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They're Tree People... They Know Things
**TEACHER WRITER
MAGAZINE**

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2023 TEACHER CONSULTANT
CONTEST WINNERS
&
HONORABLE MENTIONS

Unexpected

DIANE AYER (SI 05)

I pull into the West Hartford Reservoir twenty minutes early, wanting to scope out the scene before she arrives. The morning sun, which had been unbearable for days, is now only peeking out from misty clouds so I'm grateful for that, though it does not help my hair at all. I look in the rearview mirror and flatten out the wiry white ones in front; I really should have done more with my hair. Unclasping the seatbelt reveals my once-crisp linen shirt is now a wrinkled mess. What was I thinking? Fifty and I still can't dress myself. Also, I should be thinner. I actually consider apologizing for all of this that is me when I see her and then I warn myself not to seem so desperate for reassurances. I scoff at my vanity then cringe at not having done more to fix or at least maintain.

So, I am going through all my normal feels when meeting someone for the first time, but this time is different. Her importance and the momentousness of our meeting make me feel a queasy thrill. This is not our first meeting. I once knew her when no one else did: from late spring of 1987 until the winter of my senior year of high school, I carried her in my womb and planned how we would part.

During the first few months of carrying her, I mostly felt caught in a bewildering state of panicked inertia. I only confided to my journal and to my dog (*love you, Zeus!*) and worked hard to make sure nobody would notice my state. When afternoon torpor would overtake me in front of the television, I made sure to bury my belly into the couch cushions or call Zeus up to spoon. I was a passenger in my friend's beloved yellow Pinto when I learned orange juice would not be tolerated. I held the vomit in my mouth for several minutes until she stopped at the convenience store: I jumped out, spit it out, popped in gum, and stood back up before she noticed. By mid-August, all of my blouses looked like the shoulder pads had moved to my boobs and belly. For my senior portrait, I settled with an oversized

sweater with a popped collar (popular in 1987, yes, but not so great during the summer) and lizard-covered Jams that had a drawstring waist. The cranky yearbook photographer shook his head when he saw me: they'd only take head and shoulder pics because I wasn't in the required formal dress. Perfect! No need for sucking it in *and* more focus on my perfectly triangular hair (#1987hairgoals).

I felt her kick for the first time that week and journalled how "totally miraculous yet wicked disasterous (sic)" it was. This baby hadn't left early (there'd be no praying away pregnancy for me), I hadn't followed through on having her surgically removed from the premises, and, by the time the school nurse called my parents a couple months later, several dates for my planned suicide had passed. I was going to have a baby, but I knew I could not be a mother.

There are still ten minutes until our appointment, but I figure I'll text now and let her know I'm there. I anticipate all the ways her reply could hurt: worst case scenario she forgot and isn't even available (Why hadn't I confirmed yesterday? My gut churns); second worst is that she's changed her mind and isn't ready for this; even worse than worst is if she says she doesn't ever want this. Wait, the worst of the worst is that something happened on the way and she's in an ambulance rushing to a hospital and I, who gave her life, am sitting here worried about my hair -- but look! Here's my phone buzzing. She's across the parking lot and walking towards me. Right now.

I signed the adoption papers knowing that I might never meet her again. I did it knowing that she might hate me for putting her up for adoption. I was prepared for either and felt the punishment would be just. I also knew that she might flourish or fail in life, but I should not be the one to provide the critical footing for her destiny. I knew I could not give her the best odds by the mere fact of who I was at that point in my life. Now, she has found me, has expressed only good vibes, and here we are meeting.

The incessant flow of vehicles through the lot came to a halt; joggers and dog-walkers smile and step back in reverence; bluebirds carry garlands of

daisies that they wrap around this sacred plot; a pair of deer emerge from the woodland and a family of hedgehogs tumble out too; butterflies dance in figure eights around her head as she approaches.

Maybe it's because I'm a writer, or maybe it's because I'm bad at remembering and good at imagining, but I can recall several versions of what our first exchanges were when we met that day. No matter what the words were, they all felt wonderful. She is grateful and gracious, jovial and sincere. She says she thought I might be taller as we laugh and look squarely into each other's eyes. It's not often that you meet someone the exact same height as you are; there's a certain energy when your eyes meet and you don't need to look up or down to be face to face with them. And this young woman, my daughter from a lifetime ago, someone I never allowed myself to hope I'd see again, is positively radiant and eye to eye with me. I feel electric and giddy. I could hug her and her sweet little baby bump for days.

Instead, we walk, we talk. I narrate and explain our history, answering all of her questions, ignoring the plan my therapist and I had set out to keep some aspects private. Nothing feels too painful with her walking beside me. I only withhold my ravenous desire to interrogate her. I'd like to learn about her in every way, could listen to her every waking moment's memories no matter how mundane, and all of her hopes and dreams as well, but am terrified of scaring her away. I remind myself that she's not mine, I have no right, and settle for first-date style questions. *What do you do for fun? What's your job like?*

When Wendy, my adoption agency caseworker, called to congratulate me the night I gave birth, she said she'd be coming in first thing the next morning, and I would need to be prepared to sign off on some final paperwork before she could take the baby out of the hospital. It was then that I unhappily gleaned that the agency had built in a five-day safety period wherein the baby was temporarily housed with a foster family and would not be with the parents I had chosen. The rationale was that, if I lost my nerve and demanded her back, it'd most likely be within the first five days

of separation. If that happened, it'd be easier on the adoptive parents if they hadn't even met her yet. I believed the waiting period was cruel to the baby and to her new parents who I imagined constantly stood vigil over phone and crib, holding each other and hoping I would follow-through. I knew I would; I stated that I wanted her brought right to them, no foster care for my girl. At 17, however, I wielded little power and honestly was probably just turning my sorrow at separation into anger at bureaucracy. Wendy explained that she could not change the agency's policies. I had recently learned from a nurse that I would be staying at the hospital the next day (there was a strange preoccupation with my having to have a bowel movement before leaving). I'd likely be discharged in the early evening. Fine, I told Wendy, if that was how it was, the baby would be staying with me while I was in the hospital and she could come get her the hour before I left. There were ahems and sighs and definite displeasure, but I stood firm, knowing that this baby was mine until I chose otherwise. It wasn't entirely rational, but I had manufactured an extra eight hours before it was time to separate from this beautiful baby girl. My stand provided a brief glimpse into possible mommy material, but I knew I'd still be saying goodbye.

Back at the Reservoir, we finish our walk, hug, agree we'd like to keep in touch, and part ways. The debt I owe her parents is immeasurable: she has clearly had a wonderful upbringing and flourished from my choice. I drive away without looking back, believing that whatever magic brought us together in her creation and now in her return, will revisit and I'll see her again. I used to believe that I needed to accomplish something amazing in lieu of keeping her; I journalled about investigative reporting and the Nobel Peace Prize. In moments of self-doubt, I've returned to that pledge and felt I may have fallen short, betrayed her and myself, but that's not today. Today, I know for certain that, when I was 17, I gave my baby to someone better qualified and we all benefited from that choice.

When I get home much later that afternoon, the sun is setting in soft gold and rose hues and the humidity has lifted. I notice my neighbor has propped a small circular fan in his window and the last rays of sunlight

reflect off the bracing arms which now seem like real arms: elbows on the sill, palms embracing a golden face, blades spinning inside like my mind has turned for all of these years, wondering if I did the right thing for her, for me. The arms could be hers, keeping my whirring mind grounded, while seemingly invisible. Or maybe it's her mind, spinning on who I was, while I held her best interests up. I've just made this connection and think of maybe writing a poem about it when my neighbor's silhouette briefly appears; the fan's blades come to a stop within its circle as the last pale rays rest on the horizon.

The Phillies Are Down 1-0 At The Top Of The 9th

CAITLIN DONAHUE (SI 16)

& you're in a new hospital cot in your bedroom / all four eyes locked on the TV / *Who's your favorite player, Grampy?* / fingers worry a hangnail / barely follow the game / your cough rasps / mumble a reply / can't quite catch your words / lob another Punch-&-Judy / *Have they been having a good season so far?* / shake your head / I try to ignore how the room smells like piss / keep glancing at the half-eaten 5th Avenue bar that's been going stale on your nightstand for the past 3 days / you ask about work / I slip on a stage grin / *Living the dream!* / strike out into silence / you lift a sippy cup of cranberry juice / try to drink from the edge / miss the opening over & over / tied up 1-1 at the bottom of the ninth / on to an extra inning / I steal a look at your glazed blue eyes / your shaking hands / your shrunken legs / bases are loaded / next batter hits a goner / the home crowd erupts / you fumble for the remote

Caitlin Donahue (SI 16)

Only Three Yesterday Heads Speak in These Fields

DANIEL MURPHY (SI 23)

Down beneath the mountainside hills lie the forgotten fields. High and gentle looms the golden burnished grass, spilling over onto the worn dirt pathways. It was ambling down these dirt paths, the stalks of weeds kicking pollen onto his boots, that brought Hunch to the crossroad. A walker, a laborer, a pair of hands, Hunch knew these fields and valleys, finding a day's work and rest along the way. Traipsing down the road, he sidestepped the soft brown hexagonal curl of a mojave rattlesnake at the edge of the road. About three long walks worth down the path, Hunch saw just ahead, waving through the late August heat, an opening in the distance just wide enough to break the endless wilting field in half between the line. He approached the crossroad, partially because it was ahead of where he had been already traipsing, partially because it was something new to look at in his horizon, but there was something else drawing him forward. Something unnerving and yet wholly enticing, from a liminal space beyond the field.

Hunch approached the crossroad, coaxed forward by forces beyond his understanding. There was a cool electric buzz in the air, as beads of sweat started to run up Hunch's forehead. He reached the opening of the intersection; the dead dry dirt sat still and heat hung heavy in the air. With a last broad step, Hunch stood in the middle of the crossroads, each direction pointing out around him. The humid air swelled greatly above him, failing to bend a single grass stalk or kick up the dusty roadway. From the overgrown weeds and wildflowers surrounding Hunch rose three wild women. They were transcendent, at once a part of the earth and newly freed from it; Hunch, not having spoken to many ethereal wildflower women before, his eyes opened wide and a gulp clutched in his throat as he tried to introduce himself. They stood there, staring him down and far through him all at once. Hunch, although making unbreakable eye contact with them, couldn't tell

Daniel Murphy (SI 23)

if they were really seeing him, present, living.

One of the women opened her mouth to speak, and from her came a soaring melody played on the fiddle. The other two women closed their eyes in restful approval. The music filled the air, rolling into Hunch's ears in a way that roared like thunder and at the same time wept gently as if it was being played just for him. The lonely tune seemed to pour from the woman and echo off the air itself, reverberating in the humid heat. It surrounded him, singing to Hunch as he surrendered his strength to the melody. He fell to his knees, the woman sang unaffected, and the air reverberated the mournful cry of the fiddle all around.

He looked up, the three met his eyes, and all the music was ripped from the air. The two at each side of the singing woman floated silently through the tall grass toward Hunch. Hunch couldn't hear a thing, though the singing woman ahead of him still roared on, assumedly still erupting with the fiddle's cry. Hunch brought his hands up to his ears. He snapped his fingers, the familiar crack of air had gone.

It's no use, Hunch. One of the women at his side had croaked in a voice of three. All that's left is the fields.

Hunch dropped his hands to the earth, the dry soil humming and shaking below his sweatlaced palms. His fingers began to dip below the soil, digging into the earth below. He pulled, jerking his shoulders toward the sky, to no avail. The women at his sides began to laugh, the crying fiddle snaking back through the air, echoing, harmonizing, resonantly blinding.

The wild women were gone, the air lulled to a familiar heavy stillness. At the center of the crossroads, a mojave rattlesnake curled under the shade of Hunch's doubled-over trunk, two fresh wounds to his side.

Leader of the Pack

AMANDA PETERSON (SI 23)

Martin, a corgi resembling a harbor seal in shape, has a nose for carrion. Despite Kristin calling him back, he is pulled by the magnetic force of the scent of a rotting animal. When he finds the prize he seeks, he snaps at the mystery carcass in the freshly baled hay field like an alligator consuming an antelope. Undoubtedly, these are remains of some unfortunate creature that did not know the threshing machine was cutting yesterday. Ava grabs a ribbon of intestine, a treasure which Martin swiftly steals from the golden retriever puppy and bolts away from the group, lest Kristin or I should attempt to take it from him. He resembles a rhythmic gymnast dashing around with the thing trailing from his jaws.

“Oh, god something dead. Martin, no!” The “no” is cut off by my throat closing with disgust.

“Martin, drop, blarg, it, blech!” Kristin demands even though neither of us can bear to look in his direction without retching.

Since Kristin took over the family horse boarding facility there were always corgis, goldens, and macabre scenes of surprising variety. The farm is picturesque. Rolling Northeastern hills dotted with grazing horses, and dispersed burgundy sheds for shelter from the rain and wind. It makes for incredible Instagram pictures. To advertise her business, Kristin, an athletic, blonde woman in her forties and my older sister, is videoing our post-storm walk for clips to put online. She will have to edit Martin’s discovery out.

Following much coaxing, Martin abandons the gross thing and rejoins the pack to continue our walk.

“Maybe we should put them on leashes.” I offer after my stomach settles.

“Ok, Dad.” Her reply shuts me down.

Our departed father, an old-school farmer and carpenter, was nicknamed the fun police by Kristin and I when we were growing up. Our favorite insult for each other is for each sister to compare the other to our father.

Amanda Peterson (SI 23)

We are both parents now, and find keeping my two preteen sons and her young adult son safe, is making us a real drag.

She knows it's true though. Just last year, Martin barely survived being crushed by a Dodge Ram on the farm. Luckily, the ground was soaked like it is today from two days of straight rain. It was advised to put him to sleep, but she opted to nurse him through the broken pelvis and massive crushing skin wounds.

Kristin likes to watch the dogs run free, and I do, too. They bound and play so joyfully, and they really are very obedient dogs. But it is not worth the cost sometimes. But then again- I'm thinking like Dad. When Kristin and Dad's battles over safety and freedom became epic, I just left. I never really had to work out the cost/reward equation of safety on the farm.

The dogs dash ahead of us. Martin with his sideways limp from the accident, Ava with puppy bounds, and Evey with the heavy plodding of an old golden girl with thyroid issues.

Then we see it. The stream water has swelled over the road and is running like a river across our walking path. We decide a few inches is no issue, and we tip-toe rock to rock while the pack decides to take a dip in the river. Kristin begins recording the fun.

Ava, flailing in an uncoordinated way, briefly disappears under water. Then reappears flailing harder

"She's getting sucked in!" Urgency is in my voice, but I'm not able to process immediate action.

"No, she's not," Kristin reassures.

But Ava **is** drowning, and now her puppy face is underwater, and her body is being pulled into the culvert that is draining two days worth of rainwater off the farm.

With impressive reaction time, Kristin throws her phone and grabs the puppy by the only thing that has not gone through the culvert. Her face. And her nails dig into her loose puppy skin.

"I can't get her." Kristin says calmly, but with life and death undertones.

Without a thought, I'm in the river- pulling Ava who is being sucked into her watery grave with the force I can only describe as that of a giant toilet. It occurs to me at that moment, that this is how people die and that one should never jump into a river that is flowing into a culvert. We drag the suctioned pup out of the grips of the drain and spill her onto the road way.

Crisis averted.

Kristin laughs and comments on her new boots being not new anymore as we plod back to the farm house adjacent to the river. She offers some other comedic relief, but I'm waking up to what just happened, and I don't hear the jokes.

What would we have done if the timing had been one second later? If I hadn't gone for the walk? Or worse yet, the boys had been the ones walking the dogs? Would they have attempted the unwise rescue?

Farm life is raw, and real, and dangerous. Our father may have been an overly protective stress case- but he kept us alive. And we continue to survive because his voice still echoes warnings to us from childhood. We always resented the fearful warnings- but maybe he was right. Maybe we should put the dogs on a leash.

MONTANA

JOAN MULLER (SI 10)

You drove us in your unreasonable truck
beyond the two-track
to the top of the wind scalded butte,
you, me, your dogs
and two kites shaped like hawks
I bought us on a whim.
You got yours aloft first.
I hooted as you let out line,
your fingers strumming its wings
until the big sky had become
a single stringed instrument
pure as your shy laugh
at your success
in my video of that day
full of sun glare
I still play.

In your absence
I hear red tailed hawks
keening above my valley terrain

Joan Muller (SI 10)

and when they settle at dusk
I stay awake
past even the solace of moon
until I find company
with a distant, unassuming light.
We converse for hours,
so like you to shine
unwavering like that
though last night
you were almost slapstick
quipping: it's ironic
that some are blind to brightness
from their own constellations,
instead casting wishes
to twinkling sparks,
poor doomed circuits
brief as falling stars going dark.

Missing One Hundred

KELLY ANDREWS-BABCOCK (SI 05)

Chandra, Amina and Mariama lay chained on the mattress in the tunnel below the highway. They had just received their allotted morning dosage to ready them for work later on. As each one drifted off into their own personal hell, Chandra tried to focus on her surroundings. She knew there were more girls. She could hear them; breathing, crying, pulling on the chains attached to the wall. Then she succumbed.

They were woken by a loud clanging sound, which was followed by rustling, yawns, and murmuring. Amina came to first and quickly woke Chandra and Mariama. The three sat up in preparation for their orders before being fed. The skinny white man with the long handlebar mustache looked them over and checked his clipboard. “You,” he pointed to Mariama, will be performing on stage tonight, don’t disappoint me. And you two will be serving the customers their desires in the lower level of the same fine establishment. You know the drill. Do not speak unless spoken to, do whatever you are asked. You’ll be dropped off at 3:30 and picked up when I decide. Any questions?” The three girls shook their heads as Chandra translated.

The windowless van drove north toward downtown, as porn played on the screen to “get them ready” and dropped them off at the back door of the club. They were escorted in the black nameless door by a seven foot giant with bulging arms and shaved head. Once in their dressing room, a tall woman in stilettos sauntered over with their attire for the evening. Everything fit in one hand. She watched as they dressed and put on their makeup and each girl was given a microdose. Their long dark hair was wrapped, bundled and braided. Mariama was escorted to the cage that was elevated in the back of the stage. Here she would stay and dance until released to climb the poles while shackled to a long chain.

Chandra and Amina were busy spraying and wiping the darkened rooms they would be entertaining in. The eight rooms were inspected and approved.

Kelly Andrews-Babcock (SI 05)

As they stood smiling near the hallway, 4 more girls were escorted in by the same giant. It was going to be a busy night. Music pulsed. The giant stood blocking the black door the girls had never been through, hands behind his back, curled wire trailing behind his ear, muscles tense. He began moving his lips and looking around. His eyes fell on Amina and he nodded at her. She immediately stood before him. "I have a gentleman who will be joining you behind this door in a few minutes. Do you know what this room is?" Amina shook her head no. "It is a room where pleasures of the flesh will be demanded and granted. You will do anything asked of you, is that clear? Anything." Amina smiled and nodded. He signaled for her to wait at his side. She glanced at Chandra and moved her head slightly back to indicate where she would be going. Chandra continued smiling. She knew bad things happened behind the black door because she'd seen other girls carried out. There was nothing she could do. Just then, a sleazy looking older man sidled up next to her and ran his finger down her arm. Chandra took his hand and led him down the hall into the recently cleaned room.

It was 3 am when the girls were collected. Mariama's ankle was bleeding and raw, Amina's bruised body lay motionless on the couch in the van and Chandra was exhausted by the constant flow of men she'd had to entertain. Filthy, spent and thirsty the girls hobbled from the van to their mattress, not daring to ask for anything. Mustache man brought them each a pill and a bottled water. "Good job tonight, you'll live to see another day. I give you 2 nights off and you'll do it all over again." He watched them take the pills and chuckled as he walked away.

Chandra, the oldest at 18, knew they weren't alone in the tunnel. There had to be lots more girls...so they could be easily replaced by others. In between the drug dosing, she tried to piece together how they ended up here. Vague memories of the handsome coyote, Juan, and his promises of steady employment once they crossed the border. It was after they crossed that things became hazy. Everything was a fog and now...they were chained like dogs, forced to perform and do unspeakable acts. Things that Chandra couldn't comprehend. She didn't know how it would ever stop.

Two nights later, they were given their orders. They knew it was a

different club because it took longer to get there. Similar set up, different people, but same order of events. This place was much bigger with lots more girls. Amina was assigned to the private rooms, Chandra the black door room and Mariama in the cage. They got ready and began to smile.

Amina's fifth client of the evening, was a well dressed white man in his 30s. He smiled back at Amina as she asked what he wanted. He looked up at the camera and turned his back to it. As he took off his jacket, he whispered in Spanish, "Do you need help?" Amina immediately shook her head and glanced upward with panic in her eyes. "I can help you," he whispered. A terrified Amina ignored him. "I think you're being held and forced to do this work, I will help you. Please trust me. The code word is 'Silver.' when you hear that, you'll know we're here to help."

Behind the black door, Chandra was entertaining a 40ish fit man wearing designer jeans, an untucked shirt with tattoos showing under his rolled up sleeves. He pushed her up against the wall to list his demands. She smiled and nodded as he whispered, "I'm here to help you." Chandra didn't know if this man was for real or not, but at this point, what did she have to lose. She began dancing, her eyes hopeful. Before he banged on the door to leave her, he whispered, "Code word is Silver."

"They drug us at night," she whispered back. He nodded.

The girls were collected and herded into the van for the ride back. Exhausted, they rode in silence. Amina looked agitated and Chandra gave them a hand signal that indicated they needed to talk and pretend to swallow their pills. The other two blinked in agreement. When mustache man was done degrading and drugging them, the three girls lay on the mattress and waited. After a while, Chandra began to whisper about her encounter and was interrupted by Amina's story. Hope slowly began to rise in the three of them as they lay holding hands. It was quiet and lonely. Until it wasn't.

There were loud noises, shuffling and the word "Silver!" being yelled. They heard loud pops. The three were still too scared to say anything, until they heard the word Silver being repeated. Then, they began to scream for help.

The news headline read: "Missing One Hundred Girls - Found!"

The Jury Case

JANE COOK (SI 07)

During May of 1973, Congress convened a special Senate Committee to investigate the Watergate Affair. “Gavel-to-gavel” coverage of the hearings was televised, providing the American public both daytime and evening real-life drama with testimony about the break-in at the Watergate Office Building that housed the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in Washington, D.C. and the dirty tricks and cover ups of Richard Nixon’s administration.

During that time, I was newly out of college with no prospects for a teaching position. Since I had made some money while going through college typing papers for non-typists, I found a low-level job working at the University of Connecticut. At first, I worked as a student driver where I enjoyed driving administrators from developing countries to campus and on sightseeing trips. But when my boss discovered that I typed 100 words a minute with 99% accuracy, he promoted me to a Typist II where I did general office work and typed grant proposals that brought in the money to run the department. I was only 22, quiet and shy, but hard working and hopeful that this was just a temporary position. My boss was a misogynist and a bully who delighted in yelling at the women in the secretarial pool and almost daily reduced at least one of them to tears. But never me.

Imagine my surprise and delight when I received a notice to report for jury duty. I was idealistic and felt that it was my civic duty to take my turn to serve on jury duty. Besides, that was back in the day when jury duty lasted one month, and that would mean that I’d get a reprieve for four weeks from the daily harassment and drudgery of my job.

On day one, I reported to Hartford Superior Court. Along with the roughly 50 other inductees who reported with me, I received an orientation about the importance of juries in the criminal and civil justice system in the United States. I learned about Connecticut’s voir dire process in which

Jane Cook (SI 07)

lawyers question each potential juror to determine whether they are free of any bias that might affect the outcome of a case. I was told that lawyers could excuse me for cause if they felt I had a potential bias against their client or the state. I discovered that lawyers can also issue peremptory challenges, so I could be excused just because, with no specific reason. The judge explained that our mere presence served a very important function in the judicial system and that often lawyers negotiate plea bargains in criminal cases or accept monetary settlements in civil cases even after they go through the jury selection process. It's a psychological game. As I listened to the explanation, I wondered about this process in the selection of the Grand Jury of eight women, four men, and six alternates who were empaneled for the Watergate trial. What kind of drama must have gone on behind those closed doors?

Jurors are called at random as each new case comes up, so we were sent into the Jury Rooms to wait for our names to be called. It's my good fortune to be a non-smoker, for multiple reasons, but in this instance, I was directed to the non-smoking Jury Room, which was the only one with a TV. The Watergate Hearings were on television, so I was able to witness the unfolding drama of Richard Nixon's demise.

Day after day, I waited to be called to serve my civic duty. Day after day, I watched enthralled as Watergate witnesses, at first low level people in the administration and then higher and higher, until Nixon's inner circle started to give him up. As a dyed in the wool Democrat, I was not happy when Nixon got elected. We were living in a country divided and Nixon was far from the right person to reunite us. George McGovern had been my candidate in the first presidential election where I was allowed to vote. The entire country watched as this psychological drama unfolded.

I was called in for a voir dire examination a couple of times during the first three weeks of my jury duty. I responded to the questions honestly but was never chosen for a jury. I was relieved because there were some criminal cases that were being brought before the judge and I had no desire

to determine the fate of anyone's life or death. Besides, I was fascinated by the Watergate Hearings and didn't want to miss a moment of testimony.

At the end of the third week, the Clerk of Court called me into his office. I felt like I was being called into the principal's office though I couldn't imagine what I could have done to get into trouble. He was a kindly older man with a soft voice. He told me that my boss had come to see him and pleaded to have me released from jury duty. He reported that my boss told him how important I was at work and said that they could not do without me any longer. I was so relieved to be away from that male chauvinist pig and I was already dreading having to go back to my job, so my heart sank. My reply to the Clerk of Court was that I was not that important; I was just a fast and accurate typist. I told him that I felt it was my civic duty to finish my month on jury duty. I ended our conversation with a plea, "Please don't make me go back early." He patted me on the shoulder and told me that he would take care of it.

I spent that weekend worrying that I would get a call telling me that my jury duty stint was over. Hearing nothing, I reported on Monday morning of the fourth week and as if by magic, I got called in for a voir dire examination and was chosen to be on a jury. Since I don't believe in random, I suspect the Clerk of Court did "take care of it." I would miss watching the Watergate Hearings, but I didn't have to go back to work for at least one more day. I prayed that the lawyers would not reach a settlement once the final juror was selected. They chose to go forward with the case.

My jury case was a civil case involving a car accident in a shopping mall parking lot. The passenger in one of the cars was a woman who was suing the man who collided with the car she was riding in. She was also suing the driver of the car, also a man, presumably her boyfriend at the time of the accident and now her husband by the time her case came to trial.

It struck me as odd that she was suing her husband, but I learned during the trial that the rules of the road do not apply in a parking lot. The stop signs in parking lots are merely suggestions because they are not signed by the State Traffic Commissioner. This meant that no tickets had been

issued at the time of the accident; therefore, there was no legal standing to prove who was at fault. During the accident as the two cars approached a stop sign in the parking lot, the woman had been thrown into the dashboard causing permanent damage to her knees, so she was suing for medical costs and pain and suffering damages.

The courtroom was filled with lawyers. On any given day during the trial, there was a team of at least two lawyers for the woman and the same number of lawyers for each of the men. It was quite a circus with testimony from witnesses and charts and diagrams of the accident scene. I took it all in, knowing that soon I would need to make a decision about who was guilty of causing the accident.

After three and a half days of listening to testimony and looking at diagrams and photographs of the accident scene, the lawyers finally made their closing statements. The judge explained what our job was now, and the jury was sent off to deliberate.

I was by far the youngest person on the jury. There were two middle aged women and me; the rest were middle aged or older men except for the jury foreman who was probably in his early thirties. We talked briefly about the case, and it became clear to me that some of the jury members had already made up their minds without examining any of the evidence that had been presented.

After a short discussion, the foreman decided to hold a secret ballot vote. Most of the jurors were hoping that we'd all vote the same way so we could dispense with our task quickly and get done a day early.

We had to decide who was responsible for the accident. Was it the husband or was it the other driver? OR were they both at fault?

The foreman read each of the first-round ballots aloud – “the other driver, the other driver, the other driver, the other driver”... He continued reading the same words until he got to my ballot. Then he slowly read, “Both drivers are at fault.”

A hush fell over the room. Of course I knew that was my ballot, but I saw the other jurors making sidelong glances around the room trying to

figure out who the hold out was. The foreman didn't know how to proceed so he suggested that we talk about why we voted the way we did.

Both middle aged women, almost in unison said, "She's such a nice young woman. Her husband definitely could not have caused the accident." Clearly, they had made up their minds without even listening to the evidence.

Some of the middle-aged men said that they believed what the husband said during his testimony, and that convinced them that the other driver was at fault. Everyone else remained mute.

I finally spoke up and said, "I think both drivers are at fault. I think we should look at the evidence. I don't think it is clear that either one or the other is at fault."

The rest of the jury grudgingly agreed as their hopes of getting out early were dashed. The foreman asked the bailiff for the transcript of the trial as well as the evidence that had been entered throughout the trial.

We pored over the testimony examining who was driving in which direction when the impact occurred, what rate of speed each driver testified to, what the medical records showed, and what the accident scene looked like. After spending some time reviewing the evidence, someone asked for another vote.

We submitted our second round of secret ballots and went through the same process. We listened as the foreman read the votes aloud. Ballot after ballot repeated, "the other driver," until the foreman got to mine and read, "Both drivers are at fault." A groan went up that echoed around the room. Then angry comments flew around the room. They were all directed at me.

One juror glared at me and said, "There are eleven of us and only one of you. We all agree, so you must be wrong."

Another juror turned to me with nostrils flaring. "Do you know how much it costs if there has to be another trial? Do you want to be responsible for hanging the jury?"

I heard mutters of agreement around the table.

I had always been a peacemaker. My family and friends relied on me

to remain calm and levelheaded and to look at both sides of a situation. Here I was in the midst of a firestorm that had been created because I had listened to the evidence and drawn a different conclusion.

One of the women interrogated me. “How long have you been driving?”

“I got my license when I was sixteen, so I’ve been driving for six years,” I replied quietly.

Her angry response was, “Look around the room. Look at how many years these men have been driving. Do you really think that you know better than all of these men who have so much more experience than you? Who do you think you are?”

That was the wrong thing to say to me. Remember that it was 1973 and feminism was on the rise. The modern Women’s Movement was still in its infancy, but I was adamant that women were just as smart as men and deserved equal rights. I was not about to be dismissed by her sexist and ageist comments. And I was mortified that those words were coming from a woman’s mouth.

Since I am a twin, I was born as a group, so I’ve always been fascinated by group dynamics. It’s amazing to me how one person in a group can have a dramatic effect on that group’s dynamics. I was just one young, shy woman who did not agree with this jury, but I had raised the ire of this group of eleven other people who did not agree with my viewpoint. I had never experienced the kind of pressure that was being put on me. In those few hours, I learned what the word groupthink means. I was glad that my parents had raised me to be a woman of my convictions.

Just as I was preparing my response to the female juror who had verbally assaulted me, the bailiff came in and told us that it was time to break for the day. That gave me a 45-minute drive home to calm down and to plan my strategy. I knew that there were some reasonable people on the jury, so I knew I had to bring in evidence that would require them to rethink their positions.

When I got home, I was a woman possessed. I pulled out my old student driver manual because, after all, I had gotten my driver’s license only six

years earlier, so I still had that as a reference. I looked up braking distances and started doing calculations. If the drivers were each traveling at the rate of speed in their testimony, how many feet would it have taken for them to stop?

My husband is brilliant in math, but I could not talk with him about the trial. Math has never been my strong suit, but I can do simple calculations. So, I got out paper, a pencil, and a calculator and went to work.

I wish I had kept those notes because I went over and over the numbers. I wanted to make sure I was accurate. Much to my delight, no matter how many times I redid the calculations, they proved that if both men were telling the truth in their testimony, it would have been physically impossible for them to collide. My calculations proved that both men were at the worst lying on the witness stand or at best remembering wrong. At any rate, both were responsible for the accident.

I walked into the Jury Room that Friday morning with my student driver's manual and calculations in hand. I had proof positive that I had been right when I voted the day before. The foreman welcomed us and asked if anyone had any information that they wanted to share with the group. I immediately pulled out my evidence and explained that if the two drivers were actually going the speed that they said they were while on the witness stand, the collision would never have happened. I further pointed out the photo of the dent that the woman's knees had made in the car. I said that the husband had to have slammed on his brakes from a fairly high rate of speed for the dents to be so deep. And, since the other driver hit him from the side, the impact from the other driver would have pushed her sideways, not forward. I asserted that this proved that both drivers were at fault, and in fact I believed that the husband was much more at fault for the injuries than the other driver.

The tone in the room changed dramatically. Some of the middle-aged men asked to see my calculations and review the dashboard photos. I watched as they shook their heads and said, "You know she's right. This is proof that the husband was at least partially at fault. In fact I think he

probably was the most at fault.”

I watched, feeling vindicated, as my evidence was passed from person to person. I smiled inside as I saw the tide turning. When the foreman asked for a vote, not even by secret ballot this time, all of the men’s hands were raised in favor of both drivers being at fault. The middle-aged women were not happy with me because they had convinced themselves before any evidence was presented at the trial that this was a nice young couple, and the other driver was the bad guy. I was grateful that they were also tired of being on jury duty and just wanted to go home, so once they saw all the other hands go up, they followed suit.

All that was left was to determine how much money would be paid in damages. We came to consensus fairly quickly and even though, after reviewing my evidence, most members of the jury thought the husband was 90% at fault and the other driver was 10% at fault, the law does not work that way. If we found both drivers at fault, we had to allocate the damages evenly between both drivers.

It was anticlimactic when we reported back to the courtroom to announce our verdict. The judge polled each juror to ascertain that we agreed with the verdict. He then thanked us for our service and dismissed us from jury duty.

I headed home with a whole new appreciation of what goes on during a trial and inside a Jury Room. As flawed as the system might be though, justice had prevailed.

Even given the psychological spectacle that I endured during my final week, I was sorry to see my month of jury duty ending. Back to my dreaded boss and unfulfilling job and no more daytime Watergate drama.

Now when I hear on the radio or TV about a hung jury, I have an understanding of what kind of drama was going on in that Jury Room. I have respect for the individuals who were willing to hang the jury. I’m also grateful that my parents raised me to be a woman who stood up for her beliefs.

The Hole

JANE COOK

“The Hole” is a multimodal piece. Please click the picture to watch the video.



Jane Cook has been working as an educator for over 40 years and as a Literacy and Technology Coach for over 30 years. Since 2007, Jane has served as a Teacher-Consultant for CWP, serving in various capacities including Co-facilitator of the CWP Summer Institute, CWP Technology Program Leader, and CWP Grants Program Leader. Currently, she works as an Educational Consultant providing workshops and support in curriculum, literacy, and technology. Jane began writing for her high school newspaper and has never stopped.

Jane Cook (SI 07)

2023 SUMMER INSITUTE FELLOWS CONTRIBUTIONS

Tucker

R BENNETT

Fat black hands
pale palms facing up
reaching out
sticky fingers covered in melting sugar from my lunch box
round cheeks
thick pink lips that fade to brown round the edges
a mean laugh
kind eyes

Is there nothing so cruel as a child turned?
bracketed by the hate of a father and the hopes of a mother.

Unlaced Jays. Without creases.
Heavy footsteps. Wide shoulders. round brown face. A nice fade.

The classroom is hot and sweat sticks to his brow. We sit side by side.

I am small and gangly. All bones and knees and the cumulonimbus of black hair.

When his arm brushes against mine conjuring static against the sleeve of our uniform shirts I remember flying.

A ball tucked beneath my bird boned arm. He- charging at me like a bull
2 feet taller than I two feet wider. My feet slip on the wax Gym floor and
my ribs crack into a cafeteria table.

The hospital room is cold and quiet that night. I don't say his name when they ask.

R Bennett

But I ask. Years later. When his arm brushes against mine taking up too much space in his way. The kind of way that gets black boys killed. And I'd forgive him just for that.

He doesn't answer.

Gets quiet in a way I've never seen before. Offers an apology as if he doesn't want me to hear it. I hear it.

I hear it.

Even now.

I hear it echoing up from your grave.

Cold dirt.

Dug up.

Fresh and new.

Echoing with no response. You had to get the last word in. Dying here.

Quiet.

In the night. Before I could apologize too.

The Backyard Shed

DANIEL MURPHY (SI 23)

The first three weeks of summer were spent in the backyard of my parents Connecticut home, demolishing, replacing, and building a small storage shed in the yard's corner. The former shed, with its barn-red wood slat walls and gray asphalt roof tiles, had been a fixed image of the soft green tapestry that made up the yard in which I had spent the warm summer afternoons and cool breezy evenings of my childhood.

Over time, the shed which had held and kept so many different belongings free from rain, snow, and sun, had taken the beating to prove it. The deep red paint on the door and walls had chipped, been painted over, and chipped again, feathering its years off in tiny red specks softly onto the green grass below. The roof tiles had begun to weigh heavy on the trusses and beams, sinking and drooping; inanimate and yet still forming the dreaded sags and bags revealing its age. It was the start of summer and my father and I had looked over at it through the wavy afternoon smoke coming off the grill. The roof surely needed replacing before another winter season, but more than likely, this was the shed's last summer.

First erected by the previous owners, my parents had found what would be their family home and the shed had become a dark and dusty abode for lawn care items, buckets, shovels, saws and axes, hand tools, camping gear, lanterns, lawn mowers, weed whackers, hedge trimmers, and loppers. I came along, and moving in with all of those tools went a scooter, bicycle, helmets, a slip n slide, yard games, a basketball, worn out mitts, and a bucket of tanned dirt-caked baseballs. Time had passed, the scooter and slip n slide came out less and less often until they left the shed for good off to various church tag sales. In that time, my father and I had gotten into the world of barbecuing and grilling and low and slow smoking, so the spaces left by the scooter and slip n slide were quickly filled with charcoal chimneys, boxes of apple wood, chunks of hickory, and cherry. At any point in

Daniel Murphy

time, the tools, hobbies, and what could only be categorized as stuff that took storage in that shed could be examined as a collection making up a collage, a diorama, a sampling of the lives we were living. Everyone often thinks so deeply about the baggage they carry with them, but no one asks their date about what's in the shed.

I find so interesting the idea of getting to know a person, seeing a person, through all the stuff they keep in their life. Some of it we cling onto, unable to imagine living without it, some we would abandon roadside if we could, some we don't know *what* to do with, so we keep it, hoping someday we'll know why we needed it. All of it stuff we store and hold onto and keep, somewhere, ready to grab if the moment calls for it. Shakespeare, in one of his final plays, reflected: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on". Sure, the stuff like the dreams, wishes, and desires we hold, but also the stuff we store in the shed.

Release

EMILY GENSER

Preface

The line one walks as a teacher is thin, almost imperceptible; it is confusing at best, infuriating at worst. Most of the time Elizabeth did her best to ignore it. If she thought about it at all, it would be to notice the way it had frayed at the ends and stood strongest somewhere in the middle. That's where she spent most of her time. Carefully balancing, a circus trick of epic proportions. Because there were parents. And administrators. And co-workers. And egos. So many egos. But there were students. And there was laughter. And there were books and words and so much hope. She would stand on that line for as long as she could. She knew that much.

Elizabeth had been teaching for twenty years, which was long enough to have seen teachers who had lost interest in their students, and didn't bother hiding their loathing for the job itself. She had seen people get sucked down into the miasma of negativity. Everyone who ever spent time in a teacher's lounge could testify to that. There was no time to be the teacher they wanted to be, or used to be so they spouted rancor instead. Meetings found them griping and groaning, and forgetting. This shocked her most of all. They were forgetting why they chose this profession in the first place. They could no longer picture the faces of the many kids they had guided through the hallways and their lives. Daily, she told herself that she would not forget. There was worth to this job. There was honor. There was a daily influx of love and humor and gratitude and it washed up alongside anger and frustration and cynicism. She tried to remain above the fray, no matter how hard that was from time to time.

All that being said, she loved her job. She adored her students. When she told people that she taught high school English, most blessed her for her patience and asked her how she could work with teenagers, barely

Emily Genser

hissing the word through clenched teeth. But she loved teenagers. They were honest (mostly), and when they weren't it was patently obvious. They wore their self-consciousness like a badge of pride, though they layered it with bravado and recklessness when possible. They cried as easily as they laughed, and taunted and loved with equal passion. Every day was a soap opera and Elizabeth was never bored. She didn't know anyone else, in any job, who could say the same.

On the day that her life came into focus, Elizabeth was teaching *Romeo and Juliet* to her freshmen, and *Macbeth* to her sophomores. She was in charge of a meeting during 7th period school to go over data from the first semester with the other 9th grade teachers, and her son had a doctor's appointment at 4. She instinctively touched the locket lying against her breast-bone. She could feel it through her polo as though it had its own heartbeat. Inside the locket was a picture of her son, Connor, who was now almost three years old. The picture was from the day he was born, eyes wide open, already challenging the world to get anything past him. Even the nurses had commented on his alertness, and his hair. He was born with a shocking amount of hair. The nurses had taken to calling him Elvis. And Connor was all boy. This had shocked Elizabeth most of all. His smells and noises and his natural affinity for dinosaurs and trucks, had all taken her by surprise. She had thought you had to teach those things, but he was rough and tumble and loud every waking moment. He awoke with a scream of indignity that he should have to lie in bed alone for one more minute, and went to sleep with one last scream of anger that anyone should dictate his routine. He was a force of nature not to be dismissed easily. Connor demanded that people love him, and no one could ignore him.

She was thinking about his giggle as her period 2 class strolled in, laughing and loud to take their seats. She remained seated at her desk and watched as each one made his or her way into the classroom. She gauged each student's mood for changes from the previous day instinctively, and worried when one of the girls slumped into her desk, earbuds still in place

and immediately put her head dramatically atop her crossed arms, barricading herself from the world. Katrina wasn't doing this to be dramatic. She believed herself to be in her own bubble (as all teenagers did) and with her wall of music around her, she was essentially right. If the other students noticed, they did not let on. Katrina's life was a mystery. She was bright, but kept to herself and it wasn't clear whether she avoided other kids or they her. She was alone in Elizabeth's class. She seemed to prefer it that way. Elizabeth allowed it because it seemed safer than incurring her wrath. Elizabeth, however, could not let her remain as she was. She asked the students to begin translating the Shakespearean passage on the board and she placed her hand on Kat's back as gently as she could.

"Okay?" Kat didn't answer.

"Katrina, earbuds." The young girl sighed and pulled them out of her ears. "Do you need to go to the nurse? Do you want to talk outside?"

"I'm fine." She clearly was not, but there was little that Elizabeth could do.

"Okay, then get a piece of paper out and start the warm up please." She would do her best to make her laugh and bring her out of her stupor. It was what she was best at, and it was how she got through to her students. They thought she was strange, but funny, and she kept them on their toes. Her sense of humor was one reason they trusted her and it was the best way to get through to them most of the time. It was the best way to get through to most people, when it came down to that.

1

Katrina

"U there?"

"???"

The words flashed on her phone's screen. Kat stared at them, her eyes blinking, and her brain churning with their implications. Should she reply? Should she ignore him, block his words, put her phone under her bed out of reach and burrow under her blanket, shutting herself off not only

from Jake, but from all society? She looked longingly over at her bed. Undoubtedly that was the best course of action, but her body seemed to have lost all feeling, and the area between her computer desk and her bed seemed to span miles. Kat turned back to her laptop, minimized her game of solitaire, and set her fingers to her phone's virtual keyboard.

"Hi"

There was a long moment when nothing seemed to happen, and then dots began to bounce and she knew he was typing. It took longer than she expected and she imagined him typing and deleting and retyping. Her heartbeat increased with every second that passed, until his words appeared in the small box before her eyes.

"Wasn't sure u'd answer"

"U Ok?" Kat responded, although she knew he wasn't. None of them were okay. She couldn't imagine when they would all be okay again. But what else was there to say? Texting made it easy to pretend it was just another day; nothing had changed. It made it easy to re enter into the banalities of a normal evening's conversation. In that moment she could pretend that the 5 inch screen in front of her was her world, and that the chaos streaming around and within her was someone else's reality.

"Idk. Everything diff now. My dad's acting so weird. Idk what he told Melanie. U?"

"Same. My mom is weird too. Emergency appt w shrink tomorrow. Fun."

"Talk later?"

"Yeah. B good."

"U 2."

Kat breathed a sigh of relief. At least she had gotten the first conversation out of the way. It was a start, even if it was a small one. She had known he would contact her, no matter the prohibitions they both were under. She turned off her phone, and swiveled in her chair to look at her bedroom door. Marilyn Manson stared back at her, a single blood red tear tracing its path down one side of his face, smearing just slightly the pancake

makeup that coated his face in white. The poster had called to her, when she had found herself in a retro record store in Boston once, and she still loved it. But she was not seeing Marilyn Manson, or the door itself. She allowed herself for a moment to imagine life outside that door instead. She had not left her bedroom in a day and a half, and couldn't fathom stepping into the hallway and beginning the descent into the hell that awaited her in the living room, or the kitchen, with her mother, and her sister. None of it seemed possible. How could she begin to explain? How could she even look at her mother, let alone try to get her to understand? She longed desperately for someone to carry her away, to force this episode into the past, to have it over and dealt with. Abruptly she put these thoughts out of her head and grabbed her earbuds. She made her way to her bed, didn't bother to change (she was still in her pajamas from last night anyhow. What would be the point of getting dressed?), and plunged under her covers. She turned her phone back on, careful not to look at the messages, put her music on shuffle and lost herself to the screaming of her favorite band, A Sky So Black. As she listened she imagined the freedom of just letting go. Just screaming and screaming until her voice gave out and her throat bled. She wouldn't even need an audience, just the release would be enough.

Resurrection

BETH RICHMOND

Rrrrrraaaaawwt!

Rrrrrraaaaawwt!

Thursday

It was a late spring evening. One of those New England warm-enough-for-shorts days, but cold-enough-to-not-plant-your-vegetable-garden-for-risk-of-frost nights.

Rrrrrraaaaawwt! The cries echoed from across our wooded backyard. The noise was not the soothing chirps of peep frogs, nor the low rumbling croak of a bullfrog. This was a sound not unlike a baby Pterodactyl emerging from its egg.

I waited and listened. My ears anticipated the next cry so I could follow the piercing sound to its source, Marco Polo style.

My bare feet stepped off the wooden deck onto the cool, prickly grass. Rrrrrraaaaawwt! The pool. I padded carefully over to the four-foot tall stone-colored vinyl pool, tucked in for the winter, donning its thick green woven cover.

I moved closer, silently hopping from one stepping stone to the next, avoiding the piercing pain of walking barefoot on the stones surrounding the pool. There! On the gray ledge, mostly hidden from view, tucked just under the side of the cover, peeked two bulging eyes atop a shapeless form. The eyes, reflecting the evening light, were like a lamp to his soul.

I called my kids to come see the source of our late-night wakings. They ran back inside and dug through the kitchen drawer, re-emerging with a Tupperware (while their brother stayed behind to find a lid that would fit).

Beth Richmond

The oldest and bravest of my children tiptoed slowly to the edge of the pool, while her sister timidly held the bowl.

Speaking soothingly, she told him, “It’s okay, we’re here for you. We’ll take good care of you.” She reached over and slid her fingers beneath the pile of flabby folds enrobing him seamlessly, rested her thumb on his back to steady him, and lifted his limp body up and over to the waiting basin. With utmost care, she laid him at the bottom of the vessel. Gently, they placed some lettuce and a bottle-cap of water beside him - an offering of a last meal - before delivering him to his woodland paradise in the morning. My son pierced holes in the plastic lid with an old nail, sealed the container tight, and placed him beneath the rose bush in the garden while darkness began to fall.

Friday

Early the next morning, while the air was still crisp and the dew settled on the grass, my three children retrieved the Tupperware from its hiding place. They paraded him down the steep hill of our neighborhood, passing a dozen houses that stood quietly by and watched the procession. The specimen trembled within the tomb of his captors.

The procession stopped at a thicket of bare trees that stood silent. They stepped into the tall, whispering grass along the side of the road. A tangle of branches and thorns impeded their unsteady trek down the wooded slope that led to a trickling stream. There, they placed the creature on the top of a rock, alone, to return to its rightful kingdom.

Saturday

“Mom! Come look!” My three children dragged me out to the backyard and over to the pool.

“Look carefully at the pool cover.”

At first I didn’t see them. But gradually they came into focus - darting movements here and there caught my eye in the water puddled on the pool cover from a winter of snow and melt. A few, no, a hundred, no... thousands of swirling, swimming, darting little heads with pointed tails waving behind them rushed aimlessly around the pool cover.

Babies, offspring, followers...tadpoles. I could only imagine they were all frantically searching for their Creator - vanished, with no body for them to mourn.

As I stood and pondered how to prevent a plague from originating in my backyard, my daughter slipped inside and returned with a head of lettuce.

“Now we have to feed them *all*.” she stated.

Sunday

After a day of rushing to early morning soccer practice and the grocery store, throwing in laundry and cooking dinner, I sat on the deck and admired the silhouette of the barely budding trees against the pinks and blues of the sunset. It was a moment of quiet reflection on the week, the day, my family. I glanced at the pool and thought about the fate of our visitors.

Rrrrrraaaaawwt! I jumped up. Rrrrrraaaaawwt! What?!? Rrrrrraaaaawwt!
I scurried off the deck. Ouch, ouch! Stepping firmly on the LEGO-sized rocks that surrounded the pool.

Rrrrrraaaaawwt! How could this be?

I paused and surveyed the cover of the pool.

I gently rolled back the edge of the pool cover. There sat a small mound of gray flesh - sides quivering with each labored breath, gently staring into my eyes.

I could see him now.

He had returned to save his children.

Jesus Frog

Living Room

STACEY LANDOWNE

It wasn't that my father indulged my mother. That implies a patronizing attitude. Nor was it a matter of her wish being his command. Her decorating visions for our home simply went unquestioned. In service of those desires, he exerted himself.

It's only when I think of what my mother's visions entailed that I wonder if my father ever suppressed an impulse to curb her vision. Consider the capacious front hall closet he converted into a water feature, leaving only a thin sliver of a closet in its stead. Even a slight child had to turn sideways to retrieve, without the aid of any interior light bulb, one of the game boards stacked on its narrowed shelves. This seeker might flick the light switch that remained in the dark closet, forgetting momentarily, before being startled into remembrance that it now serviced a noisy water pump.

I can imagine that one might be impressed to walk into a restaurant and be greeted by a grotto feature. Why a homeowner might wish to impress guests with a smaller version, I'm not certain. I can only assure readers that the landscape this offered the various figurines a child plays with, including the Christ child and all other stock characters featured in a holiday crèche scene, was unmatched.

These babbling waters took on a more solemn sound the day my sister, who was just reading the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, revealed to me the sorrowful news that the Beatles had broken up.

My father was a salesman and won a trip to Spain in the mid 70s, a reward for being a top seller of auto parts in the Cleveland area. My mother returned inspired. She leaned into a vision that began with the fountain. Living room chairs and a sofa were reupholstered in gold and royal red. The carpet was dyed in the rich purple hue of a Seagram's Crown Royal pouch.

She pasted coins of Spain onto velvet and framed them. A carved wooden coat of arms plaque with crossed swords was displayed over the fireplace.

Stacey Landowne

Why shouldn't we live like kings?

It was the summer before my first year of high school and I was standing in that very room having the hem of my school uniform taken up when I met my first boyfriend. My mother explained to Jim and his friends Roger and Randy the inspiration behind the purple carpeting, a thing never before seen.

"Spain," Randy, the quietest of the three said simply, indicating it all with a stately gesture.

Heads Up, Feet Up

AMANDA PETERSON

Crush and Squirrel

Crush tossed another child into the icy river and considered his good luck and the strategy of his next move. He was genuinely enjoying this accidental job placement. He and Squirrel had been camping by the river when a diesel engine truck with smoke stacks and trailer pulled up to the boat ramp and skidded to a stop.

“Are you the guys?” called out a distracted man in a wetsuit and with a visible wad of twenties in his hands. He was barefoot and permanently leathered in the places the wetsuit did not cover. “Thanks so much for coming down, double-booked the morning somehow. Unload here, and we’ll meet you in two hours at camp. Oh, don’t forget to tell them ‘heads up, feet up’. It is a safety regulation now.”

Crush and Squirrel looked at the money, looked at each other, and unloaded the large white water river rafts while a dozen girls alighted from a large white transport van rented by the girl scouts organizer.

Squirrel, to hide his sunspotted and pocked Irish skin, put on the Asian conical hat he had swiped from an elderly Taiwanese man in the last old folks’ home they hit. The men had been feeding their fentanyl and morphine habits by dressing as nurses aide temps. The desperate rehabilitation center secretaries never asked any questions, and sent them to a floor with no one answering the pleas of the elderly for water and help to the bathroom. Understaffing meant the men had zero supervision. They would choose a room, give the patient candy, and peel the half-used fentanyl patches and stick them to themselves, or take the dripping morphine IVs from the critical patients. They would then pretend to clean while they fleeced the room of all cash. Things had slowed down as word began to spread, and they had to put more distance between their hits.

“Heads up, feet up,” Squirrel called out as he tossed another girl scout in the river, her shriek drowned out by the freezing Ococee waters. The

chaperones shifted uncomfortably as the child floated, spurting water and flapping, to the trailing raft captained by Squirrel. Crush's muscles, tattoos and demeanor reminded them vaguely of someone who had done time. Was this part of the schtick, or was the the beginning of Deliverance? The chaperone breathed in sharply when another soggy eight-year-old was splashed unceremoniously onto the floor of the raft. Eliciting some audible prayer in the yellow raft.

Marley

Marley, oddly enough, had enjoyed being thrown in the river and fished out again earlier this summer on their yearly field trip. This year's trip had been to the Ocoee River in Tennessee, but the lesson of 'heads up, feet up' was working almost as well on this wall of water working its way toward the Connecticut River. Thankfully, she never forgot 'heads up, feet up' because now she needed it.

How could she have known that the levees would be opened in advance of the forecasted hurricane? They usually only opened them in fall to drain the lake. But concern about incoming rainfall had caused local lake engineers to make the call to lower the water levels early this year. She and Lilia had only run about half way through the culvert that extended under her parents' property before the water caught them and flushed them downstream. Marely had reached the surface and immediately went into float position. But where was Lilia?

Crush and Squirrel

Their employment at the raft company was cut short when the real raft replacements arrived at the meeting point and called the owner. The two fakes took the pay and some jewelry they had insisted the passengers give them for "safekeeping" in the river, and stole a 1985 red Ford Ranger that a local fisherman had left in the parking lot with keys in the ignition. It wouldn't be missed for several hours. They headed north, their southern route had become too predictable, and they both had enough warrants in

enough states to encourage regular movement. Crush reevaluated their situation. The old folks home gig was drying up and soon people would start confirming their ids. He looked at their new truck filled with lores and fishing poles, thought of how fun it was to throw the girl scouts overboard, and hatched a new plan.

“Where to?” asked Squirrel sifting through the glovebox looking for snacks and hitting the motherlode in a metal lunch box packed by the fisherman’s wife.

“The Connecticut River,” he replied. Then, pressing the side of his phone, “Hey Siri, tell me about the Boy Scouts.”

Marley and Lilia

The day had started out boring. The girls’ mothers were engaged in one of those doorway conversations that could go on for hours. Lilia, who had always lived next door, may as well have lived on another planet from Marley. Lilia’s dress was new and clean and smelled like Downy. It was expected that it would stay that way. Her dark brunette hair was always painstakingly pulled into french braids, and tied with matching elastics with colorful plastic balls attached. Her hair was expected to stay that way, too. Lilia’s visits came with a long list of “don’ts” but Marley did not believe in all that. She was a free-range child, and it was serving her very well.

Lilia knew she was heading to a church tag sale after this, so she opted to stand under the ancient willow, while Marley sat, and they casually observed a heron on the cow pond standing in motionless wait. This became boring, so a yard tour was initiated. First, a mouse family under the firewood stack. The babies were now old enough to move unsteadily around the nest of fluff and horsehair from a nearby farm. Lilia was wide-eyed and very much in the spirit of the tour now.

“What else, what other animals are here?!”

Marley, considered, and led her friend down a worn garden path, Lilia did her best to avoid the dirt, until they reached Marley’s mother’s potted tomato plants, and she began lifting leaves until she found him. A jumbo

tomato bug, green with eyeball looking markings down his side- delightfully terrifying and the perfect second stop on the tour.

“He looks like Aboslem, the caterpillar, from Alice and Wonderland,” Lilia observed.

“You look like Alice,” Marley teased, indicating the freshly pressed blue and white dress.

“How does that story start again?”

“She goes down a hole, and it’s a portal to another world,” she summarized.

“I know what would be fun.” Marley had a *pièce de résistance* in mind for the tour.

Crush and Squirrel

Squirrel was the technology savvy of the two, and he showed off his fake Facebook business page and fake reviews on Angie’s List with pride:

“Low-cost camping trip for advanced level boy scouts. The boys will: demonstrate proper fishing, catch and clean their own dinner, make a campfire from firewood they collect, and set up their own shelter. One night camp. Only \$75 dollars per boy. He had included a QR code of GPS coordinates, and his Venmo account, and waited for his seven scheduled campers to come to him. “We do nothing, the boys catch us fish and build us shelter, and it costs us nothing.”

“I like it. Do you think they will notice?” asked Crush.

“No,” replied Squirrel, “I looked up the Boy Scouts. It will be fine.”

Marley and Lilia

“Are you sure that this is safe? It is really dark,” inquired Lilia. As she looked for signs of mud in the culvert.

“It only has water in it once a year when they drain the lake into the river. I’ll video you running, and it will look like you are going down that hole from the story for an Alice in Wonderland Tiktok.” Lilia started running. “Wait,” insisted Marley. At that moment, Marley looked up at the onslaught

of lakewater heading in her direction, and knew why Lilia was running.

Poor Lilia had never learned the importance of ‘heads up, feet up.’ The most dangerous thing you can do is try to stand up in fast moving waters with rocks underneath you. A foot can become lodged, and the force of the water will pull you under. This is by far the most common river danger. And Lilia, who was desperate to feel the security of the ground beneath her in the running water, immediately found herself in this exact situation- able only to come up for a few gulps of air at a time and a choking scream.

Marley came to her aid as fast as she could find her, but could not hold up her friend, nor could she dislodge her foot. So Marley had to make the choice to run and find help.

Crush and Squirrel

“Crush, do you hear that? It sounds like a kid screaming for help.”

“That is a girl,” clarified Crush. “We are running a boys’ camp. She is not our problem.”

“But Crush, she might be missing. Missing kids have rewards.”

So Crush sent up the call to his fleet of boy scouts all trained, not by Crush of course, in CPR and water rescue. They extracted Lilia with precision and efficiency. Two boys pulled her up for air, and four others dove down and pushed over a rock that had her little foot in a vice grip.

Lilia was already talking when Marley returned with more help from a nearby home. The ambulance soon arrived and with it an opportunistic news reporter who heard the call go out and couldn’t miss the opportunity to tell the following news report:

“Tonight is a story of heroes. Today on the river a camp full of boy scouts put their own lives in danger to save a little girl caught in an unexpected current. The boys did an exceptional rescue, working as a team to ensure the little one made it safely out of the raging river, but tonight has another set of heroes. An even bigger thanks goes to their counselors, Crush and Squirrel, who give up their own time to teach the next generation of men about courage, honor, and public service.”

That night, the duo's Venmo began to fill up with donations for their boy scout camp. Crush gratefully contemplated his good luck and thought of a strategy for his next move. He had successfully spent decades evading responsibility for his crimes, but unbeknownst to him, he had finally committed a crime from which there is no coming back- underestimating the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America- and Crush and Squirrel's luck was about to run out.

2023 WRITING RETREAT PARTICIPANTS

My Home on Wheels

JULIA KNEELAND

In this picture of me as a baby I'm being held by my father in front of our family's first home, an eight-foot-wide silver mobile home parked near the beach in Narragansett, Rhode Island. My dad had just graduated from Zion Bible Institute in Providence the spring that I was born. He was happy and proud of his new life that he and my mom were making for themselves.

Dad worked as a car salesman while attending school in Providence and discovered he enjoyed selling and was good at it. That talent plus a fondness for mobile home living had taken him and my mother to West Hartford, Connecticut, where both were hired by a large successful mobile home dealership called Jensen's.

We lived just up the hill from the dealership, in a small apartment in a brick building. I was about three years old. It was located close to a church we would walk to and attend on Sundays. I stayed with sitters when both my parents worked. I remember the sitter was a nice lady who took me to a local park where there were swings to play on. My grandmother, my mom's mother, and my aunt, who was only four years older than me, also lived in a mobile home not too far away. My grandmother was a single older mom, and her life was especially difficult in those days. She worked as a manager for a small mobile home park in which they lived. I would sometimes stay with them. I remember my grandmother drank lots of coffee and would always say, "I'm going to pull my hair out by the roots," meaning that the park tenants drove her crazy! Of course, she never did.

After a few years of selling experience at Jensen's, my parents decided to venture out on their own. They bought a small mobile home business from a man ready to retire. So, we moved to East Windsor, Connecticut, along the Connecticut River Valley, in tobacco and farm country. It was a good location for a dealership right on a major route connecting Springfield, Massachusetts, with East Hartford, Connecticut.

Julia Kneeland

My dad would expound on the advantages of owning your own place. He would take customers through the mobile homes and say, “This could be your new home. Everything is included! All you have to do is move in.” Sometimes he would pound on the wall and say, “This is a well insulated mobile home.” Another plus for these mobile homes were that they came fully furnished. Many of the customers rented tenement apartments in Hartford or local cities and towns. With low heating and electricity costs, many people could afford to purchase their first homes. And they didn’t have to move their new purchase far. There was a mobile home park next door to the business and a smaller one located across the street.

The property the business was located on was owned by a sweet elderly lady named Mrs. Robb. Her home was toward the back and was actually her summer cottage. Mrs. Robb’s yard was like a park garden. Her house was separated from the business by a beautiful hedge of red rose bushes extending the entire length of the property. She tended her garden lovingly. It was full of apple trees, lilac and mountain laurel bushes, and a wide variety of flowers including lilies of the valley and Irises.

We lived in a mobile home parked in front of Mrs. Robb’s home. We did have some privacy from the busy road because there was another mobile home parked on side of ours. We had a small yard with a white picket fence and a swing set.

Eventually the business grew so big that my parents needed more room to display the mobile homes, so they decided to rent the neighbor’s adjoining cornfield. At the peak of their business, there were more than twelve mobile homes parked in two long straight lines, new units out in front and used ones taken in trade in the back. My dad did most of the selling, with my mom’s assistance. She mainly took care of all the book keeping, including checking credit and typing the bank papers. I also participated in the business. I mowed “the field” as we called the neighbor’s cornfield. Also, whenever a used mobile home was taken in trade, it had to be cleaned. I enjoyed being part of the business and my parents would pay me a little money for my help.

My parents' mobile homes were like large play houses on wheels. My friends and I had many styles to choose from. Early on the models were mostly simple eight to ten feet wide ranging in lengths from forty to fifty-five feet. They typically had one to three bedrooms with a choice of front kitchens, front living rooms or bedrooms. I think my favorite was the 1959 Pace Maker tri-level model. I always was impressed that a mobile home could have an upstairs just like a regular house. In 1964, the American came out with a twelve-foot-wide mobile home. Because of their width special permits had to be obtained in order to move them to parks. In 1973, an Aetna mobile home sold for \$3995 with lot rent as low as \$35, making the investment affordable for the average working person.

Selling was second nature to my dad. He was enthusiastic and persuasive, and he had the ability to show a genuine interest in his customers' lives. He would always shake their hands, make eye contact, and smile. He was usually dressed in a suit and tie, no matter how hot in the summer. Naturally my friends and I would try to encourage the customers to buy. We hid inside the closets of the mobile home spying out my dad with his customers. As they came through looking at all the fine features we would jump out and yell, "Surprise!" Then my dad would laugh and say we were also included in the price. Most of the customers took this well.

One major part of the business was finding spots in mobile home parks. Unfortunately, some parks would not accept any children and if they did it would be only two. Some of the mobile home parks were quite attractive. I remember one park that looked like a country garden. The lots were spacious with trees and shrubs growing around and the tenants added their own flowers and yard embellishments. Parks would not usually allow dogs, but cats were fine. I remember going on deliveries with my dad. I would help him as he backed the truck up to the hitch of the mobile home. I would beckon him back then give him a signal when he was close enough. He was always appreciated my help. I also assisted him when he would be picking up a unit from a park that he was taking in trade. He would have me go inside with a big roll of masking tape and tape up the doors and

drawers including the stove and refrigerator.

Sometimes I would find little kitties wandering around the park. I would pick them up and cuddle them knowing he probably would not allow me to take one home. So, as my dad was working around the mobile home to get it ready to move, I would hide the kitty under my shirt and slip inside. Then I would put the kitty in a drawer shut it and tape it up. I would assure my dad that I had done my job completely, and we would head for home. Once we got back home I would “discover” the kitty, acting truly surprised that it had just wandered into the mobile home on its own and delighted that it was there. After my dad got in the habit of double checking my work.

By the late 1970s the demand for mobile home living had changed. Customers also changed. Before people would do business based on reputation and trust. Later people were more critical and would often back out of deals at the last minute, threatening to sue if not allowed to get their deposits returned. The demand for mobile homes had definitely passed. So, what began as an answer to housing shortages after World War II declined into a dinosaur during the later part of the twentieth century. Today many towns have restriction on parking mobile homes even on privately owned land. Part of the reason is because mobile homes depreciate in value every year. And the taxes collected by towns also decrease. My dad was a proud veteran of World War II and was also part of the growth of the mobile home industry.

Everything but Buttercups

JOAN SELIGER SIDNEY

Only yesterday I drove miles of toffee-
treacled back roads, trying to find my way
to that farmers' market NPR's Faith Middleton
likened to the red sky at night, a sailor's delight.
No GPS, Smartphone or even a Google map,
lost in ribbons of possibilities, scissoring
left and right, until, a burst of light, then
the sky laced peppermint led me to the site.
And what a sight it was! Conies
chasing chickens, farmers' pretty wives
skipping behind with very sharp knives.
Aisles of tables laden with sweet-
smelling snuff, excellent jacky, soft tommy,
and succulent chops, a taste of Great Britain
hidden in these distant woods like a gift
waiting to be unwrapped.

Joan Seliger Sidney

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Diane Ayer teacher English at Lyman Memorial High School in Lebanon.

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Caitlin Donahue is an educator and writer who has studied at Emerson College and the University of Connecticut.

DANIEL MURPHY

Dan is a secondary English and Theatre teacher and playwright. He has written plays performed in readings, development workshops, and full productions in collegiate theater and participated in new works drama festivals off-broadway. Thanks to Jason, Jane, and Kelly for their support and guidance in the UConn CWP Summer Institute.

AMANDA PETERSON

Amanda Peterson is a writer and teacher from Columbia, CT. She has a bachelor's in English from Florida State University and a Masters of Teaching and Learning from Coastal Carolina University. After teaching for 17 years, she was determined to develop her own writing style and teaching abilities by attending the Connecticut Writers Project last summer. She teaches English and creative writing at Montville High School, and hopes to inspire the students she teaches by modeling life-long learning.

JOAN MULLER

Joan Muller is a retired teacher and an artist.

KELLY ANDREWS-BABCOCK

Kelly Andrews-Babcock teaches at Killingly Intermediate School.

JANE COOK

Jane Cook has been working as an educator for over 40 years and as a Literacy and Technology Coach for over 30 years. Since 2007, Jane has served as a Teacher-Consultant for CWP, serving in various capacities including Co-facilitator of the CWP Summer Institute, CWP Technology Program Leader, and CWP Grants Program Leader. Currently, she works as an Educational Consultant providing workshops and support in curriculum, literacy, and technology. Jane began writing for her high school newspaper and has never stopped.

EMILY GENSER

Emily Genser has been teaching secondary school for 22 years, and has taught every grade from 6-12. She finally found her sweet spot with grades 11 and 12. She is a writer and a reader, and a mother of two, and somehow laughing through the chaos of it all.

BETH RICHMOND

I'm Beth Richmond - a Reading Specialist at Dr. Charles E. Murphy Elementary School in Montville, CT. This summer at the CWP Summer Institute at UCONN, I explored writing narratives, poetry, and fiction for the first time. I also researched methods to support my elementary students' reading comprehension skills. The story I submitted grew from a summer memory with my 3 kids and morphed into a metaphor through collaboration with my writing group at the Institute.

STACEY LANDOWNE

Stacey Landowne teaches English at Fairfield Warde High School. A graduate of the Bread Loaf School of English, she came to teaching after careers in advertising and publishing. She loves discovering books by wonderful, but forgotten writers.