my next words would seal my fate. She thought that her great teaching had cured my fear of the water but the thought of diving into the pool brought the old terror back. I was paralyzed with fear and nothing that she could say would move me to dive into that pool. "Then I'll fail the course," I moaned, resigning myself to the life of a college drop-out.

She could see that I was very close to melting into a pool of blubbering misery. She knew that I was approaching the end of my senior year with only my student teaching semester to go. She knew that if she failed me, I would never get my college diploma or my teaching certificate. She could read the terror in my eyes and she took pity on me.

She looked around the pool area to make sure that none of the nymphettes were around to hear her instructions. After all, she had her academic integrity and standards to uphold. She whispered in my ear, "OK, Jane. I know that you can tread water for three minutes and demonstrate three different swimming strokes that you've learned this semester. I will let you step into the pool, hold your nose and put your head under water just for a second to start your final exam. That's not really a dive but I can still count it as a headfirst entry into the pool and you'll still be able to pass the course."

I thought for a minute and weighed my options. I knew that she was stretching her standards way beyond their limits. I could appreciate that. Still there was the terror of putting my face in the water. Would I inhale water and drown right in front of her during my final exam. I bet that would be a first for her. Was it worth the risk of dying to have a teaching career?

She begged me to try, uttering additional words of encouragement as she watched the battle that was going on in my head. The ticking of the clock reverberated throughout the gymnasium. Time stopped as she took my hand and slowly walked me down the steps of the pool. I walked alone into the pool, took a very deep breath, tightened my fingers firmly over my nose and put my face into the water.

## *Biographies*

### **Teacher-Writers**

**Denise Abercrombie** (SI '07) teaches English and co-directs the Writing Center at E.O. Smith High School. She lives in Storrs (rated the least likely town to suffer a natural disaster) with her husband, Jon Andersen, their sons, Miles and Kit, their barn cat, Shadow, and their rooster, Fred.

**Karen M. Adrián** (SI '10) is an English Language Learners tutor at East Hartford Middle School and teaches English Literature and Reading and Writing for the Adult Education program at East Hartford. Born and raised in New Jersey, she and her husband moved to Connecticut in 2003 to raise a family.

**Jon Andersen** (SI '09) is an Assistant Professor of English at Quinebaug Valley Community College. He lives in Storrs with his wife and fellow teacher Denise Abercrombie, and their two sons, Kit and Miles.

**Laureen Lemire Anthony** (SI '10) is a high school English teacher in Griswold, Connecticut. This is her seventeenth year as a teacher, and her third year at Griswold; previously she taught at Montville. She has been an avid writer of all genres since publishing her first book of cat haikus when she was in third grade.

**Daniel R. Blanchard** (SI '10) grew up as a student/athlete. However, he was more of an athlete than a student. Today he has successfully completed 12 years of college and earned seven degrees. Presently, he teaches, trains, mentors and coaches. He lives with his wife, Jennifer, their four children, and family dog. "They are my *lucky 7*."

**Dara Bowling** (SI '10) lives in Willimantic, Connecticut and is perpetually inspired to write by her husband, Jeff, and their four children. She is an English teacher at Windham High School, a Hebrew teacher and School Administrator at Temple Bnai Israel, and a Program Assistant for the Capitol Theater Arts Academy. She loves reading, writing, and helping students realize that they can change the world.

**Erin Caouette** (SI '10) lives in Southington, Connecticut with her husband and her daughter, Abby. She teaches middle school language arts. She credits her writing ideas to her experience growing up during the eighties and nineties in suburban Connecticut, but worries that the volume of Aqua Net she used during those years may have negatively affected her writing.

**Jane Cook** has worked as Staff Development/Literacy and Educational Technology Specialist for EASTCONN for the past 25 years. She became addicted to computers when she met a word processor thirty years ago and believes that if computers could do nothing but word process, they would still be worth their weight in gold.

**Erin Haddad-Null** (SI '10) is a PhD student in English at the University of Connecticut where she currently teaches Freshman English. Her submitted poem first started from a line written in response to a friend's Facebook post, but it really took shape with the



support and suggestions from her wonderful writing group during the Summer Institute.

**Della Hennelly** (SI '10) was born and grew up in Ireland. A University of Connecticut graduate, she completed her BA in English and later earned an MSW in Administration and Planning. She began her career teaching Middle School, then moved into Administration in Human Resources Development. Having come full circle, she has been back in the school system for the past decade. As a docent at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, and as an interpreter at the Hillstead House Museum, she enjoys the on-going learning and giving back to the community.

**Eleisha LeMay** (SI '10) is an English teacher and PLC team leader at East Windsor High School. She earned a BA in English from Central Connecticut State University in 2003, an MS in Secondary Education from Saint Joseph College in 2009, and is currently pursuing a Sixth-Year Certificate in Educational Leadership from Central Connecticut State University.

**Janet Thouin Lussier** (SI '10) grew up in Tolland, Connecticut. She earned a journalism degree from the University of Rhode Island in 1983 and worked as a newspaper reporter. A middle school Language Arts teacher for the past decade, she currently teaches at Ashford School in Ashford, Connecticut.

**Stephanie K. McKenna** (SI '05) has taught at Wethersfield High School for twelve years. She thanks her wonderful husband, J., and her beautiful children, Veronica and Joey, for their love, laughter, and support.

**Joan Muller** (SI '10) earned her BFA from the Hartford Art School in 1974 and Master's equivalency in writing and illustration from The University of New Hampshire and Rhode Island School of Design. From 1995 to the present she has taught preK-8 Art at the Eastford Elementary School and developed Designing Minds, her school's Gifted program in 2007.

**Sheila A. Murphy** (SI '85) served as CWP Co-Director and Co-Facilitator of two Teacher as Researcher groups. She conducts memoir-writing workshops for her library, and for Institutes for Lifelong Learning at Middlesex Community College and Wesleyan University.

**Tiffany Smith** (SI '10) is a second year English teacher at Parish Hill Middle/High School in Chaplin, Connecticut. She graduated from the Neag School of Education with her masters in Curriculum and Instruction. Tiffany has presented on young adult literature at the NCTE Convention, and will be presenting at the ALAN workshop this fall.

**Steve Straight** (SI '90) is a professor of English at Manchester Community College. His first full-length book of poetry, *The Water Carrier*, was published by Curbstone Press in 2002.

**Melanie Tokarz** (SI '10) is in her sixth year teaching high school English in the Hartford public schools. She has a BA in English and an MS in secondary education. Her background includes working as a newspaper reporter and a political press secretary.

**Kisha Tracy** (SI '10) is a recently-minted doctorate of Medieval Studies from the University of Connecticut. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts, where she teaches composition and literature courses.

**Emily Wojcik** (SI '10) is a doctoral candidate at the University of Connecticut, where she teaches Freshman English and, occasionally, 20th Century American and British literature. Her proposed dissertation is titled "'No Compromise with the Public Taste': Women, Publishing, and the Cultivation of Audience in the Modernist Era." She is also the assistant editor of *Paris Press*, and co-editor of *Sisters: An Anthology*.

**Karen Romano Young** is an author-illustrator. Her new children's book, *Doodlebug: A Novel in Doodles* has won wide acclaim. Karen's trip to the Arctic to cover NASA's ICESCAPE climate change study gave her the opportunity to research her *Bowhead Doodle*, one of her series, *Humanimal Doodles*. She has taught workshops for the Connecticut Writing Project since 2008. Her website is [www.karenromanoyoung.com](http://www.karenromanoyoung.com).

#### **Readers (along with CWP Director Jason Courtmanche)**

**Sean Forbes** is a poet who was recently shortlisted for the Harper-Wood Studentship for English Poetry and Literature. He is an English PhD candidate at UConn, and is writing a creative dissertation, a full-length book of poetry titled *Providencia*. His poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Poetic Journeys*, and *Long River Review*.

**Jennifer Holley** is in the English PhD program at UConn. She received her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her poetry has been anthologized in *The Best of the Prose Poem* and *The House of Your Dream: An International Collection of Prose Poetry*.

**Zara Rix** is the Assistant Director of UConn's Creative Writing Program and the Director of *Poetic Journeys*. She writes fiction and non-fiction, and her work has been published in *Sailing* magazine and *The Essay Connection*.

## *Colophon*

### *Design and Typography*

Connecticut Writing Project – Storrs, 2010

### *Designers*

Sean Forbes

Jessica Mihaleas

### *Printer*

Gulemo Printers

### *Font*

Book Antiqua

### *Paper*

Colger

### *Cover Design*

Joan Muller

[www.cwp.uconn.edu](http://www.cwp.uconn.edu)