

**The Gnu**  
**A Literary Journal**

**Spring/Summer 2008**  
**National University**



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### Introduction

It never fails: as soon as the temperature rises to 85 degrees, I can concentrate on nothing besides the thought of the warm Daytona Beach sand beneath my toes. All the trials and tribulations of daily life—papers to grade, stories to write, laundry to wash—fail to compel when the ocean breeze beckons. But, no beach excursion would be complete without the great joy of basking in a lounge chair on the shore with a good book.

This summer issue of the GNU is indeed a good book. As I am making my final edits, I am picturing my classmates enjoying the magazine in their various vacation destinations. Perhaps you are reading the issue on an airplane, ripe with the anticipation of a fanciful Caribbean getaway. Perhaps you are sitting at a Parisian café, awaiting your morning crepes. Or, perhaps you are sitting in your home, wishing you were on your way to a Parisian café... in any case, it is my hope that the summer GNU is part of your warm-weather escape.

-----  
As this is my last issue of the GNU, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the following people:

Matt Amaral, who worked tirelessly on the cover and layout of the issue – thank you for putting up with my tyranny without ever so much as a cross word. Good luck with your issue, Mr. Editor-in-Chief.

Frank Montesonti, who answered all of my questions, no matter how silly, with grace and speed. Thank you for everything you've helped me with the past year. I'm sorry you had to suffer through reading my awful poetry!

Heather, Pam, Robert, Suzanne and the rest of the editorial staff – thank you for your hard work and your insight.

And, of course, thank you Colin Dickey, for helping Matt and me through the internship class. I believe it lent a sense of clarity to our process that we would not have found otherwise. I will try to look at writing as more of an art than a business so I will not end up an elitist pompous ass like other commentators in the industry. ☺

Lastly, I would like to thank all the MFA students that contributed their work to the GNU. I wish I could print all of your pieces, and please know I truly enjoyed reading every work that was submitted to the magazine. National University is practically bursting with talented writers.

Best,

***Katie Evans Jackson***

*Editor-in-Chief*





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Editor's Pick:

### Talking to My Shingles

Elaine Medina

I've had enough of you.  
One year of pain gripping my upper right quadrant,  
a series of baby scorpions biting that won't let go.  
Inside my armpit, deep, behind my shoulder  
blade, working my main nerve and its branches:  
biting, gnawing, chewing, stinging, knifing.  
Bent over from the digging jabs, for six months.  
I grab my side and walk around holding it.  
Tied up with ace bandages and scarves, I pull--  
tight, tighter...to try to numb the piercing.  
When it passes for a few minutes, exhaustion,  
my eyes blood shot. Resting in the living room--  
the kick-back sofa helps. For I can't tolerate  
the hardness of the bed or even one thin sheet  
on my skin--my poor husband.

In my third month, a visit to Scott, my hairdresser,  
he barely touches my hair--can't stand it.  
Gotta go--I tell him, and jump off the chair demented.  
Sorry, Scott. Run out—back to my cave.  
There's no morning or night.  
Sleep--impossible. In between, assemble  
three one-thousand piece puzzles of  
England, France, and Italy: c'est moi  
riding upstairs in the double-decker red bus,  
shopping at a Patisserie,  
feeding pigeons at St. Marks.

Last six months no strength  
and a singular sharp pain is left,  
centered inside my axillar. Must have  
swallowed a belt buckle or an open safety pin--  
the kind used for those Scottish skirts.  
One day, my friend psychologist  
suggests: talk to your shingles.

When home alone, I ask:  
Why are you here? What do you want to tell me?  
I'm here because you haven't learned your lesson.  
For years you worked like a machine.  
No sleep, no rest, nothing but work.  
This is your fault, or have you forgotten what  
you told me that one time?  
What? What did I tell you?  
You told me—I want to work and work until it kills me!

Oh that...yes I remember also crying in the car.

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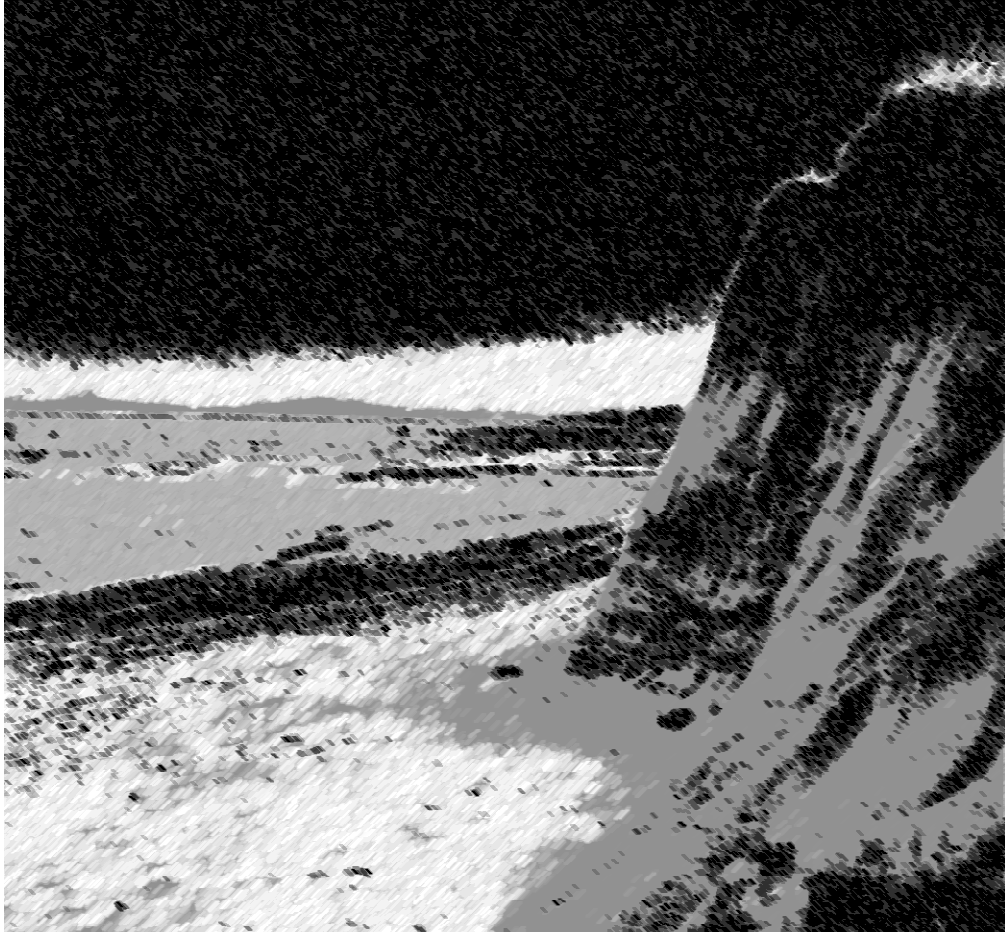
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But it was because of the anguish of my childhood,  
my parents, the way they were. I was trying to forget.  
You're right. I did say that and meant it at the time.  
Now, it's an older and wiser me. Don't need parents to love me.  
I'm my own parent. I've learned my lesson about work and  
want to enjoy my life.

But you still have a job like the last one, and the one before that.  
Check your resume.  
You're right. But when you're a principal  
its expected you work till the job gets done-- whatever it takes.  
Don't care if you drop dead—that's why we pay you the big bucks.  
But to be honest, for the hours put in, and ruined health,  
it wasn't worth it. No, I'm getting out. Anyway, I'm too ill.

All right then. Last time I believe you.  
Remember, to get me back-- no sleep and lots of stress.  
Next might be your optic nerve. I can make you blind.  
Yes, yes. Just wrote my resignation. Already feel better.  
Thanks for the talk.

# Poetry





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### My Thoughts on Brown Eggs

Amanda Kanouff

Three little miracles, nestled in a bed of dead grass, surrounded by brown, gold and red. Now cocooned and sheltered in warmth and darkness. Later, possibly cracked and eaten, possibly grown and killed. Situated in the middle of a world they will never understand, regardless their fate.

The red hens are surprisingly submissive when I gather their unborn young from under them. No fight, no struggle, as if they were born knowing their babies would never hatch. An abortion for poultry. Tomorrow there will be more eggs, and I'll send my younger brother to gather them.

### The Fisherman

David Dannov

I was stuck in traffic on the 405 North,  
heading toward Long Beach—  
exhaust pipes coughing and people honking  
in the pouring rain of an afternoon.

Just by looking at their expressions,  
I could tell something was wrong.  
They looked panicked  
as if the freeway  
was a ship in a storm, water gushing  
through a hole in its hull.  
Everyone knew it was sinking  
and they were doing everything they could  
to keep the water from taking her under  
into the depths of total madness.  
Feeling all this myself, I wasn't sure  
I'd be able to sit in my car for much longer  
without wanting to cut my fingers off.  
Then, just when I thought my nerves  
couldn't take anymore,  
through the rain, I saw a billboard,  
which towered over the freeway, advertising  
a fishing boat company.  
I laughed, picturing myself  
sitting atop the roof of my *Trooper*,  
wearing a rain hat in the pelting rain—  
fishing rod cast into the traffic jam;  
drivers honked in fury and  
stared with scowls, unable to understand  
why I didn't care  
that the western world  
was sinking into the sea.

**Comatose Cave Painting**

Amy George

Take me away from this hole  
from this sin, this crushing weight.  
Your voice speaks from another place  
and I am here. I am here. Forget  
what they've told you. I'm not gone.  
I am here! I am here!

I am here listening, as you plan  
to bury me again  
to thrust this cave,  
this cursed, cursed cave  
deeper into the earth.  
What then?  
I'll beg to tell you  
I have a soul,  
beg to move just  
a finger, to raise the lid  
of my own coffin...  
the sheet they'll pull  
over my head.

I wonder if you'll  
know, if you'll see any sign  
when the last breath  
escapes me.  
The last "I am..."

I've given up calling out.  
I screamed for hours,  
for days, for eternity.  
"I am here! I am here!  
I am here in blank blackness."  
You were just on the other side of the wall.  
But no Telltale heart murmurs,  
no beats ricochet through the fog  
you've accepted because they told you so.

And the echo fell back  
into the silence,  
into the space  
behind my closed eyes.

Here in my cave,  
I paint. The past,  
the present I can't see  
and the ugly worms  
that will eat me.

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Don't give up on me.  
I'm here. I'm here.  
I'm here.

### Feng Shui Amy George

I picked up a book on Feng Shui  
not because I was interested in  
pleasing the minor deities,  
but because I thought a simpler existence  
might help me locate  
useful things  
like the phantom socks  
whose lonely mates I've been holding  
in a drawer for the past  
two months.

I figured Feng Shui could help  
minimalize my avalanche of stuff  
that was threatening to crush me by  
its sheer force.  
(After all, the furniture arrangements  
always looked so tidy in the magazines.)

I opened the book and read how  
I should keep a fish of prosperity  
in 82 degree water  
in a northwest area of my home.  
One fish didn't sound too bad.

I also read that I should  
keep fish in groups of nine  
to prolong my life, eight  
had to be goldfish because  
eight would bring prosperity.  
One fish with the eight needed  
to be black and I could not,  
should not,  
under *any* circumstances,  
keep them in my kitchen  
because kitchen equals fire,  
which does not equal water.

I had to make sure all mirrors  
showed my whole face or  
I was doomed for eternity  
and I needed to carry a small mirror  
at all times, to ward off evil energy.



### The Gnu

A cow statue would bring me luck  
when placed on my desk.  
But then again, so would  
a crystal jar of bonbons.

My books needed to be ordered  
in the northwest part of my home  
(Or was that the south??)  
I needed feathers in doorways  
and crystals in the bedroom,  
doves carved in wood and  
a chandelier to bring me love.  
Carefully placed chopsticks  
would bring me children.

I decided to rid my home  
of all chopsticks.

By the end of the book,  
I realized  
I could live just fine  
with single socks.

### Mr. Jazz Man

Amy George

Hey, Mr. Jazz Man,  
I see your foot tappin' out the rhythm,  
notice the way you move your head,  
bobbin' it to the beat  
like Joe Frazier in the ring.

I grin at the suppressed sway of your hips  
and the relaxed way you hold the bass.  
She's your lady tonight.

You tenderly caress her neck,  
run your hands and fingers fondly  
up and down her strings:  
pluckin'  
slappin'  
dancin' joyfully.

Because that's your way.

While the cool glacier pianist  
sways his head genteelly  
and flows with the melodic line  
of the sheet music in front of him

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and the sax player moves in waves  
of motion, his whole body and sax  
a palm blown by  
seaward winds,

you are the fire  
that captivates the audience  
as you cut through the music,  
eyes closed,  
fingers blazin'

raisin' the temperature in this room.

### Natural Interaction

Amy George

As a child, I wanted  
to be the wind, hold  
the blackbirds up  
as they swooped and turned,  
bursting forth from clouds,  
in and out of shadows.

The trees would bend and sway  
in a choreographed dance  
and I would conduct it all.  
When the time was right,  
I would strip them of their leaves,  
shower the earth with color.

I did what I could.

I watched the leaves  
as they spun and floated,  
kicked them from the ground  
so that they would flutter down again.

I skipped rocks on pond water,  
just to feel the power of orchestrating  
something from my fingers  
that touched the wildness  
of the world.

I tossed pine cone seeds in the air,  
just to see them spin their way  
to the ground, like dozens  
of tiny doomed helicopters.

**Sonnet to a Saltine**

Karl Rubinstein

Oh, little cracker that I see  
your salty crystals shining so  
like tiny diamonds in the glow  
of stars and moon upon the sea.  
Good, kind, morsel 'tis just to thee,  
and to thy comfort that I owe,  
the last power not to blow  
my beets or biscuits aft alee.

T'was by thy benefit so true  
that I could swallow through my throat.  
I dared not masticate my stew  
while pitching in this goddamn boat.  
Thee soothed my mind, and belly too;  
thus here, thy goodness do I note.

**Poem**

Karl Rubinstein

You stand, strong  
and audacious;  
a new wing  
risen from the ash;  
a new sun  
to shine  
in the first day.

**Poem**

Karl Rubinstein

It's the girls, isn't it?

Really, hasn't it  
all been about  
those lovely,  
diamond-smart  
vivaciously in-your-face  
girls?

The ones with  
the brilliant  
eyes;

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the ones with  
the derisive grins

whose slim beauty  
poked you  
just beneath  
that secret rib,

the place you  
didn't think they  
knew.

Those girls  
who could float on  
the aura of their smiles,

who could walk on the  
water of your tears;

who could dance  
you into the hope  
of tomorrow.

Another promise  
of a new reality.

**Cassano Summer**  
Donna Kendall

The passionate allure  
of my native soil.

Its blistering earth,  
chapped from deep within.

Baking internally like crusty *pane*.  
The golden earth, the color of bread

splits and cracks. Evaporating inferno,  
trying to escape an unseen barrier. The heat

held in. An ancient *forme*  
Baking the village, and its loaves –

heat rising like ghosts wiggling upwards  
pushing away from the crust. Releasing.

as the air surrenders. Scents of rising yeast, warm  
fleshy dough – giving way to arid crumb

Splits apart. Like the particles of hot air.  
Crackling.

Several Miracles Before Breakfast

Andrew Freedman

The sun rises in the east

I trace with two fingers  
the rice paper skin  
drawn across her proud Russian cheekbones,  
wonder at the sudden shocks of silver  
in her swift, tangled hair,  
her small, secret breaths  
barely raising the comforter,

uncomplicated light in the hallway,

the bearing walls, joists, knotty beams  
have all held,  
the pine slat floor still level,  
same trees outside the same windows,  
the neighbor boy plays his scales before school  
but for once perfectly

enough cream for the cat  
and the coffee  
though no one has shopped  
or thought of shopping

Nothing has wilted  
or given in to the callousness  
of our absence  
these hour less days

someone has draped my mourning coat across a chair back  
dried the silverware  
piled the mail neatly away

I find the photo on the table

You're trapped inside that silly suit forever now  
jardinero  
the tie always a little crooked  
same half convincing smile  
but your hands, big knuckled and restless,  
find their way to something useful  
outside the frame

as if you could be measured  
or contained

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### Infinitives from a Waitress

Roxanne Mills

To hoist up a tray with six chicken dinners  
To shoulder it through the crush  
To juggle four coffees and not spill a drop  
To know under your right thumb is decaf  
To smile and laugh at all of the jokes  
To slip a big tip in your pocket

To hunger, encumbered by food  
To grab a warm yeast roll out of the steamer  
To load the next tray while you chew  
To savor the last sweet morsel of dough  
To shove swinging doors as you swallow

To feel a lift when the waiting lines' gone

To spot an old warrior slumped small in a booth  
To fuss over him like a fond daughter  
To tug back the years with a delicate ribbon  
To pocket his smile when he goes

To blush as you linger beside the back booth  
To scribble your name on a napkin

To lean on the back wall as the night slows  
To write songs on the back of your tickets

To move in the cool embrace of the night  
To hold hope for something more

Hue Ling  
Deborah Phillips

They thought me dangerous.  
So they sent me to Uncle. Uncle  
said I may come but must  
immediately cease and desist

from healing people without their  
permission or, come to think of it,  
even with their permission. No, you  
may not ask permission. You are

not to heal again. That is the end  
of the conversation. I give you work.  
Do the work only, nothing else. That  
is all I have to say to you.

Uncle turned away; I took off my shoes  
good for walking and unpacked  
my few things from my small sack  
in my tiny room with the narrow bed.

For one dollar per minute I work knots out  
of the shoulders of rich ladies. Some  
try to make me talk their language but  
I will not . . . I smile and say Chinese

words, I understand all they say,  
I smile and bow and turn away, it  
is over, they must go now. Ladies  
want to make friends but I cannot

allow to be friends. Being friends  
is not safe. Not safe for me or ladies.  
If we are friends it will happen again  
and I will be sent . . . where . . . there

is no where else. So I press the knots  
of stress out of shoulders and keep  
my thoughts here in my head private,  
alone, safe.

Until now.

Today she came— one hour please,  
on the table please. Yes, Lady, over  
here, lie on table. Face down please.  
She took off her shoes not good for

walking and put her body on the table,

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face down. Is she a rich lady, I don't

know, but she has more than knots.  
She has dark deep sickness that

will take her soon. She does not  
speak; when I begin my work I  
feel and see the dark growing  
deep in her body. I feel the cold.

It is not, I know, too late, there  
is time yet. Time to bring light  
into the darkness, time to – no!  
it is forbidden, I cannot, I can*not*.

I work the knots in her tense body,  
her dying body. I soothe the muscles  
until she lets go, fades into light sleep.  
The curtain is pulled, no one can see

she lies face down, sleeping, she will  
not know. One small movement, one  
brief flick of my hand over the deep darkness  
and I am back to working the knots in her neck.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have transgressed. They will soon  
discover my transgression and come  
for me. I will go now before they come,  
before Uncle and family are shamed.

I pack my few things in my small sack,  
I wear my shoes good for walking.  
Why did I transgress again? I sigh at myself.  
She did not need me, she is rich lady

with famous doctors. Why am I not more  
strong why can I not let the deep dark be?  
What will they do, I know of no place  
they can send me to be safe from me.

My dirty door rattles with knocking.  
They have found me! I must flee!  
There is no other way out, only through  
my dirty door. I open the door to stop

the rattling. Lady stands in my  
dirty doorway, tears pattern down  
her made-up face. I know, she says,  
I know what you have done.

Lady reaches out to me, to grab me



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I back away from the dirty doorway  
 Lady steps into my tiny room, now  
 she grabs my arm in her bony hand.

*I know what you did.* She shakes  
 my arm three times. I begin to  
 shriek Sorry! Sorry! So Sorry!  
 Aieeeee! Sorrysorrysorry!

Lady lets go of my arms looking  
 at me be crazy. No, no, no, she says,  
 please, she cries more tears – I know  
 what you did, thank you; I came to

thank you. She sits on my narrow bed.  
 You are afraid? Yes, I am afraid  
 I wipe away my own salted tears.  
 Then I will tell no one. No one will know.

Not from me. I try to trust her,  
 I try to feel safe. Lady comes  
 to wrap her arms around me  
 for long moments then Lady goes.

I close the dirty door to my tiny  
 room and slowly begin to unpack  
 my few things from my small sack.  
 I take off my shoes good for walking

then sit to make tea. I am calm now,  
 Lady will not tell, I am safe, no one  
 will learn of my transgression. I can  
 stay here in my tiny room and work

to take the knots out of rich ladies'  
 shoulders I am without blame,  
 without shame, I am innocent,  
 I am free from transgression.

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### The Hum of Bees

Corle Huffman

Thirty minutes ago the back garden was alive with the hum of bees, their tiny bodies buzzing about through the flowering lavender, alighting softly here, stopping there, pollinating.

Twenty five minutes ago I was a different person as I watered our bamboo, the thin reed-like ones in the clay pot you bought from the riverside market and placed in the bathroom to bring us love, fertility, luck.

And then I set out a large bowl to make a fresh salad, removing the cool, wet lettuce from the basket, slicing garlic with the old wooden-handled knife.

Fifteen minutes ago my toes pushed into the earth as I lifted myself up, stretching to reach the lower branches where the lemons were just coming ripe—the sunlight piercing through the leaves.

Ten minutes, I heard you turning pages in that heavy book in the backroom, that melancholy story of listless characters about whom I had no taste, for my skin was warmed by the afternoon sunlight, and my ears were straining to find you.

Five minutes ago we struggled hard against sheets. A fullness of raw movement. Soft curves. Tangled hair. A burning union of suns. The cat confused.

And now, in a sweet rawness of sorts, the bed a befuddled mess of blankets, the lush scent of overripe lavender sifts through our open window, the vase on the nightstand undone, the air breathless, breathing hard.

Of the future, and in nine months, the consequence—let it come. Dear—is it not obvious—I have been stung.

### Re: About Our Breakup

Carole Huffman

I am writing just to say  
that I never  
fully mastered the concept  
of April fools—  
My elementary teachers were quite vague on the subject.  
Some kids were disciplined,  
others were not.  
By the way, your car windows are broken.



# Fiction





My Penis in a Nutshell

Peter Hepburn

“Hey doc, don’t take any more than necessary. Okay?”

My flaccid attempt at humor made the nurse chortle, but the doctor ignored me, as he continued sawing away at my penis. To be more accurate, he was cutting into my *vas deferens*, the muscular gun barrel that fires sperm. I’d already decided that my milt was entirely too accurate at finding eggs, so I opted to shoot blanks, rather than cut back on target practice.

“Don’t make me laugh Mr. Hepburn,” the surgeon answered, “If I cut the wrong string your keister will drop down to your ankles.”

He severed the first *vas deferens* quickly and painlessly. We had reached the surgical fifty yard line and he had already had transformed my stringed instrument into something that looked like a cat’s cradle. Not that I allowed myself to look. The nurse started talking about getting something for lunch. *Chinese noodles*, I thought, but resisted the urge to crack wise.

The second *vas deferens* was made of steel. It looked over at its wounded brother, and decided to fight like a little man. The local anesthetic started to wear off. I could feel a slight twinge of pain, then a bit more, then a bit more, until a woman screamed. I wondered where the screams were coming from.

“You okay, Mister Hepburn,” the nurse wiped my brow with a cool cloth.

“Hell no. Give me another shot doc.”

I screamed again, and realized that I sounded like an actress in the Texas Chain Saw Massacre. The doctor gave me another shot of testes tenderizer and told me that I was lucky, because some men have an extra *vas deferens*.

“If I have a third one, I’m keeping it,” I said.

“You don’t have one, and even if you did, I’d take it,” he said as he continued to pluck away.

“Go ahead,” I yielded, knowing he had all the cards and my scrotum in his hand.

An hour later, I steadied myself against the side of the elevator and cursed every bump, as the car seemed to grind itself, and me, all the way down to the lobby. I hobbled out to the parking lot and wobbled my way to my Nissan. I found the treasure chest of ice that I’d buried in the trunk. With loaded ice pack in hand I, pun intended, inched myself into the driver’s seat and nestled the frozen lifesaver into position.

I managed to make my way home where I spent the better part of the next few days watching my gemstones imitate the colors of pomegranates, plums and prickly pears. With time on my hands I took a few minutes to call the city’s street department with the location of nine potholes between Kaiser hospital and my apartment.

## Older Than I Want To Be

Corle Huffman

I am a little cold tonight. But that will not uproot me from my chair near the window. For when the wind stirs just right, the heavy tang of Indian curry carries six floors up into my little corner. Mary's favorite was the tikka marsala. Years ago, I had to give it up. Digestion. But the smell. It is a reminder.

Everything sounds wet in the city—the tires on the road, the drunks in the alley, tourist chatter.

The sun played hide and seek with me all afternoon, ducking behind the top of the Warwick hotel, only to appear later, like a growth, from the side. The soft hue of dusk blends itself into the leaves of the nearest trees: red, dark gold, heavy green.

When did *dusk* become *night*, I wonder, and shrug my shoulders. I suppose that, like so many things, it happened long ago. A siren rings out from a great distance. Somewhere deep in the Tenderloin, I assume.

My son should be here soon. He will be mad. Let him. I wonder what it will be like, this HappyFields community.

And just like that, a knock. Under my breath, I curse myself for teaching him punctuality. I decide not to answer.

“Dad...” I hear him say, muffled. And a knock again.

My moment of defiance over, I reply, “Door’s open.”

I hear the handle twist. I do not turn to greet him. Now footsteps. Then silence. He is looking at the empty boxes. I know. He has that look on his face.

“Dad...” he says. “Dad, you didn’t pack.”

It’s true. I hadn’t.

“I know you don’t want to go.” He sighs.

Over 60 years old himself... When did my son grow up? It is a strange thing. Slow and hard to understand. To see one’s son, old.

Bah. Old. What does he yet know of it? I should at least have packed my T.S. Eliot book. He knew what it was to grow old, to pass time. And so young, too. I remember explaining to Mary how Mr. Eliot knew... he really knew. And, what arrogance I had. With what condescension I argued for Eliot. He knew, I would say intellectually—as if understanding the concept was just as good as knowing. Look at these poems. He knew.

What did I know?—Well. I know now. There was no need of condescension, of arrogance. I should have had more fear. And now *I* am old. Now I know.

“Dad, aren’t you going to take anything with you?”

But how do you pack what I want?—to sit again with my friend Charles on that bench near the English department, between classes, and chide him about those fashionless plaid pants; to take the Geary 37 at night to the beach, with Mary, and smell the sea spray; to walk unassisted, without this cane, down to that corner pizza shop; to be here again, only younger, full of sound and fury and voice.

How can I pack that?

I want this sunset—this chalk-orange sky—those burning, burning clouds.

**Everything for Life**

Davalynn Spencer

The heat lay in the valley's bowl like hot oil in a skillet: thick, heavy, smoking. It soaked into the streets and rose after dark in weary sighs from the shrinking asphalt. It scorched the grass and fields, and dried once-verdant orchards into brittle, block-like squares against the foothills. Jessie stepped onto the bus and nodded at Miguel who sat with one hand on the steering wheel and the other held out for fare. He smiled and returned her nod before counting out her eight crumpled dollar bills. Three boys, no more than 12 years old, sprawled in seats to her left, jeering as she passed in the narrow aisle. She knew she shouldn't take the drink they shoved toward her, a cloth-shrouded bottle proffered by a soiled, bony hand. Her mother would have cringed. But Jessie justified the tepid, homemade brew because she was sick and weak and it was just one drink. She didn't look at the boy when she returned the bottle, but held her hand out behind her as she turned away. She didn't want see another old child, leering at her with starving eyes and matted hair and filthy clothes. *Take it or I'll drop it*, she thought with the next step, and she felt him snatch it from her hand, heard him laugh, then cough and share obscenities with his friends.

Miguel closed the door and shifted gears and she stumbled into a seat half way back on the opposite side of the drinking boys. She pulled her sweaty blonde hair off her neck and held it up in the warm wind from the open windows. It did little to cool the burning in her chest, but she welcomed its movement, preferring it to the still, lifeless air she breathed all day at the reclamation center. The commuter ride home each night after work was the only time she felt like she wasn't suffocating.

*Oh, Mama, how I miss you.*

Her mother had died in June when the state's power grid shut down for good. Life support systems at the hospital had kicked over to their backup generators, but with so many people suffering from respiratory disorders in the dense, dirty air, her 37-year-old mother was just one more in an already overburdened system. Besides, she needed more than life support: she needed life, a new life, somewhere other than California's San Joaquin Valley. They'd had plans to leave, to save their money and move up north, but now she believed her mother had known all along that she wouldn't make it, wouldn't survive. "Get out," she had finally wheezed, pressing Jessie's hand that last night. And Jessie knew she didn't mean the crowded halls of the over-filled hospital where her gurney hugged a pale, impersonal wall. She knew her mother meant the Valley. She knew, too that if she didn't get out soon, she would die as her mother had: too young.

Familiar unseen fingers wrapped themselves around her lungs and she choked against their grip in a sudden, ripping cough that shook her from her memories. She bent in half on the cracked plastic bus seat and fought to control the fit, spitting blood into a rag she carried in her purse. The boys watched, passing their bottle back and forth, as if trying to drown the fear that soon they, too, would cough their lives away. Miguel looked into the wide mirror above him at the hunch of her back, then to the boys who suddenly quieted, and returned his gaze to the road ahead, driving silently on.

Weakened by the fit, Jessie sat up and leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. How long had it been like this? She could not remember living any other way. She had not learned to drive, few people did any more with no gasoline and diesel sold only to city and county transit lines. The very wealthy had fled the valley long ago and the working poor saved what money they had for the \$8 bus



fare to and from their jobs. Sports cars and SUVs, pickups and luxury vehicles sat lifeless on most streets, without wheels and tires, inhabited more and more by growing numbers of homeless who had nothing to do. At first, their owners beat them off with brooms and curses. But what was the use? They couldn't drive their cars away; why drive away the homeless?

The bus slowed and Jessie looked up at Miguel and then out her window. It was not quite dark and she could see they were less than a mile from town, not yet to the first stop, but Miguel pulled over to the side of the road and pushed the lever that opened the door. A bent little man stepped in and up to the aisle. Thick white hair hugged his head like a woolly cloud, and he carried a shiny black plastic trash bag across his back. He stopped beside Miguel, handed him the fare, and reached over his shoulder to pat the bag.

"I got everything you need for life in here," he said with a grin. "Yep, everything you need."

"That's great," Miguel said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "Find a seat."

Another homeless, hopeless man, Jessie thought. She looked out the window as Miguel pulled onto the road, hoping the stranger would not sit near her. "Hey, old man, what'd you say you got in that bag?" One of the boys across the aisle held up the cloth-wrapped bottle. "I'll let you look in my bag if I can look in yours."

Miguel jerked the steering wheel in a sharp left turn and threw the mouthy kid into the lap of his friend. The old man grabbed the seat back nearest him and held on through the turn. Bent beneath the bulging bag, he shifted its weight with an upward push of his hunched shoulders and continued down the aisle to the seat in front of Jessie. In a quick movement that belied his age, he stepped out from under the load and dropped it in the seat before scooting in behind it.

He smelled, and the odors overwhelmed Jessie where she sat mere inches behind him. It took her a moment to identify them, for they weren't really odors, but heady scents she seemed to remember from long ago, as if she had imagined them or read about them in a children's book. He smelled of fresh air and green grass and thundershowers. He smelled like a forest at night, and flowers, and that time of year when tree leaves shimmer yellow and red and fall to the ground. The odd perfume of his presence stunned her, for she had expected body odor or whiskey or moldy bread, not things she hadn't smelled for so long that she had nearly forgotten them. She sat up straighter in her seat and leaned forward ever so slightly to breathe in deeply and slowly.

"So where you headed?"

His question startled her and she jerked back in surprise. He turned half way in his seat to look at her with eyes as green as the grass she imagined.

"Home," she said.

"You by yourself, or are those other rascals with you?"

His question frightened her. Her mother had taught her not to talk to strangers and now one was asking if she were alone. She didn't want him to know the truth, but she didn't want to identify with the younger boys, either, even though she had swallowed their liquor.

"My family's place," she answered.

"That's good," he said. "Family's a good thing to have."

He pushed the bag forward and scooted behind it to lean back against the windows, apparently satisfied with her answer. She relaxed a little and tried to ignore the three idiots across the aisle punching each other and laughing as if they were happy. She knew better.

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She smelled it again, like a fresh breeze, but it wasn't coming from the windows. She could feel the outside air, too, easily detected the difference in its hot, dusty weight. She slid away from the window and leaned forward, pretending to dig through her purse.

*Everything for life*, the old man had said. She wondered what he meant by that. He certainly *smelled* like life – fresh, like the irises and zinnias her mother once gathered in glass bowls and set on their dining room table. And rain. She detected the faintest scent of rain, as if a storm were rolling down over the pine-draped Sierras.

When she looked up he was watching her and she was surprised that it didn't make her nervous. Deep wrinkles ringed his emerald eyes as though he had lived a thousand years and laughed through every one of them. She sensed an unfamiliar peace and returned his smile, and somehow, by just being there, he was making everything all right again.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“What's in a name, you say?”

“No, what is *your* name?”

“Oh, well, that depends on where I am. Sometimes it's Vidal or Vie or Leben. Sometimes it's Het Leven, Athanasois, Chaim, Ghassan, or Umi.” If it weren't for the way he smelled, and the intensity of his eyes, Jessie would have thought he was crazy. Instead she wondered if maybe she were crazy for not doubting him.

“What is it now?”

“It is like your name: He sees.”

“What? Who sees?”

“Your name, Jessica. It means, ‘He sees’.”

Her pulse quickened; she sat up straighter, pulled her purse into her lap and wrapped her arms around it. How did he know her name? She glanced forward at the back of Miguel's head. Had he mentioned her name since the old man got on?

“What makes you think my name is Jessica?”

The white-haired man tipped his head back and laughed full and heartily and it sounded like deep water running over smooth stones in a river.

“Jessie, Jessica – it is the same,” and the lines around his eyes deepened as he squinted and leaned ever so slightly forward.

“You look just like her and she was very pretty, wasn't she?”

“My mother,” she whispered. “How do you know my m-” Suddenly her throat constricted and her lungs stabbed through with the familiar, choking cough. She covered her mouth with one hand and wrapped the other around her middle as she doubled over on the seat.

“She still is,” the old man said softly. “You'll recognize her immediately.”

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It had been just one more long, hot evening for Miguel, shuttling people back and forth from their lifeless jobs during the day to their lightless homes at night. The three rowdy kids got off at the abandoned dairy west of town where he knew they slept in the milk barn on its cool cement floor. He dropped off others – an older Hispanic couple who once told him they didn't want to live in the city. They commuted every day to their jobs and back at night to a shabby home tucked into a dried up, fruitless orchard. As he drove back into town, anticipating the comfort of his own tiny apartment and Graciela who awaited him there, he realized that he didn't remember Jessie getting off. Nor the odd little man with his plastic bag.

Out of habit, he stopped before the blinded eyes of the traffic light at the corner of Prosperity and Futuro and turned right in a sweeping curve and into the county's bus yard. He parked the bus at the north end of the steel building where the dim glow of a hazy moon would shield it from the dark. Then he turned off the engine, put the key in his pants pocket and walked back to see if any of his riders had left anything behind. There had been little to pick up these last several months, very little trash. People threw away less because they reused everything. The boys had even taken their bottle and the old t-shirt wrapped around it. More than likely they would sell the bottle to a glass dealer.

Half way back on the right side he found her lying in the seat, curled up like a child, a faint smile on her lips. He regretted having to wake her from such a peaceful sleep, for he knew she had the cough that would eventually kill her as it had so many of the people he knew, more of them white than brown. Guiltily grateful he wondered what it was in his own heritage that shielded him from the choking death.

Where would she go if he woke her? Maybe he should just let her sleep, for there was no room in the cramped storage space against the bus barn that he called an apartment. He and Graciela slept together on the couch as it was. Yet if he let her stay on the bus, others would learn of it and want to stay, too. He couldn't let that happen; he couldn't risk his job.

He leaned over to touch her shoulder and nudge her awake and the sweet scent of growing grass and full-bodied trees rose up from around her, rich smells that reminded him of his childhood home and the wide green pasture in Mexico where long ago his father had run burros and horses. She didn't wake when he nudged her again, and when he held the back of his hand against her colorless cheek he knew that she was gone. He stepped back and looked out through the filmy bus windows into the thick night, toward the soft glow of a candle that Graciela always burned in their single window when he was late. He thought of the barren life that he and his wife had in the city, how they longed for the past when the country was alive and rich and full of orange groves and peaches and cotton and vineyards. He looked again at the girl and bent over her once more. It lingered there still, though fainter, as if it were fading away, the perfume of living, growing things. And in the dark of the empty bus, knowing he would let her lie until morning when he drove her to the body camp, he envied her.

**If Life is a Prison...**

Matt Cates

## I

Walking by the copied houses of suburban purgatory, the wind shuffled and dealt Rick Dreyer an endless stream of fragrances.

"Someone's cooking something good," Lynn presumed, smiling her vacuous smile.

Rick nodded noncommittally. "Sure smells good."

Though his tone suggested apathy, he secretly liked to smell other people's lives. There were always the expected scents – hot fabric softener, sizzling onions – those domestic smells behind which there were probably women. Women other than wide-spreading Lynn. He sniffed and caught an aromatic candle, a wisp of perfume. The root cause of these, too, he mentally traced to a woman. A better looking woman, perhaps.

"Let's walk faster, it's getting cold," his spouse complained, letting slip from her grasp his ungloved hand. Good.

"Go ahead, I'll catch up."

Pervasive was the scent of smoke from burning wood, hanging in the frost air. He wanted to head out to the lake on foot, just fifteen minutes walking rapidly, but in the other direction from that she was going. Let her go the other direction.

He grimaced. "Wait up! Let's go to the lake!"

Lynn half-turned in mid-stride, said back, "It's too cold. Let's go home!" Expected response, though she was dressed almost for skiing. She sped up, the distance between them greatening.

Passing windows, some yellow with curtain-filtered lamplight, others flickering blue from glowing screens, he made his way down the paved sidewalks and the driveways with their black ice teasing. He caught himself hoping she would slip and bust her ass and in that moment his foot missed traction and he almost lost his own balance. He stopped, turned to look behind him toward the direction of the lake, just past the two newly-constructed three-story homes. Always, there was construction in this exclusive neighborhood. Society kept pressing in, backing him into a corner. He could see the strip of Douglas firs that lined the lake. Sublime, they rose up, hundreds of years high, some. Proud ancients scratching the sky. Intermittently, the moon peered at him through black silhouettes of tangled twigs and he could make out, in his mind's eye, the lights of porches reflected off the obsidian surface of the still lake water.

His breath fogged his lenses. He listened for life but heard only cars in the distance. Tilting his head back, he observed the Big Dipper, his friend since childhood. Always there, pointing to Polaris. This made him feel suddenly very old and disenchanting. He wanted to feel hard, like one of the trees – but he knew he was soft. He wanted to be fierce and untamed, but nothing was afraid of him these days, if anything ever was.

"What are you doing, Rick?! Hurry up, let's get home!"

His reverie shattered, he wondered about home. Why anyone would ever want to go there? No one could breathe in that place. Yet marital obligation rang its tinny bell and he started back again, the tips of his ears getting cold, his nose only now running. Rick looked up to see his estranged wife ahead. His feet walking his body forward but his spirit lingered near the calling wilderness. Nothing had been the same between Lynn and him after the incident in Los Angeles. 2:14 a.m. on

Sunset. He'd never forget that time, displayed on the dash of his prized SLR McLaren Roadster as its polished front fender collided, at approximately 85 miles per hour, with the rough denim-clad legs of some random pedestrian. That late at night, in that part of the strip, it was probably a junkie, rambling down the road in search of a fix - but they'd never know. She'd never forgiven him for speeding off, but never told a soul, either. Just as guilty as he was. After, they had decided together to make the permanent move to Bellevue, a posh "East Seattle" community, thinking the distance would separate them from the deed. Thinking, with the guilty logic of the extremely rich, if they sold their multi-million dollar home in California and bought a less extravagant place up in the Pacific Northwest, something rustic, in the woods, perhaps, they could somehow get back in touch with nature, be redeemed through the act of simply escaping the city. There, in the manicured wild, they might forget the damned thing and move on with their lives.

This didn't happen.

Instead, the foul weather of the north served to deepen their collective depression, the damp chilling their bones and spirits, the snow drifting into the growing rift between them, frosting over the relationship pathways, freezing out the lines of communication.

## II

The winter broke. Lynn's things were out of the house by late spring and their divorce finalized on the last day of summer. He gave her everything she asked for. But she didn't ask for the house, didn't want it. Moved to Vegas where the desert might cleanse her in its twin crucibles of sunlight and alcohol.

Alone, Rick wondered what to do with all that empty space. The fall season passed slowly. His film friends had stopped calling and his agent said he had nothing worthwhile. Such was karma, Rick supposed. Then one overcast day in late October, as he walked to his beloved concrete bench overlooking his favorite scenic stretch of Lake Washington, a twisted idea rose to the surface of his fogged consciousness. Always a man of action, he implemented his plan swiftly. Within two weeks, the renovations of the guest bedroom were nearly complete. He made a final melancholic trip to the lake, sat down to watch the migratory buffleheads and surf scoters diving for dinner, and wondered if he had he forgotten anything. Then he went home to put on the finishing touches.

## III

Rick smoothed the final square foot of the thin layer of concrete he'd poured directly onto the floor of the small, spare room. Standing with aching knees, he observed the overall effect - the concrete floor, the grey-painted walls, the barred windows with one of the sliding panes removed to let in the cool autumn air. The stainless steel toilet and sink where a marble top Victorian dresser had once stood. Those had been a plumbing nightmare, installed at great expense and with no small number of quizzical looks from the maintenance men. He'd explained that his ill sister was moving into the room and she required a toilet and sink close by her side at all times. This dubious story was told even before he'd made the other renovations, when the room still looked like an ordinary room and not a prison cell. Still, their eyes questioned him, accused him. Fair enough; it was a lie. He had no siblings. Rick paid them in cash and gave them each his autograph.

On the floor was a plain, single mattress. In the left side of the closet on wooden hangers were twelve sturdy, navy-colored, long sleeved jumpsuits. Up on

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the closet shelves and stacked high on the right side of the closet were six pair of long johns, fifty-two t-shirts, fifty-two pair of underwear, and fifty-two pair of socks, all white cotton. There were also a pair of Nike walking shoes, twenty-four cotton towels, twelve bars of soap, fifty-two rolls of toilet paper, four tubes of toothpaste, one toothbrush, a new down pillow and a thick, neatly folded Army surplus blanket. And on top of the blanket were his only “luxuries” - four ink pens, four spiral notebooks, and a leather-bound bible with gold page trim and the words of the Lord in red letters. Here in this place he intended to stay for one penitent year. After that time he would release himself, he - the judge, jury, and jailor. It was easier this way rather than turning himself over to the authorities to be humiliated, to lose face in front of the world.

“Rick Dreyer has decided to take a year’s sabbatical,” his manager explained to the media. “You won’t be seeing him, the paparazzi can’t track him where he’s going.” The tabloids ate it up, as is their custom to feed on bullshit.

Rick had thought a great deal about his incarceration and decided to plan ahead for an hour of exercise each day, outside in the enclosed courtyard. Even in real prison, inmates were given at least that much. Probably more, he imagined, though really he had no idea. The only prison he’d ever seen was a set in a warehouse in Hollywood. On the wall he’d placed a small shelf which held the key card to his room door, a special key to a special lock. Custom made, also at great expense, the Schlage standalone electronic smart lock allowed itself to be unlocked only once each twenty-four hour period. It would remain unlocked for precisely one hour and fifteen minutes, just enough time for him to exercise and grab a box of preserved food stuffs and beverages from the kitchen, or maybe a roll of toilet paper if he ever ran out. After the allotted time, if he hadn’t returned to his “cell” and closed the door, the smart lock would trigger the house alarm, summoning the police and, undoubtedly, the press. The lock’s power supply was tied to a back-up generator and there was no way to disable the lock without triggering the alarm.

The first week was the longest, or so it felt. There were only so many push-ups he could do, only so many songs to sing. Lines of dialogue to recite. Prayers to mumble. His mind wandered under such conditions, did things he didn’t want it to do, went places he’d rather have avoided. Relentlessly, it crept back to the accident. How many parties had he and Lynn attended over his years of fame? A thousand, if not more. How many cocktails had been poured for them and how many times had they made it back to their L.A. mansion safely? Every time. But the last time, someone else had never made it home at all, or so they presumed. Alas, they would never know, having fled the scene like bandits. Such were the consequences of a hit-and-run. A lifetime of not knowing.

Rick had set things up to be intentionally spartan, allowing himself no real entertainment or even access to a hot shower (he washed in the sink). But in the end, it was the littlest thing that annoyed him the most about his self-imposed confinement. He’d forgotten to bring toothpicks. He knew there were some in the kitchen, knew exactly where the box was in the drawer just underneath the microwave. But they were off-limits now. Of all the things he missed the most, he missed those. Food had always stuck in his teeth, ever since he was a kid. He’d carried a box of toothpicks in his Wrangler jacket in high school. In college, he’d kept them in an Altoids tin. They were everywhere in his home, usually stuffed into shot glasses from around the world. On location, his people always made sure to have them in his trailer. Even the Kraft service folks knew to keep a supply handy for him. Without them, he licked at his teeth ceaselessly.

The end of the month found a cool winter breeze blowing into the room. Rick had had a brick box constructed around the window, shaped to allow air in without providing a view of any kind, unless you considered a maroon brick surface a view. If he stacked all his jumpsuits on top of each other and stood on them, craning his neck, he could just make out the outside world through a narrow opening in the box. Eating a granola bar for breakfast, he did just that - stood on the pile of clothing and peeked out to check the weather, as if seeing the source of the draft might calm it. Outside, it was another green and grey wet day, the wind slanting the rain into diagonal sheets. He scrutinized the luxury houses across the street and all the cars in all the driveways. The damp firs poked the clouds, opening holes from which plunged ceaseless torrents. The sun would be gone until spring, for sure, and with it his hopes for redemption. It was a mistake to move north; Rick had always been a sun person.

Without caffeine, his brain was groggy, the decades of addiction unshaken. In silence he continued to stare out through the slit in the box, staring at nothing in particular. After a moment, his eyes lost focus and the box was gone. The houses and cars were gone and only the trees were left, standing exposed under the elements, enjoying the copious rainfall as they were apt to do. He watched the trees but they didn't go anywhere. Nowhere, that is, but down where his gaze couldn't follow. His eye saccades tracked the still trees upwards, following them to the skies, then quickly down again, tracing them as they sank down deep into the soil, their roots buried alive in the cool earth. For a fleeting second he felt as if he could feel those roots, connected, their tangled veins touching, relating. They held each other up, living cobwebs supporting each other naturally, their very linkage also keeping the soil itself from washing away. He could see the Great System then, the clouds, the rain, the trees, and the earth - and there! - a squirrel, caught out in the weather and running for cover. Running across the road, feet pounding unnatural pavement. The squirrel ducked under a BMW as a long haired teenager emerged from the garage and got into the vehicle. A blond male youth not unlike the one he'd struck down in his own Mercedes-Benz on Sunset Boulevard at 2:14 in the morning after leaving Jake and Michelle Logue's post-production party.

And then the System was broken, Rick's footing on the jumpsuits slipping. The brick box reappeared before his tired, stubbly face. Reaching down to the mattress, he picked up the Army blanket and draped it around his shoulders, hoping the winter would be mild, but with global weather behaving as erratically as it had been for the last few years, he doubted it. By the end of the bitter cold month, he began to wonder if he would need to break his sentence. This idea was loath to him; he needed to tough it out or it would be a waste of time, his redemption incomplete. He started to wear two layers of long johns under his jumpsuit, which helped substantially, but as the nights grew colder still and his breath became visible in the dimness, he wondered if he would allow his pride to lead him to a frozen grave.

## V

His answer came soon enough. Rick Dreyer did not pass gently into the night but shivering and moaning, pneumonia set deep in his lungs, too weak to even attempt escape. When the final cold dawn came, he rose weightlessly and, looking down, he saw the obvious reason for his lightness - his rigid corpse lay huddled and locked, half off the mattress, his cheek flat against the concrete floor. Leaning close to gaze into his own dead eyes, Rick lamented the fact that he had not lasted two

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months incarcerated in his own home. How weak and pathetic! No doubt he wouldn't have made it a solitary week in a real prison. But now his sentence was ended prematurely and he wondered where to go next, felt he should be someplace else. His glance shifted to the bible, still resting untouched in the closet. There was no guidance or direction, no actor's assistant telling him when to be in make-up or how much longer until he needed to be on the set. This was the set and he, the only actor, was on it, waiting for the director to appear. There was no director. He was paroled from his term, but no one was aware. Above and below and everywhere in-between – all seemed oblivious. And somehow, he had predicted even this final anticlimactic ending, knew that this script of his life would be missing the final page. On the floor, scratched in like an autograph and hand print in wet cement, was a question he'd asked himself while down on his hands and knees smoothing that final square foot - "If life is a prison, where do you go on parole?" Now he knew.



The Hit  
Erin Reaume

Jane Mary was blasting the *Hair* soundtrack at top volume and singing along to as she drove her little purple Escort through nowhere-land. Snowflakes began to hit her windshield lightly, which even in Michigan, was unusual in September. She knew she had at least four more hours on the road before she would be home, and had become concerned she would run out of gas. She was beginning to hate her job at Lifetouch and especially her boss, Frank, who was never supposed to send her more than a hundred mile radius from her tiny Detroit apartment. Even so, she was constantly being sent to the other side of the state, the Upper Peninsula, sometimes to Illinois or Indiana. The worst part was, it was always for these little country schools, with ten or twelve students. What was the point? She had taken the photography job so that she could have afternoons off, but it wasn't happening. These trips were taking the whole day, and her car was starting to run like shit. Driving so far was difficult: Jane Mary was bad with directions, and she hated the cramped way her car felt jam-packed with photography equipment. Times like these made her wish for a cigarette, and she had given up smoking three weeks ago. She kept her car loaded with CDs, instead, so that she could become absorbed in the music and forget how pissed off she always felt.

She hadn't seen a gas station for at least sixty miles. This seemed impossible. The snowfall became furious, and Jane Mary grew apprehensive. She reached to turn off her music, when there was a sudden sound of metal against metal, followed by a scream and a thud. Who screamed? Perhaps she did. There was this carnival sense of spinning, and her jaw hit her steer wheel, hard. She must have bit into her lip or tongue, and could taste the blood in her mouth. The motion stopped. Ice. She must have hit ice on the road, and the car was stuck in a snow bank. She was shaking. Had she not been paying attention to the road? She hadn't seen anything; but she had a terrible feeling that ice wasn't the only thing that she hit. She was afraid to find out. Dread overpowered her. "White Boys" was blaring. With a shaking hand, she finally turned the music off.

She got out of her car. The snowfall had turned into a blizzard, and she was miserable. She was wearing this thin little gypsy skirt, shoes without socks, short sleeve blouse and no coat. When she left for work this morning, it was seventy degrees.

She had no way to prepare for what she saw lying on the other side of the road: a bright red bicycle, bent and contorted; and a man with a halo of blood soaked into the snow around his head. With a breath, Jane Mary rushed to his side. She could see a bit of his skull. She thought she could see a part of his brain. Was this some kind of nightmare? She closed her eyes. It seemed too unreal. The country road. The September snow storm. The bits of brain. She opened her eyes again. The man and the blood, the ruined bike; they were all still there. Jane Mary checked for his pulse. There was none.

She began to scream. Her skull felt like it was closing in on her brain. What could she do? She remembered the terrible night, eight years ago, that her cousin Robby hit and killed a motorcyclist on the way to his prom. He was underage; he couldn't be tried as an adult. The motorcyclist's family was on Robby's side. They knew it was an accident and didn't want anything bad to happen to him. Robby didn't go to prison, but his life was still ruined. He started smoking a lot of pot. He didn't go to college. Shit, the kid was president of his high school class. What was going to happen to Jane Mary? She was 25; her age wasn't going to

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buy her any sympathy points. This place really was full of nothing; and there was no one who would be able to say that she was ever here.

Still. She wasn't just going to leave him there. She wasn't the type of person who could just hit and run. She reached into the dead man's pocket and pulled out a worn, leather wallet. To her horror, it contained a student ID. Reading High School. His name was Matthew Mackenzie and he was just a kid. Without considering her actions, she tucked the student ID into her own pocket and set the wallet on top of the boy.

Jane Mary went back into her car and pulled her cell phone off its charger. She dialed 9-1-1. There was no reception. She dialed again and again with no result. She turned the cell phone off and turned it back on again; it didn't seem to make a difference.

"Okay," she said to herself. "I guess I'm going to have to get help on my own."

She went back to the body and talked to the dead boy. "Listen, Matt. I want you to know that I'm not going to leave you here. I need to get you some help. I'm going to come back."

She paused, as if he was answering her, and then got back into her car. It was deep in the snow. She tried starting it again and again, but the vehicle would not budge. The needle of the odometer was on E. She wouldn't be able to get very far, even if she could dig herself out of the snow.

"Damn it!" She shouted at no one in particular.

The snow seemed to become more vicious. Her feet were already frozen in their sockless shoes; she could barely feel her fingers. Jane Mary observed her surroundings. This was genuine nowhere-land. She knew there would be a farmhouse every five miles or so. The thought of knocking on the door of some strange farmhouse was creepy. Who knew about the people who lived out here? The concept of actually walking in the snow until she could find one was even more horrible. But she couldn't leave the boy out there on the road, even if she wanted to. She was, after all, stuck. They were both completely stranded, and she had no choice but to find a farmer. She tried her cell phone every few minutes as she walked, but this was a genuine dead zone.

Jane Mary walked and her feet became more like blocks of ice; her hair was actually frozen into little strands of icicles, and the only reason that her face was not completely numb with cold were her burning hot tears. She rubbed the student ID that was in her pocket with frozen fingers, almost unconsciously. Why would someone ride their bike in weather like this, anyway? It wasn't safe. This couldn't be her fault, entirely.

When Jane Mary finally saw a dilapidated house in the distance, she felt a glimmer of hope. But when she pounded on the door, no one answered. She peered into a window, and saw only broken beer bottles and empty cans, a sleeping bag, some milk crates. This house had obviously been abandoned for a very long time.

She had to start walking again, and the next house she found was three miles away. She knocked on the door and no one answered. She could hear Bob Barker's voice loud from inside the house, and knew the television was on. She banged at the door frantically. Dogs started barking. Finally, an old man wearing thick glasses and flannel pajamas answered the door.

"What do you want?" He asked suspiciously.

"I need to use your phone!" Jane Mary wept. "I ran someone over and now he's dead and my car's stuck in snow and my cell phone won't work."

The man just stared at her. He made no move to let her in. Jane Mary could see into the living room behind him racks of guns and wooden ducks. "Is this some kind of joke?" The man asked.

"Does it look like I'm joking?"

"Ask somebody else. I can't help you." *The Price Is Right* blasted behind him.

"Why not?" Jane Mary pleaded. "There *is* no one else."

"I'm busy. I don't know you. I certainly can't let you use my phone or let you into my house!"

"You are *not* busy!" Jane Mary shouted. "At least let me use your phone. Look at the way I'm dressed, are you just going to let me freeze to death?"

"That's really not my problem." The man closed the door in her face.

A desperate Jane Mary sat on his porch for a few terrible minutes. She tried again to use her cell phone, but still without signal. She stood up and pounded on his door.

"Come out of there, old man! What kind of person are you!" She shouted. She continued to pound on his door until it just hurt her knuckles too much and she had to stop. Defeated, she sat back on his porch.

The man finally opened the door back up and handed her a cordless phone. "I've already put the sheriff's number in," he said almost apologetically. "You just need to press 'talk.'"

Jane Mary pressed "talk" and called the sheriff. She explained the situation to the dispatcher at the sheriff's station. "Where are you?" The young, female dispatcher asked.

"Where am I?" Jane Mary asked the old farm man.

"Tell her you're somewhere between the village of Allen and the town of Reading."

"What? I need an address."

"That is the address," the man was annoyed. "You're between the village of Allen and the town of Reading!"

"At least a zip code?"

"There is no zip code!"

"They'll never find me," Jane Mary told the man, who didn't answer her. She told the dispatcher, "I am between the village of Allen and the town of . . ."

"Reading!" Shouted the old man.

"Okay. Reading," Jane Mary repeated to the dispatcher.

"Alright. We'll have the sheriff there within the hour."

The snow continued to sadistically fall. "Are you going to make me wait outside until they get here?" Jane Mary asked the man.

He hesitated. "No. I guess you can wait out in my old pickup truck."

"Seriously?"

"Go ahead. It's open."

"Can I have the key?"

"What for?"

"To get it started."

"You planning on stealing my truck, girl?"

"I'd like to run the heat." Jane Mary was infuriated.

"Key's in the truck," the old man retorted.

Jane Mary gave the man a mean glance, and then got into his rusted red truck. She turned the ignition on and cranked the heat. Some Johnny Cash song was playing on the radio, but Jane Mary quickly turned the radio off and rested her head against the ice-cold steering wheel. She wished that she could sleep. Fast food

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wrappers and old pop cans cluttered the floor of the truck. After a moment, Jane Mary took out the student ID and studied it. When Matt was alive, he had dimples and very nice, soft blue eyes. He probably had a girlfriend, and parents that were so proud of their son. She wondered if he had been an artist or an athlete. He had been a junior; that would make him sixteen or seventeen. He had probably already taken his ACTS. Maybe he had started filling out college applications. Whatever dreams Matthew Mackenzie had, and whatever hopes his parents had for him, they were all crushed to nothing now. All of this was because of Jane Mary and her pathetic music.

Someone knocked on the driver's side window. Jane Mary jumped in her seat. It was the old man. She couldn't roll down her window because the handle was broken off, so opened the door instead. The old man motioned for her to scoot over. She climbed into the passenger seat and the man got into his truck.

He didn't say anything, and they just stared at each other for a moment. He was no longer wearing the flannel pajamas, but had on jeans and boots, a heavy flannel jacket and a mad bomber hat, flannel with ear flaps and lined with gray rabbit's fur. The man's face was deeply lined and his hair was dusty gray. Jane Mary realized when she looked at him that his skin was completely void of liver spots, and that his skin was not waxy and paper-thin as a person who was truly elderly. Maybe he wasn't as old as she thought.

Finally, the man interrupted the silence. "Sorry as I haven't been terribly nice to you. You must be having a rough time."

"Yeah," Jane Mary said softly.

"I'm not used to being bothered by people these days. My wife's left me and my boy . . . my boy's left, too."

"Sorry."

"I'm John, but most people call me Mac." He extended to her his gloved hand, which she limply grasped.

"You don't seem like a Mac."

"So this man you hit. You sure he's dead?"

"I'm sure."

"Nearest hospital's close to fifty miles away, you know."

"Oh," Jane Mary mumbled.

"You should know," said the man who was called Mac. "They put people away for doing what you done. That's involuntary manslaughter or what have you. I think I would've left if I was you. I think I would've just plain left."

"How could I leave? My car is stuck, and I'm almost out of gas."

"I'll sell you a can of gas. I'll take you over there. We can use my truck. You know, the sheriff won't be here any time soon."

"That isn't the right thing to do, John."

"How old are you, girl? Twenty?"

"Twenty-five."

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Jane Mary, if you have to know."

"Well, listen here, Jane Mary. They'll put you away till you're fifty. You'll never have kids, never have a family, you'll never have any life at all."

She felt uncomfortable next to him. "Are you trying to scare me, John? It wasn't on purpose; it was an accident. I won't go to jail."

John shook his head. "You don't know nothing, girl, you don't know nothing at all." He lit a cigarette. He offered one to her. She had done everything in her power the past few weeks to avoid the temptation of cigarettes, and would have hard time forgiving any friend who offered. This time, she took it gratefully.

The two smoked silently in the rusted red pickup truck, which was finally starting to get warm with the heat. When she had finished her cigarette, she flicked the butt out the passenger window and decided to talk with her companion.

"It wasn't a man I hit, it was a kid," she told him. "Sixteen or seventeen years old. He was riding a bike, but without a helmet. Red bike. I think his brain was crushed."

John appeared stunned. "How do you know this?"

"Because I got out and took a look at him. He had dimples when he smiled and these nice, blue eyes. He was a good kid."

John started the truck and backed out of the driveway. "Which way did you come from?" He demanded.

"Right," Jane Mary said, bewildered. "What are you doing?"

"I have to see him. You've got to show me."

"Okay," she said slowly. "What about the sheriff's department?"

"Take their sweet time, don't they? Don't worry about them."

They drove until nearly eight miles down the road, until they came upon Jane Mary's purple Escort, half covered in the snow. It wasn't in a snow bank at all, but just parked peacefully at the side of the road. The truck came to a halt, and they both got out. Jane Mary walked slowly to the site where the boy and the bicycle had been. They were both gone. "This can't be possible," Jane Mary whispered.

To her dismay, John dropped to his knees, right in the snow.

"John, what are you doing?" She was afraid. John was weeping.

"What are you trying to do to me?" The old man said gruffly, between sobs. "Who are you?"

"John, he was here. I swear he was." She surveyed the site again. There was nothing but pure, white snow and her car on the side of the road. No blood, no pieces of broken bicycle, certainly no human remains.

"If he was dead when you saw him," John said. "How do you know what his eyes looked like? How do you know about his smile?"

Out of her pocket, she produced Matthew Mackenzie's student ID. She handed it to John. "This proves that he was here."

John gazed strangely at the ID. He removed his thick glasses and set them down in the snow, to have a closer look. Jane Mary noticed his eyes for the first time, soft blue eyes that seemed so sad. He took off one of his gloves and caressed the ID with his fingers. Finally he looked up at her. "You didn't hit Matthew," he said quietly.

"I did," she started to say, but John interrupted.

"No, you didn't. Matthew's been dead ten years. What you experienced here . . . I don't know what it was. Something like a memory of this place and what happened here."

Jane Mary was aghast and felt a chill down her spine. She believed what the man was telling her. Somehow, she knew that he was speaking the truth.

John stared straight at John Mary with his sad, blue eyes and continued talking. "I used to have this bad drinking problem, see? Not really bad, I didn't think so, but I was the kind of guy who went to the bar a lot. My wife would always say, you're gonna kill somebody, Mac, drivin' drunk the way you do. And she was right, too. One day . . . he came riding on his bicycle, the one we got him for Christmas. He was so proud of that thing, shiny red . . . I was so drunk I couldn't see straight. And that was it. That was it."

"You just left him here . . . didn't you?" Jane Mary asked.

"I didn't tell no one. Just went home like nothing happened, waited for the sheriff to come break the news. She always suspected, though, my wife did. Never

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actually said so, but I know she did. I couldn't cry when they told me he died. Not at the funeral, neither. She just couldn't stand me for that. I couldn't stand myself."

"Everyone calls you Mac," said Jane Mary.

John was still caressing the student ID card. "Yes."

"Matthew was your son."

John nodded his head. "I just left him on the ground. My own son." He paused for a moment. "What do you think this means?"

## A Portuguese Diet

Mateo Amaral

What is Portuguese food? Can you name it? Could you point it out in a crowd of ethnic dishes? Of course not-- nobody can. The Portuguese are such and enigmatic people, there is not one Portuguese dish known to mainstream American dining tables. Heck, I'm Portuguese, and I could only name a couple.

Of course it is not just in food recognition where my people prove enigmatic. My ancestors were so good at being invisible that the rest of the country failed to notice our arrival and subsequent marination. We were the artichoke hearts of the American salad: spread out, few in number, easily dismissed to the side, and marinated. Our instinct to assimilate amiably settled us quietly into farms and businesses while the rest of the country continued to exist in the raw form. Cities labeled certain parts China-towns and Japan-towns. Black and Latino communities were affectionately given the title "ghettos." Some cultures were successful; most cultures are now known for certain things, like their cuisine or music.

The Portuguese are known for nothing.

There are no Portuguese-towns, no Portuguese Mafia, and there are no Portuguese gangs running around doing drive-bys or wearing pillowcases on their heads. There is not a single Portuguese dish known to mainstream America, nor could anyone identify our music (if we even have any, I don't know). We even lack a celebrity to champion our people to tabloid notoriety. Nelly Furtado does not count because she is mostly silicone. The Portuguese did not take the world over, they were quietly mediocre, and are not known for anything in particular. We marinated.

Like artichoke hearts.

Every four years the World Cup finally arrives to the delight of the Portuguese, and pretty much everyone on earth, except Americans. Being the fanatical maniac I am with everything soccer, I love it when the Cup approaches because it gives me a chance to pretend like I'm really Portuguese.

I don the official red jersey of the national team and whisper a silent promise not to take it off until Portugal are eliminated. I follow the Portuguese players with an imagined kinship in which I like to think we are all cousins. I am fascinated by the unique names like Joao, Costinha, Figo, and I find comfort in the brown of their eyes, hair and skin. The perfection of their bodies, profiles and playing ability make me think the Azore Islands (where my ancestors hail) must have been a penal colony where the mainlanders sent the perverts, mutants and redheads, just as Britain used Australia. I embrace my countrymen and all of a sudden I am consumed with a soccer hooligan's nationalism for a country I know next to nothing about.

During this most recent World Cup I even tailored my diet to appear Portuguese. Taking the queue from successful American restaurants, I created a menu that would appear Portuguese enough to the casual, drunk observer, but prove unrecognizable to an authentic citizen from the country.

I knew three dishes, and luckily one was used for breakfast, one for lunch, and the last iconic dish for dinner.

My breakfasts were simple because all I needed to purchase were a few dozen loafs of Portuguese sweetbread to get me through the coming weeks of international soccer. My mother told me of a Portuguese bakery where the sweetbread was plentiful. "Now when you get there be careful because the painted

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handicapped symbols are faded in those front parking spaces, you don't want to get a ticket." Unfortunately my mother is still under the impression that when I go out into the world I am still a sixteen-year old who just got my driver's license, as opposed to a badly balding bespectacled twenty-something with a beard. "And go SLOW, I think there's an elementary school within twenty-five miles of the bakery." Upon entering the sweet smelling establishment, which had a tiny Portuguese flag taped inside the window, it seemed to me the only difference on the menu when compared to regular bakeries were two items: The Portuguese Sweetbread and the *Malasadas*. I shuddered at the latter, a tingling tap-danced down my back. I quickly bought as much sweetbread as I could and ran out of there retching.

I have a special aversion to *Malasadas*, or Portuguese Doughnuts, from a dark childhood stained by fear and sugar. One year my father got the half-baked idea to learn how to make *Malasadas*, and began fervently experimenting with yeast. The initial batches came out dry and chalk-like. Not realizing that was exactly how it was supposed to taste, he decided to seek help to perfect his craft. Dad began attending our church's annual *Malasada* Bake where he could observe the techniques of experienced Portuguese bakers. So every year since I was twelve, he willingly sat in a hot, crowded room with 40 aged Portuguese women. I thought maybe he was punishing himself for past sins, like a form of corporeal punishment. He had secretly joined some perverted sect of the Opus Dei where instead of whips; followers purged their sins by exposing themselves to loud, gossipy, hardheaded Portuguese bitches in a steam room. Having neither a steam room nor even a sauna, my father had to make do with a large kitchen with all the ovens turned up.

As far as I can tell, *Malasadas* are basically overcooked lumps of bread. If done right they should be brownish-orange in color and covered in large inconsistent tumors. After about an hour outside of the oven, the doughnuts solidify into granite, which seems to be its natural defense mechanism warning enemies of its taste. When a poor, unsuspecting predator does sample the bulbous lead, they are greeted with a chalky blandness not unlike actual chalk. To disguise its taste the Portuguese pile either granulated or powdered sugar over the biscuits, which to me seems like trying to hide an elephant with a palm frond.

Because of our sea-faring history, I always thought *Malasadas* had been created for explorers and fishermen who might be gone for months. Like most rock formations, the *Malasadas* don't seem to deteriorate or decompose unless continually blown by winds for a couple million years, far past the life expectancy of any voyager. I also do not miss its obvious usefulness in weighing down the ship and cold-cocking live catches. The actual origin of *Malasadas* is funnier, and fitting. Evidently they were created to get rid of all the sugar and lard in the house before Lent, the time of year when Catholics pretend to give things up or change their diet, like New Year's for the rest of the country. So on Fat Tuesday *Malasadas* appear on Portuguese tables everywhere and explain the need to get drunk.

And every year my dad would come home from the church bake looking like he had just taken a helicopter flight to Hawaii and back while hanging onto the rotors. Out of pity my sister and mom would act all excited and busy themselves with getting the plates and paper towels. Groaning, my brother and I would raid the cupboards for all the sugar in the house.

With a dazed look on his face, Dad would take a seat at the table, adjust his glasses, run a hand through his wind-blown hair, and silently stare at the napkin-holder.

We would microwave five *Malasadas* to tenderize them from granite to marble and join him at the table. My mom and sister would praise Dad for the excellent job he had done while we each poured a box of powdered sugar on our biscuits.



“Wow Steve, these look great this year.”

“You did so good dad, MMMM, they’re so tasty!”

A few kicks to our shins under the table from my mom would get my brother and I started, and it was moments like those that confirm my belief that most cultural foods are brought about from desperation, like Chittlins.

Once in a while Dad would look up as if wondering where he was; Mom would pat his pale cheek and attempt to flatten his hair until he looked back down at his sugar mountain. On those first days home from the bake, I don’t think he ever touched his doughnuts.

I prefer the Portuguese Sweetbread to *Malasadas* because of its sweetness and ease to prepare. It is a delightful, light way to start a day of *futebol* spectating. The obscure first round morning games, like Lithuania versus Congo, found me in the living room happily buttering large chunks of the bread, counting down the days until Portugal’s first game.

The second staple of my month-long soccer-induced ancestral diet was Linguisa, a popular sausage that serves as a perfect metaphor for American awareness of Portuguese culture. Linguisa can be found in almost every supermarket in the country, however no one realizes it is Portuguese; and we like it that way, any kind of recognition seems to make the Portuguese people I know uncomfortable. Of course the only Portuguese people I know are my parents and grandparents, my siblings don’t count because they are just like me-- American. My parents’ hereditary, shy modestness always seemed most pronounced during Christmas. Any thanks thrown in the direction of my father for good gifts was inevitably followed by “Your mom got it, not me.” Our grandfather went so far as to avoid acknowledging the gift-giving was even taking place. “I already got a pair of shoes.”

Therefore it is no surprise Linguisa has failed to claim its rightful fame as being Portuguese. I get the feeling if anyone did notice, they would either not know what a Portuguese was, or if they did, we would deny having anything to do with it. Linguisa can be consumed for breakfast, lunch or dinner; it tastes a bit rougher in the middle than other sausages, and looks like a freckled horse’s cock. Lunchtime found me munching on Linguisa while watching the slightly better quality of Mexico versus Denmark, because dinner had to be saved for the most famous of Portuguese delicacies.

The main course of Portuguese Festas everywhere, *Soupish* was the obvious choice for a delicious, authentic Portuguese dinner after a hard fought victory on the pitch. *Soupish* is a combination of bread, shredded-beef, and cabbage piled on top of one another, then drowned in a mysterious Portuguese broth. It is in the broth where this guarded recipe maintains its stature, and has the dual responsibility of turning the oatmeal and cabbage into mush, while making the meat edible.

I requested the enigmatic recipe from my mother via email, but never received it. By not sending me the recipe I do not think my mother was trying to protect a cultural secret as much as I suspect she thought I was joking when I asked for it. I did however receive a forwarded warning that using your cell phone while pumping gas will cause you to catch fire.

Without the recipe, most nights during the Cup simply found me dipping hamburger patties and Iron Kids Bread into cans of chicken broth. Like a good American I avoided the cabbage in order to stay away from all things communist. For some reason, it was during dinner, with a mouthful of mushy bread and chicken stock dripping down my chin, that I truly felt Portuguese.

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Between the Sweetbread, Linguisa, and “Soupish”, I didn’t know any other Portuguese dishes. Therefore each day invariably followed the same pattern of Portuguese mockery.

I woke up for the morning match, threw a couple slices of sweetbread covered in butter into the microwave, and chased down the second half with a glass of milk. The afternoon game came with Linguisa, straight off the George Foreman grill, slapped between a couple pieces of bread and a generous lathering of mustard. Finally, the night game would, of course, be viewed with the accompaniment of *Soupish*, or in my case, bread, hamburger, and chicken broth. My ignorance of anything Portuguese limited me to that rather stunted menu, but thankfully my intestines began to adapt. The predictability of my eating schedule delighted me with the most regular shitting agenda of my life. I would eat, and exactly fifteen minutes later I would shit. Eat, wait fifteen minutes, shit. Eat, wait, shit. I even began timing my meals to end fifteen minutes before halftime so I spent each intermission on the pot, not missing any of the action.

This last World Cup was wonderful because Portugal went extremely far into the tournament. At the beginning, my friends showed up with enthusiasm, joking about my third-world heathen food. They would sample the Linguisa with familiarity but never be able to pinpoint its origin. By dinner they would dip their Iron Kids Bread with zeal into lukewarm chicken runoff and laugh until hamburger shot out of their throats.

By the later rounds, however, I mysteriously found myself watching the games alone. There I’d be in my apartment, sopping up new stains on my musty red jersey caused from emptying the grease catcher under the Foreman grill. In hindsight, that absence of company was a blessing in that my duties as host would undoubtedly have been interrupted by my increasingly frequent (and violent) trips to the bathroom.

When Portugal were finally beaten in the Semi-Finals, my mother sent me a care package in honor of how well we did in the tournament, and because she knew how much their success meant to my feverish psyche. The card was brief and congratulatory, with a post-script informing me that my father had not signed the card because he had mysteriously fallen ill after the All Saint’s Church Annual Portuguese Bake. She showed added concern that he always seems to fall sick this time of year. And sure enough, when I undid the bow and pulled back the cloth, staring up at me were two-dozen *Malasadas*, like baby lepers in some radioactive stork’s basket.

On the edge of exhaustion, sitting among grease-filled broth cans, and crumbs of Iron Kids Bread, I embraced my destiny. Portugal had overcome; as a country we had proven our worth to the world by kicking a ball a lot of times into a net. The world would recognize this through the praise of what people on the television would say, and for one brief moment, the country of my ancestors would appear in the American consciousness of the couple-hundred people who follow soccer here.

In her wisdom, my mother knew that in everything there must be closure. Whether it was her love for me, her annoying surplus of doughnuts after the church bake, or her cultural yearning to keep force-feeding me well away from the teat, she had once again provided. Somewhere I hear the voices of my ancestors guiding me. They come from the sweating, brown-eyed faces on the TV and the rooster above the stove. I follow their voices, willfully acquiescing to their Spanish-sounding murmurs. Hands shaking, knees wobbly, I hobble to the kitchen and open that last cupboard door. Before my fingers brush against the box, my people tell me the powdered sugar is there.

My ancestors were Portuguese. I would like to be too, but I think I have been overfed preservatives.

**Mama's Shoes**  
Donna Kendall

If Mama's shoes sat heel-to-heel beside the back door, I knew she was home. Even before I heard her resonant voice or the tapping of her clackity slippers through the house, I knew she was waiting for me in the place we came to call home after my father died. Mama had to go to work after that day when Papa laid down for a nap in the afternoon and never woke up.

The O'Neill's Department Store, in Akron, Ohio had hired Mama to shorten floppy cuffs on men's shirts, hem their trousers or take in bulky suit jackets. They recognized her as an exceptional seamstress; her work was so meticulous it showed no evidence of having been altered. This is what she did for a living and every day, except for Sunday, she walked to O'Neill's because she had never learned to drive a car; she was afraid they were dangerous.

On Sunday mornings I would hear her steps outside my door as she drew near.

"*Figlia mia, alzati,*" she would chide in her native Italian. "Hurry now, it is time to get up, or we'll be late for church." I would scramble to find my white blouse with embroidered flowers, pleated blue skirt, and the matching cable cardigan Mama had knitted for me. When I got to the door I would find Mama standing there tapping her feet in her best Sunday shoes, the red pumps with Sabrina heels. These were her favorite, she'd said many times, since they looked nice but were also comfortable for walking. Mama now had many pairs of shoes that Papa had bought for her when he brought her over from the old country. Back in Italy, Mama had only had one pair of shoes at a time, the wooden pairs that had come down the hand-me-down ladder from her four older sisters.

As we scaled the seven blocks between home and church, Mama held my hand firmly while her heels tapped rhythmically along the sidewalk, and I skipped and leaped to avoid stepping on cracks. *Step on a crack, break Mama's back.* I liked walking near my mother, but I was vigilantly determined not to walk inside her tread. I liked making my own path close to her perfectly guided steps.

As a growing teen, I would sneak into Mama's closet and see if I could borrow a pair of her shoes to match an outfit before going out with my friends. Mama wore a size 7, and my feet never grew beyond a size 6, her shoes were always just one size too big for me. But styles being what they were it was awkward for a sixteen year old girl to wear her mother's pumps back in the seventies, so I wore my own platforms with my little mini skirts.

"*Dove vai?*" Mama would ask if I tried to leave the house in a skirt that was too short. I looked toward my stepfather hoping for support to plead my cause. He was no help as he sat in the kitchen eating the food Mama had cooked for him. I wasn't sure why she had married him. Perhaps she needed help since we didn't have a car, or much money from Mama's job as a seamstress. So he helped us out and drove us to church and to the store. And over the years, Mama continued to sew and make some money to buy pretty shoes that matched the dresses she would create.

When I ventured out of my childhood home, married, and began my own family, Mama would come to visit. She would bring roasting pans filled with pasta and meatballs to help gratify the hungry little mouths in my home. I tried, but never felt I was quite the incredible cook that she was. With each visit she would bring me a homemade gift; something she would sew, knit or crochet to embellish my home. And every time she'd come to visit, she would leave her shoes by my front door and carry her presence throughout my home and enrich our lives with the beauty of her strides.

But nothing prepared me for the day Mama's things were brought to me in a yellow bag the day after the accident. A speeding car had hit the passenger side of my stepfather's car where Mama was sitting. The rescue crew had had to make use of the hydraulic cutters, the Jaws of Life, to pry the mangled steel away from Mama's delicate body. She had just turned seventy-two a few weeks before her final trip to the store for bread.

When her things were brought to me I couldn't speak. I didn't want to open the bag so I walked away and let my family deal with the business of death. I crouched into a corner while my husband took the yellow bag containing Mama's things that had been removed from the demolished Nissan Ultima.

Gently, my husband asked, "What would you like me to do with these?" I shook my head silently. What did it matter? I didn't want to see what was left, they were just things. The objects pulled from the car were not my Mama and I didn't want to sort through her spiritless relics. Dutifully, my husband took her keys, her glasses, and her rosary and put them into a small box on the top shelf of our bedroom closet. Her purse and wallet he took to her house and returned them to the man she had married; the one who had been driving the car, who was now sitting in the kitchen eating the food he'd cooked for himself.

As months passed, and I stepped out of the fog of grief, I suddenly noticed an extra pair of shoes on the rack next to my front door. They were Mama's shoes, her black leather lace-ups, the ones taken from the car on the twenty third of April, 2003 on the day she had died. My husband had taken her shoes from the yellow bag and put them on the rack, next to an old pair of my own shoes that were one size smaller than Mama's. I gently touched the tops of her shoes, the ones she'd worn when she'd taken her final steps in life, and decided to leave them sitting there, next to the front door of my house. As long as her shoes are near the door, I know she's here – with me. These days, we walk together in my shoes, the ones that I leave by the door next to hers, when I am home.

**At Arms Length**  
Davalynn Spencer

Our middle school is the nicest building in town. Mock Grecian columns support the administration building's portico entrance, and an outdoor stage backs up to the gym like a miniature amphitheater. Turquoise classroom doors and window frames stand out against creamy stucco walls, and behind one of those doors, I teach history and language arts to children whose parents work in the leafy vineyards and fragrant groves of the heat-drenched San Joaquin Valley.

Others have left, those who once graded lemons and oranges in the now-empty packing house; those who owned stores across the highway, stores that stand bare windowed, picked clean by conglomerates that drove the small citrus farmers out of business and out of town. Even the car wash has closed.

Like so many other diminishing farm communities, ours is plagued by gangs and their attendant drugs and violence. The remaining residents try to live quiet lives, 3,000 of them squeezed into small frame houses and low-rent apartments along curbless streets. But nearly every extended family has someone touched by gang crime. Big cities have no monopoly on the blight of car thefts, stabbings and drive-by shootings. It spreads along arterial roads and highways into the lives of the country young who want status or money or recognition. On television and in theaters they see and envy the grilled teeth and gold chains of rappers and wannabe's, and it makes them wanna be, too. So they sag their jeans and swagger onto the school ground and jab their chins up in the air to say hello. Not all of them, but enough of them to make a difference. Sometimes that difference pulls them out of school and onto the streets and into trouble with other, older dropouts. And sometimes they do nothing but suffer from the choices of others.

"I don't have my homework," said a dark-eyed girl who drooped before my desk one morning in late September.

"You don't?" I said, taking roll on my computer and only half listening. Alexa often did not have her homework; I had heard it all before. "And why is that?"

"My grandma died last night."

I stopped in mid mouse click and looked into her red-rimmed eyes. Mama Tienda – of course. The 64-year-old storeowner shot during an armed robbery was Alexa's grandmother – Alexa's and 30 other youngsters in town.

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "Don't worry about it." I stood, feeling guilty for being busy. "I'm sorry about your grandmother."

She turned and walked back to her desk and the day took off in the usual way with morning announcements over the intercom and the pledge of allegiance and first-period assignments. But Mama Tienda was dead. The robber got \$200 and the sheriff got nothing and everyone wanted to believe it was an out-of-town banger and not one of our own. A 19-year-old grandson clerking at the store had dropped to his knees when

he saw the gun. The shooter aimed for him but hit Mama Tienda, and she bled to death waiting for the ambulance in the small market her husband had opened 30 years before.

I had been warned. I had been told by college professors not to distinguish between my students, not to fall in love with some and disregard the others. There would always be those who clutched at my heart or clashed with my rule, they said. Keep your distance, don't let it get personal, they said. Keep them at arms length.

But that's hard to do in a community of cousins where one woman bears a blow and so many others feel the pain.

The death of Mama Tienda fell hard on the town, especially the school, regrouping from a brutal murder the previous June.

It had happened the day before graduation, the day when eighth graders push the dress code with spaghetti-strap tops and low-slung surfer shorts and against-the-rules flip-flops. In the frenzy of yearbook signing and disposable camera photography, few of them noticed the two white and green sheriff cars roll up next to the administration building and park near the bike rack. They paid no attention to the plain clothes officers who walked across the perfect lawn and in through the double glass doors.

It had happened that morning, the deputies told our principal. It had happened when the mother of one of our eighth-grade girls confronted her own mother's new husband about molesting the girl. It had happened when he shot her, there on the front lawn of her home, and then killed himself.

The news ripped through the school like an earthquake, knocking students to their knees in shock and grief. Football players cried like babies, their wet faces shining in the hot June sun. Girls clung to each other in stunned disbelief. Yearbooks lay open on tables and benches, their inky farewells stained and smudged.

And when the girl walked across the stage for her diploma the next evening, she carried an 8 x 10 framed picture of her mother which she clutched in two hands and held out to the applauding, weeping crowd.

Three months later, her brother Jericho walked into my sixth-grade classroom. I seated him as close to me as possible so I could wrap my eyes around him in lieu of my arms. Teachers had to be so careful: hugs could be misunderstood, even from those who knew there was no mother and wanted to somehow make it better. Jericho was a beautiful boy, but that was not something I could tell a 12-year-old on the brink of what he thought was manhood. His eyes were dark pools over a fine nose and full lips; he looked like his mother.

For Veteran's Day we wrote messages on red construction paper handprints and taped them to our classroom door. Some were notes of encouragement to soldiers in Iraq. Jericho's handprint said, "There are better ways to die."

Later we discussed thankfulness, and Jericho wrote about Rosie, the shaggy white dog that slept on his bed and made him smile. I imagined his tears had soaked Rosie's neck, that she heard his cries in the night, that she knew his heartache better than most. A boy and his dog – a common story. But how much closer the bond, living now with Dad who had left them years ago?

By late spring the town barber had welcomed flocks of little boys to his shop for their annual shearing. It was the coming heat, I guessed, that forced parents into this

nearly abusive ritual. Every other day or so, a newly shaved head would duck and hide in the morning line in front of my door, and I would say, "Nice haircut," to those near-bald, pale-skinned skulls that suddenly looked bigger. Especially those with ears protruding like great parentheses. But as most of the other boys appeared clean-shave and faded, Jericho did not.

I had noticed certain little things about him during the year, like his beautiful handwriting and neat papers. Or his clever answers during class discussions and how, at other times, he stared distractedly into space instead of reading or working on an assignment. But I had not noticed his hair growing. Later when I glued his class picture to his cumulative folder, I realized it had sprouted like

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unmowed grass on the lawn that suddenly shoots up and brushes your ankles. Sometimes he pushed it out of his eyes, but more often he did not, and would just hide back there behind the soft black fringe.

As a teacher of ancient history, I could not help but see in Jericho a flicker of the Middle Eastern city of antiquity that shares his name, and the people who, over the centuries, have rebuilt again and again upon the ruins of those before them. And I could not help but pray that he would somehow reconstruct his own life in spite of the ruins of those who left him behind.

Many others like Jericho had walked through my door with ancient names: Solomon, whose wise eyes watched my every move and always knew when I was about to call on him; Ezekiel and Daniel who would have benefited from a bit more insight;

Moses the quiet follower; Sarah who suffered through the divorce of her parents, and little David who was constantly on the lookout for Goliaths. Jesus told me his family

did not celebrate Christmas, and Roman and Caesar and Hammurabi were proud to be compared to their namesake leaders in my early civilizations class.

Yes, I had been warned. But then I met Alexa and Jericho, his sister and others, and I spent year after year trying to neither dislike nor love them – trying, as my teachers had said, to be fair. But there were always children I resented for resenting me, and others I did not remember because they made no noise for me to notice them, and those I would never stop loving, for their lives were anything but fair.

And now it is June again and the outdoor stage is hung with blue and yellow construction paper painted for the final assembly with surfboards and palm trees and “We’ll Miss You 8<sup>th</sup> Graders!” I am always relieved to see some of my students move on to the next grade and sad to see others leave. But this time I wonder if Jericho thinks of last year and his mother’s kiss as he left for school the morning she died. I don’t have much time to tell him what’s on my heart, so I ask him to close the door behind our class as we head for the library and I slip in beside him, bending a bit at the waist to step across the threshold of political correctness and into his mother’s shadow.

“Don’t hang out with Alphonso,” I say. “He gets in trouble all the time. Teachers will look at him and see you there. You don’t want to get in trouble, too, do you?” He looks up at me from behind the fringe and nods. I lay a hand on his shoulder, squeeze it lightly and pat him on the back. He is thin, swallowed by fashionably oversized clothes. I want to take him in my arms and tell him he will make it. I want to tell him that even though it hurts, he will make it.

Next September I will see him across the courtyard when he lines up with the other boys in front of the turquoise seventh grade door. He will be taller, perhaps thinner, as is the way with boys his age. The girls will notice his dark good looks, his perfect white teeth, his quick laugh. And at arms length I will wave and call his name and ask him how his summer was.



## Running with Honey and Cinnamon

Corle Huffman

The fierce sun began the day's ascent behind the high-peaked *Montañas Gemelas*, smearing a ruddy-amber mural low across the horizon. As it lifted beyond the summit, and cast the world into clear light, its morning rays streamed down the mountainside, into the village. There, they clipped the tops of eucalyptus trees, pierced dirty windows, and crashed into bedrooms.

One of those bedrooms was painted orange, and it belonged to elderly *Señora Santiago*. And she was lying in bed, dying.

Outside, the village had a single road, flat and straight—*La Calle Principal*—separating the adobe homes in the South from their markets in the North. A long row of thin eucalyptus trees swayed gently on the West side of the road, providing shade.

*Señora Santiago* was surrounded by several people: a nervous, black-gowned priest; a thick-haired, pregnant woman with swollen breasts; and a young boy wearing tan shorts. The boy stood at the hem of her bed, while the priest read from a well-leafed book. Suddenly, *Señora Santiago* coughed. It was followed by a short exhale and a sharp intake of breath. The priest shot a glance to the pregnant woman, whose eyes opened wide: *La Señora* was dying... now. A curious, desperate idea came to the boy, and he dashed from the room.

He ran barefoot across the living room floor, bumped into a table and spun out into the yard. He kicked away the white chickens and ducked through a gap in the fence. Cutting left he crossed through the church garden. The first 7am bell tolled, a high iron clang, slow and solemn. His blood went cold—but he did not stop, no time. His grandmother was leaving. Then, he turned onto *La Calle Principal*, and down the road he raced. The great iron bell struck again. From above, a rush of wind pushed the treetops, rustling their heads. At the end of the road, he cut right,—his breathing labored. The bell struck a third time.

He came to the vender displaying rare roots and multi-colored leaves, organized in rows of tiny glass jars. The lanky man lofted a bag of holistic medicine with his long fingers, ready for the boy's daily purchase, but the boy just flew past. The fourth bell sounded. Two venders later, at a white-clothed table lined with sticky sweets, the boy reached for an amber-colored pastry, dripping with honey and cinnamon. He tossed three coins to the heavily-mustached vender. And the boy was off again, the honey seeping wetly through his fingers. The fifth bell.

Back up the road he raced, his breath burning hard in his lungs. He was going to make it. But near the church, turning too quickly, he slipped, crashing sideways hard to the concrete. He held tight the pastry. Too tight. The fall tore flesh from the back of his hand, and his fingers smashed the pastry into several pieces. The sixth bell struck. And, just like that, he was running again. Tears coming hard. He again cut through the church, dodging the gathering crowd. They called to him, but he did not hear.

Into the house,

'*Abuela.*'

Into her room,

'*Tómelo!*'

He forced the remaining pieces into her hand, all honey and blood and cinnamon. '*Tome esto con usted.*'

Her fingers sealed around his... her eyes closed. The seventh bell tolled.

**Tripwire**

G. Thomas Hedlund

“Get some help!” Mike screamed.

Tom and Rich stood in front of him, mouths gaping. They looked at each other, then to Mike and the body lying at their feet. He was sobering up now. They all were, and in a damn hurry. Mike’s hands and the sleeves of his orange jacket were soaked. So much blood. He couldn’t believe there was so much blood.

“Deer don’t b-b-bleed like th-this. What the h-hell?” He was hysterical and stammering. Mike looked up at Rich, his eyes wide and desperate. “Get some Goddamned help.” Rich stumbled back two paces, unable to tear his gaze from the scene. The train wreck wasn’t over.

A tornado whipped thoughts into a frenzy in Mike’s head. How did this happen? Why was the guy wearing brown, out here, in the middle of the fucking woods during hunting season for Christ’s sake? Why couldn’t he have stayed sober this time? Would he have pulled the trigger so fast if he was? Did it even matter anymore?

His hands pressed hard against the single bullet hole in the man’s chest. Fallen on his back, he still managed to wheeze in air, if only barely. The hole bubbled then sucked in blood with each breath. His eyes were open but no one was home. He was gone. Checked out and en route to that big woodland park in the sky. Mike knew it, yet he couldn’t let go. The nearest hospital was hours away, out here in the thick forests of northern New York. This guy was gone the second Mike heard a twig snap twenty yards away, while his mind focused on bagging the first buck of the season.

Winter had begun to descend on the world. A cold, arctic snap of air swept down from Canada, coating the barren trees and thinning pines with a light glaze of frost. Steam from the dying man’s body drifted through Mike and into the frigid air. It crept Mike out something fierce. ‘He’s passing right through me,’ he thought, still pressing on the wound with all his weight. The man was growing cold. Mike’s red wool hat had fallen off during the commotion and now the painful bite of winter chomped at his ears. His chin dropped to his chest and his blood soaked hands fell to the ground on either side.

Tom couldn’t move. He looked at the lifeless body on the ground and couldn’t believe this was happening again. The hunt, the booze, the laughs. All gone. Ripped away in the blink of an eye. He played by the rules the first time and he still did time. He hadn’t pulled the trigger then and didn’t now, and he’d be damned if he’d go through that hell for anybody.

The bright blue morning had given way to gray skies. The smell of snow hung in the air. Tom looked through the trees and studied the leaf-littered ground. He knew mid-November soil was not frozen solid yet. That would be helpful. Scanning the immediate surroundings, Tom was looking for something in particular. He couldn’t see what he wanted and began to walk deeper into the thicket. Rich called after him but Tom had disappeared.

“Wh- ... where’s he goin’?” Mike asked. He remained on his knees, facing his victim. He looked up at his Rich who had taken several steps away, trying to catch a glimpse of Tom. Rich stopped next to an insect ravaged pine, its lower branches reduced to hard, sharp stumps that stretched out in effort to tear at an unwitting passer-by. His head bobbed from side to side, searching for Tom. It was

like looking for a ghost. Rich suddenly wondered why they had chosen this place to hunt. You could barely see twenty feet.

“I don’t know,” he answered, still scanning the region. “He’ll be back.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you? Come back?” Rich made his way back to his friend and knelt next to him. Mike had shot his share of deer but this was entirely different. His body felt sluggish, like he was suspended in honey. He could’ve been dreaming all of this, but he knew better. The smell of death was much too real, and much too close.

Rich thought about it. He thought about it long and hard. What it boiled to was that he didn’t know. Neither one of them knew Tom all that well. Tom had been introduced to them by a mutual acquaintance when they spoke of their annual hunting trips in a deli back home. He seemed like a nice enough guy and agreed to bring all the beer they needed in exchange for a seat in the truck. They knew him now for little more than three weeks. He realized they didn’t know him at all.

“Can’t worry ‘bout that now,” Rich stated. “We need to get this guy outta here. We need to get outta here.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.” Mike shook his head and his eyes grew large in their sockets. “What did I do, Rich? What did I do?” The heel of his blood stained left hand dug into his forehead. He began to rock back and forth on his knees.

Rich put an arm around his shoulder. “It’ll be all right. We’ll get through this.” Rich shuffled on his knees to the lifeless body and rifled through the man’s pockets. There was nothing but loose change and a comb. It struck Rich as odd; a man wandering in the woods, dressed in non-descript clothes, a faded brown suede coat, black jeans, and a black hat, during hunting season and miles away from civilization. Rich found it peculiar and rather unsettling. He began to wonder just how deep into the woods they wandered. Was it possible they had encroached on someone’s backyard?

“Grab the body and come with me.” Neither one heard Tom return. He approached from behind and they spun startled to their feet.

“Jesus Christ. Scared the shit out of me.” Rich’s anger was apparent. He stared at Tom unflinching. The guy had been quiet for most of the trip so far. This might have been the most he spoke since they set up camp last night. “What’re you talking about?”

“We’re taking care of it. Now.”

“Yeah, we’re taking him to a hospital.”

Tom dropped his chin, shook his head, and stepped forward. Rich was easily half a foot taller but suddenly felt intimidated. There was a look in this man’s eyes he didn’t know. A determination of some sort. This man wasn’t bargaining. “I don’t think so.” He stopped less than a foot in front of Rich. Michael made it to his feet and took several small steps back. He had created this mess but wanted no part of whatever Tom was planning.

“We can’t hide this!” Rich waved his hand over the dead man. “Are you suggesting we-”

“I’m not suggesting, I’m telling you.” Tom took another step closer. His nose turned up, nearly touching Rich’s chin. The look in his eyes was grazed with a touch of instability. A loose cannon. “I’ve been here. This happened to me already. I didn’t pull no trigger then and I still got fucked. You think I’m gonna do that again? Fuck you. No fuckin’ way. This guy’s gone. Vanished. Plain and simple. Now grab him and let’s go.”

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Rich had no answer. He looked at Mike and those eyes told him he was beyond making any decisions, or even contributing to the solution. Mike was slipping away, almost as far as the man growing cold on a nest of leaves. “No, we’ve got to do the right thing.”

Tom whipped a handgun from his pocket and thrust it in Rich’s face. He growled, “Then you’re gonna stay right here with ‘im.” He pressed the gun into Rich’s nose until he was forced back, the heel of his right foot catching the body, nearly knocking him over. They all had weapons and they were away from the world. The problem was, too many people back home knew they came out here together. They all had to return together, or not at all. Tom made it clear how they were dealing with this.

Rich stepped reluctantly over to his friend and the two of them looked at Tom. “We bury him. A hundred yards from here,” Tom directed. “There’re enough rocks we can use so nothing digs him up. Then we leave.” As he started to turn and lead them to the spot he had found, he turned back to them one more time. “This is our little secret. Don’t forget that. Anyone finds out and God help me, I’ll bury yer ass right out here next to him.” To drive his point home, he fired his gun at the corpse. The man’s jacket puffed and Mike winced as the bullet ripped through dead flesh with a thump.

It was the last time Mike and Rich ever hunted. It was the last time they ever did anything together. As they dragged the body across the crunching leaves, Mike couldn’t help wondering how long until he snapped his own twig and caught his own fate.

**Lies My Mother Told Me:  
A Semi-true Story in 10 Parts**  
Sahag Gureghian

My father brought his mistress to my mother's funeral. They arrived separately, of course, stood apart until a large crowd gathered, and started moving closer and closer, until eventually, they stood together, looking down at her grave. She cried, he didn't.

The sea of faces judged them. The wind carried a plethora of whispers to my ears; mostly shocked remarks of how he could have the nerve to bring this woman to the funeral. My grandmother, my mother's mother, howled in the corner, cursing God for taking her only daughter away. Comforting hands were placed on her shoulder. Water was brutally poured down her throat to keep her conscious.

A cell phone went off behind me. Somebody answered and spoke loudly. "No consideration for the dead," a woman said. "Did you expect anything less of him?" another replied. I wasn't sure if they were talking about my father or the person on the cell phone. I tried to look behind me to see who it was, but my view was obstructed by the mounds of mourners trying to make their way to the freshly dug grave. The men wore suits and the women wore veils. They were all strangers.

The priest stepped up to the grave, silencing everyone. Even the birds seemed to stop chirping. All attention reverted to him in an ocean of silence. Without a word, he began a hymn. His voice was soothing in the desolately humid afternoon, almost comforting to hear. Some of the mourners sang along with him, their monotone voices overthrowing his melodic tone.

Those who didn't sing, cried quietly. There were a few loud cries that seemed exaggerated. Maybe even fake. My grandmother stopped talking to God and started talking to herself, muttering gibberish I couldn't quite understand. My father bowed his head. I wasn't sure if it was out of respect or boredom. I closed my eyes and listened to the hymn, letting the priest's strong voice transport me to another world. Things were different there. My mother was alive and my father had never met his mistress. Maybe she didn't even exist.

When I opened my eyes, I noticed my younger brother standing alone in the corner. I hadn't seen him in weeks. We had drifted apart when my mother got sick. I walked up to him and grabbed onto his hand, squeezing gently. He wiped his tears as he gazed at me, a flood of relief washing over his face at seeing me. We didn't have to say anything. Being next to each other was enough. My father glanced our way, and I thought that he might acknowledge us in some way, but he turned back toward his mistress. He whispered in her ear. I felt then that he loved her, but he didn't love us.

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She looked like my mother. They were both dark-skinned and beautiful, with bright brown eyes that glinted in the sun. My mother's hair was shorter, and she often dyed it red, but their features were strikingly similar. Their eyebrows were shaped almost identically, thin and plucked to perfection. They had high cheekbones, elegant and smooth with a hint of rouge to accentuate their beauty. They even shared the same nose, had perhaps gone to the same plastic surgeon for a nose job, like so many of my friends in high school.

All these so-called friends had gotten nose jobs as either birthday, Christmas, or graduation presents. One girl recommended her surgeon to another, who did the same, and so on. It became a cycle, until every girl in the class had the exact same nose. My mother's nose. The nose of my father's mistress.

*I didn't even know her name.*

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My friends looked identical with their anorexic bodies and perfect noses. They were a valley of like-nosed dolls, blonde and plastic. They started to crowd around me, pretending to cry, their fingers gently brushing my hand, trying to comfort me. I let them think they were doing a good job of it, but their sympathy seemed forced. We had nothing in common anymore. They hadn't even bothered to call me after graduation. And now they swarmed around me like we were sisters.

They were as fake as their noses. Fake, just like my mother's life. As I looked at them, pretending to be grateful for their presence, I thought about the lies my mother told me. She said my father loved her. I believed her. Thinking back, I don't remember a time when I had actually witnessed that love. He said he worked long hours, and wouldn't come home until well-past midnight, when we were already in bed. But we stayed up, my little brother and I, and waited for him - *daddy* - to come home and hug us goodnight. But he never hugged us.

Sometimes, he'd come into my bedroom to kiss me goodnight, but he would slobber all over me. His breath reeked of beer and stale pretzels, and I'd try to push him off, but he wouldn't let me.

"I'm your father," he'd scream. "And I love you."

But I wouldn't want him to touch me, and I'd shove him away, so he'd hit me, angry that I didn't want his love. He never showed us his love when he wasn't drinking. I wished he would. I'd enjoy it then. But when he was drunk, his love didn't seem real and I didn't want anything to do with it. It repulsed me. So I'd lay there and let him hit me, until he felt satisfied and crept into my brother's room.

My brother was more tolerating than I could ever have been. He'd pretend to be asleep and let my father give him his goodnight kiss and creep out of the bedroom. That's all he wanted; to kiss his children goodnight. My brother had learned not to make my father angry by resisting. I wouldn't give him that pleasure.

In the morning, he'd wake up and apologize a no big deal apology, like he had forgotten to take the trash out the night before. We nodded, my brother and I, and let him think his apology was enough for us to forgive him. My mother would make him breakfast. He'd eat hungrily, then routinely kiss us on our foreheads before going to work. My mother would get a quick peck on the cheek. There was no love in his kiss, but I let him kiss me anyway because it felt right in the mornings. We all acted like nothing was wrong, even though he had gotten violent with us the night before. My mother looked like she hadn't gotten any sleep. Her eyes were dark and puffy. I could hear her at night as my father forced himself on top of her. I cried myself to sleep while her miffed moans flooded through my bedroom walls. I didn't know what was happening then, but the pieces made sense now. And it got me angrier.

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I wish I knew sooner that my mother was trying to protect me with her lies. Instead, she had blinded me with sugar-coated fantasies of what life was like, and made me believe them. Blinded me with the image of a perfect family in an imperfect world. All she wanted out of life was a loving husband and successful children who would grow up to have wonderful families of their own in a fairy-tale Hollywood tableau. She wanted people to look at her family and wish they could be like them. She strived to be perfect. I never understood why.

I quickly learned that things were never that perfect. I believed it at first because of her fake smiles and the happy pictures we always took. I didn't know then that pictures lie like my mother lied. I was heartbroken to learn that perfection didn't exist. She had brainwashed me to think it did, even though she didn't quite believe it herself.

She'd tell everyone about her happy life, about her loving husband and wonderful children. It became monotonous after awhile, so rehearsed that people stopped believing her. But as long as she said it out loud, it seemed real to her. She believed her own words when no one else did anymore.

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I realized my mother was a liar when I was eleven years old. It was the day I found out my father was cheating on her. I would never forget the look on her face; the pain and anger in her voice. From her words, I knew he had done it before. From his, I understood that he didn't care. It wasn't the first time he would do this and it wouldn't be the last. She screamed and threatened to leave him.

My little brother seemed relieved. He always wanted to be a child of divorce because then he could brag about it and seem cool to his friends. He was eight at the time, but even he knew better. So did my mother. She had nowhere to go, and she couldn't live with the shame of being "a woman of divorce." It was better to live with her cheating husband and suffer than subject herself to gossip inflicted by overweight middle-aged women, who only talked about others to make their miserable lives seem better. She didn't want anyone to know her life was less than perfection. She needed everyone to think that she had an ideal marriage. That she, herself, was perfect.

So she stayed, and she suffered, but pretended she was happy. She wouldn't talk to anyone about her problems. She even lied to her psychiatrist. As long as she lied, none of it was real.

I didn't want to blame my mother for staying, but I couldn't help it. It would have been different if she were happy, but she wasn't. I knew she loved my father, or maybe she loved what my father provided for her. But he didn't love her. I don't think he ever did, I hated to see her watch him from the distance as he loved someone else. It ate her up inside. I don't know how she didn't just take a gun and shoot him, ending his misery and hers.

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The priest's hymn was finished. My grandmother fainted. A small crowd gathered around her, forcing water down her throat and smelling salts up her nose. She woke for a brief second, screamed in agony, and fainted again. They started to lower my mother's casket as she woke up again. She grabbed her cane, forcing herself to watch. Her cane looked like it was about to break from the strain of her weight. And she screamed. She screamed like a wild animal being slaughtered. And she cursed God and all those living, and pounded her cane angrily, pushing a hole into the soft grass.

I told myself to go comfort her, but I couldn't move. I wanted to hold her and let her know I felt exactly like she did, but something stopped me. She had a lot to do with my mother's misery. It was her upbringing that made my mother the way she was. My grandmother had reinforced "till death do you part in sickness and in health" in her. Whatever happened to "thou shall not commit adultery," and being able to leave the person if they did? My grandmother's Christian ideals allowed my mother to be the victim. Her firm beliefs kept her there. This woman had ruined my mother's life and I couldn't bring myself to comfort her. I wanted to let her know she killed her own daughter, and suffer for it.

I stared at the casket being lowered, the tears stinging my eyes, and for the first time, I prayed. I prayed that my mother was alright. Prayed that she would be happier dead than she was alive.

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As my mother was dying, I asked why she lived her life the way she had. With her last ounce of strength, she managed to tell me.

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"I lied about my happiness because I didn't want my children to see their father for who he really was. I wanted you to love him," she said.

"Did *you* love him?" I asked, desperation in my voice.

"More than anything, despite what he put her through."

*Why?* I wanted to ask. How could you let yourself love someone like that? But I didn't ask, because I knew it would upset her.

She never told me about the child he hid from us. The sister I had to find out through letters hidden in his dresser. Letters from his mistress to my mother. The letters about the child my father had with her. The child he was going to help her raise, and my mother could not do anything to stop it. That was how I said goodbye.

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As the casket made its way underground, disappearing forever, I wished I was as strong as my mother. I wished she would have left my father and been happy, instead of staying with him for us. She stayed with him because she didn't want her children to grow up without a father. I never told her that I would have preferred it.

A line formed so each person could throw a handful of dirt onto the casket and say their final goodbyes. I looked at my brother. He didn't have any tears left. He asked me if we could walk to the casket together. I nodded, and took his hand into mine. My Barbie doll friends said they would come with me, but I said I didn't want them to. All I needed was my brother. They crouched back and didn't respond.

We walked up to the grave, slowly, our hands entwined. A circle formed around us, everyone making room for the 'poor motherless children' to be able to go first. I wasn't a child anymore, but that's how everyone would see me now that my mother was gone. Just the child she left behind. The child who would forever live without a mother. My brother went before me, grabbing a small handful of dirt and throwing it onto the casket as he said his goodbye; a short and sweet "I'll miss you mommy." He was almost sixteen, but he still called her "mommy."

I picked up a fresh mound of dirt and flung it on top of the casket. "I wish you weren't so stupid," I told my mother. I was almost hoping she'd respond, but I knew that wasn't going to happen, so instead I said "goodbye."

I said goodbye to her and to everything she represented. I looked at my father. I stared at his mistress. And I wondered where their little girl was. The sister I had never met. The one I hated and would always hate. For the first time I didn't care. None of it mattered. My mother wasn't around to suffer anymore. There was no point.

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It took me a long time to admit to myself that my father wasn't a compulsive cheater. He was in love with another woman. She was having his child. I heard him whisper on the phone once that he could never leave his wife because he "felt sorry for her." But he stayed with her until her death. Still, I wondered if he ever loved us, or if my mother was the mistress and the other woman his wife.

I watched as he approached the grave and threw a mound of dirt on top of the casket. He did the "sign of the cross" and stood there in silent prayer. I thought I saw a single tear roll down his cheek, but I wasn't sure. After he finished praying, he helped his mistress throw a mound of dirt onto the casket. I watched as she also prayed for my mother's soul.

People crowded around him, offering their condolences. My plastic friends said goodbye, gave me fake hugs, and left. Mourners approaches us, but to me, they were all white dots without faces. I couldn't differentiate one from the other.



My father acknowledged everyone who came near him. When they moved on to us, he carefully took my grandmother's hand and kissed it. He brushed her face, reassuring her that time heals all wounds. "Not this wound," I wanted to tell him. "This won't heal."

I wished I could hate him, but I couldn't. My mother had made sure of that. I remembered the times when we were so happy. It was a long time ago, before my mother became angry at life. Perhaps it was her anger that stopped our happiness. Maybe she was to blame, after all.

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My brother found the letters. He went looking for them after picking up the phone and overhearing my father's conversation. I can't remember how many there were, half a dozen at least, but they were neatly tied together with a worn out rubber band and stuffed inside a drawer full of personal belongings; beneath my mother's underwear and father's condoms. They were dated over ten years before, and the papers were yellowing and crinkled, hidden like clandestine treasures that were never meant to be found. Each went on for pages, containing secrets we could never have imagined, ones he still denies. The sloppily written words vicious and hateful.

My mother told us not to believe what we read. She tried to reassure us the letters were a pack of lies, but she looked guiltier than he did, even though he was the one doing wrong. She never asked us how we stumbled upon the letters, never wondered why we went looking for them. I knew she kept them for a reason and there must have been some part of her that believed the words were true, as horrible as they seemed.

Words are powerful and there was too much detail for a pack of lies; too much truth beneath the cruelty. I didn't understand why she was protecting him. None of it made sense. She seemed so happy on the outside, but the letters were probably eating her up inside. Ten years of silence had taken its toll on her appearance.

I asked if anyone else knew. "What's the point of spreading lies?" she responded, refusing to talk to anyone about it. Instead, the anger was taken out on us.

That was the day I stopped believing in the concept of family.

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When almost everyone had left, my father came up to us. And he kissed us; a soft, gentle, loving kiss. And he cried. For the first time in a long time, he cried. "It'll be okay," he reassured. He kissed us again and walked to his mistress, waiting in the shadows for him. He took her hand and they walked to his car together. I don't remember him ever holding my mother's hand.

As I watched them, my brother at my side, something washed over me. He opened the car door for her. She smiled gratefully and climbed in. My brother turned away, hurt, angry, and confused. But I was almost glad to see them like that. They were now a shadow amongst the dead trees, but they looked good together. I never saw such emotion on my father's face when he was married to my mother. This woman made him happy, I could see that now. Things would have been a lot easier if he had met her first.

**And the Ball Rolled Away**

Pam Achenbach

We thought we were so grown up, sitting on the porch on a warm summer day. Our conversation was of utmost importance—at the time—although, now I cannot seem to remember the topic that kept us so captivated that afternoon. We were probably talking about boys in the gossipy way that thirteen year-old girls have. Jill had just kissed Keith behind the shed at the back of the parking lot at the school, and Hayley was no longer talking to her because she secretly liked Keith, although Jill did not know that. Whatever our conversation was about, we did not want Bethany's little brother interrupting us. So when he came running down the driveway bouncing his blue ball, we quickly decided to ignore him. Teenagers cannot be bothered by six year-olds.

But he did not approach us; he just walked by us toward the concrete sidewalk where he could practice dribbling like his college-bound brother. We saw him periodically look over his shoulder to see if we were paying attention to him, but the ball soon became more interesting than his sister and her friend. I glanced at him now and then and watched the ball hit the cement as the sunlight glinted off of his golden white hair. I sipped my lemonade and turned my attention back to Bethany, who was continually talking as my thoughts drifted. She didn't seem to notice as I drifted in and out between her words, only listening to half of what she was saying.

The sun was sinking beyond the trees, and the ice had watered down our lemonades when we felt our tummies grumble. Beth called out to her brother: "Brandon! Come in and we'll get some dinner." I always felt sorry for Bethany, who took care of her brother when her mother was passed out on the couch, which happened every weekend.

We stood on the porch and talked about what we were going to make for dinner while Brandon finished his last dribbles. We weren't paying attention when he dropped the ball. When we looked up again, Brandon was in the middle of the street. I screamed, but nothing came out as a dark grey car sped around the corner. Someone yelled, "Brandon," but it was barely audible over the squeal of the tires. Bethany and I ran into the street. The driver opened the door and fell out of the car. Someone nearby yelled, "I called 911!"

We stood in the middle of the street watching as his blood poured onto the blacktop from his crushed head. He didn't move; he couldn't. His tiny body was pinned by the tires, and his right arm was bent at an awkward angle. The front left tire was still balancing on his side, trapping the edge of his yellow shirt beneath its weight. His head was split wide open, and I stared at him until I could no longer decipher the black of the street from the red blood and tiny blobs of grey that had spilled past the shards of bone poking through his hair. Bethany fell to her knees. I reached down and put my arm around her shoulders. I could hear sirens in the distance. I closed my eyes and listened to the driver snoring as he slept on the street, his legs still entangled under the driver's seat of the car. Silence fell around us with the dusk. When I opened my eyes again, blue and red lights flashed as they turned onto the street. I rose to talk to the officers getting out of the car and saw the blue ball finally stop in the gutter across the street.

**Momma**  
Suzanne Shultz

When I came back from the store, I could hear the T.V. blaring. The trailer park was quiet as I pulled the groceries out of the trunk and the loud squeak of the hinges echoed through the lot.

As I walked to the wooden porch, I set the bags down and clutched onto the rail. My breathing had become rapid and I inhaled with a wheeze, and then coughed badly. I pulled the cigarettes from my purse and lit one, hearing *The Price is Right* audience cheering on the television inside. I opened my wallet and counted the money I had left.

“Two fifty!” the contestant shouted. Like she had \$250 to spend on whatever gadget they were trying to give her.

“Milly!” Momma yelled from the living room. I tried to breathe in but the smoke caught in my throat and made me cough loudly. “Spend all my money on those damn cigarettes!” she said in her normal banter. “Serves ya right! Cough `til ya chose for all I care!”

I inhaled the rest of the cigarette in long, steady drags. I’d need this before I walked back in that place. I threw the cigarette butt over the side of the porch, onto the pavement and wheezed again as I bent over to pick up the grocery bags.

I tried the door but it was locked. I shifted the bags so I could get a grip on my purse to find my keys. I coughed and wheezed, muttering curses until I got hold of them and unlocked the door. The wave of the television’s volume rushed into my ears and made my head dizzy. I walked into the dark room to see Momma sitting up in her chair, her feet propped up in the recliner.

“You get my chips?” she barked.

I sighed and slowly made my way to the kitchen and set the bags on the counter.

“Yes, Momma. I got your chips.”

“How much money do I got left?”

“I’m not sure.” I set my purse on the edge of the sink and turned the overhead light on.

“Hogwash!” she spouted. “You done took it, didn’t cha?”

I pulled the money from my wallet, a folded over stack of twenty dollar bills. “I didn’t take anything from you and you know it!” I hand the bills over to her after making sure a couple was left in the pocket of my purse lining.

“Hhmpf,” she snorted and stuffed the wad of bills in her bra.

I put the groceries away but leave the bag of wavy potato chips on the counter. “Give’em here!” she griped, holding out her boney hands.

I extend my hand with the chips to her at the chair and she snatched them with a crumpling sound. She fusses with the top of the bag until she finally tears it open. The crinkling and crunching sounds were worse than the audience’s cheering. “And turn that damn light out!”

“Momma, I can’t see...”

“You can see fine. Turn it out. Hurts my eyes!”

I flick the switch and put the cans of soup in the cabinet.

“Stop that racket!” Momma yelps. “All that bangin’ and bustlin’ ‘round. Can’t hear my show!”

“Well, I have to put this stuff away...”

“What’s the bother of puttin’ it away? You gonna waddle back on in here’n eat it all b’fore long.”

My face felt hot and my breath stated to quicken. “Am not.”

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“Am too, hell.” I look over at her, glaring at me through her big foggy glasses that illuminate in blues and reds from the image on the screen. The curtains behind her, old mustard yellow, only hint at the sunlight from the corners of the window. She shakes her head. “Jus’ look at cha. Ain’t no wonder you ain’t got no man. Ain’t no man’d wanna woman he’d be fightin’ over some scraps of food for.”

I pull the cigarettes back out of my purse and walk to the porch.  
“Check the mail, while’s you’re out there, would ya? Make yourself useful.”  
I nod my head and start to close the door.

“Milly! Make sure’d lock that door!”

“But, Momma,” I say. “The mail box is just down there.” I gesture to the left of the trailer.

“Don’t cha go arguin’ with me, gal. You can be gone for a stick and somebody’ll come on in here and snatch my money.”

“No one wants to rob you.”

“Hell, you been robbin’ me my whole life. Don’t think somebody else ain’t gonna take in that notion.”

With the unlit cigarette and lighter in my hand, I walk back to the kitchen for my keys.

“Shut that damn door, Milly! That light’s hurtin’ my eyes! I can’t see the T.V. Somebody’ll walk right on in here b’fore you gets to lockin’ that door...” She keeps on ranting and harping when I walk back to the porch and lock the door behind me.

I light my cigarette and lean against my old, dented car so that it moves back slowly, making me think I’ll loose my balance. I grab onto the bumper and adjust my weight back against the trunk. I take a long drag and close my eyes, lifting my head up to feel the sun on my face. The breeze crosses my face and whips in my ears so that all the noise mumbled from inside, shut out for a moment. From down the road I hear the engine of the mail truck and I watch the old man in his blue postal uniform sing to himself as he fills each silver box with letter and magazines. I started my walk down the road, noticing the bright colored plastic swing set and toys left out by the neighborhood kids. I’d seen their mother, a young girl of twenty or so, put them on the bus before she’d left for work. I would see them run down the road in the afternoons, glad to be home. Glad that their mother was there to greet them.

“Mornin’ Miz Beachum,” the old mailman says as I walk to my mailbox.

“Morning,” I reply smiling. The cheerful greeting of public employees was the only kindness I could count on anymore. The breezy sunlight whipped by me again.

“Nice day,” I stated.

“It is. That it is,” the mailman smiles to himself as he sorts the letters.

I unlock the mailbox and pull out the fresh white envelope. It has the same black letters on the green and yellow check behind the clear, plastic window: *Mildred Beachum*. The state and the mailman didn’t know I wasn’t the woman the checks were addresses to. I was Eleanor Mildred, named after my grandmother and my mother.

“Now, Mix Beachum, I don’t mean to be nosey,” the mailman says from his work, “but the State sure does like to send you things, don’t they?”

I laugh and cough. “You’d think they knew me personally after seeing all these nice presents they send.”

The old mailman laughs at my joke and I feel a sense of welcomed gladness. “They must think you deserve it.” He looks at me fro a moment in a friendly grin, “and I’m sure you do.” He smiles, nodding his head. “I’m sure you do.”

I hold the check in my hand as the mailman climes back into his truck.  
“Have a good day,” I call to him and wave.

“You too, Miz Beachum. You take care now.” He keeps smiling and singing to himself as he drives back down the road out of the trailer park. I see his mouth moving in song beyond the open window, enjoying his life, enjoying the breeze, the sun and the sound of his own gleeful melodies.

I open the envelope and see the familiar check. I am the one who always cashes them, always doing the grocery shopping, always running around spending money that wasn't mine on things I didn't want. I hadn't wanted anything other than the few dollars I could take for myself on cigarettes or a candy car or even a bottle of hair color once in a while, just to make myself have a pleasure in this work. Otherwise, I had the life that wasn't much more than that of a maid, or a dog, begging for scraps. No one ever saw Momma or ever questioned who I was. I looked old enough to have a Social Security check and when the little cashier at the grocery store first checked my ID, she wrote down my license number without any question. I was amazed and pleased to watch her count all the money out to me.

I told Momma that they had let me cash her check and she said, “Good thing. I'm sick of them banks. They all lie. They take as much money as they can. Tricky, good for nothing's all they are.”

Once Momma didn't have to go to the bank with me, I left her at home in front of the television. Day in and day out, I made an excuse to get a handful of cash. Then I could leave for a bit, just to be left alone. But it was still a trap of begging and sneaking and coming back to her.

I fold the check up and slide it in my cigarette pack, light another and walk back to the trailer. Inside the news is blaring but it is less painful than the audience from the show before. I unlock the door and find Momma asleep in her chair, the potato chip bag still open in her spindly lap.

I take the remote from the end table and turn the volume down to a medium level. Momma breathes deep with a raspy tone. The wad of money is peeking out of her bra and I gingerly remove it in my fingers. She doesn't stir into more than to open her mouth and snore. Feeling tired myself now that I see her resting, I put the money on the end table, lifting a twenty dollar bill and sliding it into my cigarette pack. I put the chip bag on the counter and walk to my room at the back of the trailer. The creak of the flooring mimics my hefty steps until I flop into the bed. The house shakes and Momma's snores grow to an abrupt pitch. I must have wakened her. I lie in the dark room, hear the breeze outside rush over the roof. Momma's snoring hasn't returned and I drift off to sleep, picturing the check with the black, bold faced print, gleaming in the sunlight.

I become partially awake to the sound of the school bus down the road. I hear the kids running and yelling in playful delight to be free, to be home with their mother. I fall back asleep, dreaming of myself, standing in the dark of early morning, waiting for the school bus at the end of that country road we first living in. Momma had never waited with me but simply told me to stop at the mailbox “So's the bus'll pick ya up.” I had walked slowly in the sunless morning, shivering by the crisp air and waited silently, not knowing where or why I was leaving. I was just glad I wasn't to stay with Momma for a change. In the darkness, I was separated from everything and knew, as I heard the diesel engine from far away, climbing up the road to greet me with escape.

I open my eyes and see nothing. The sun had gone down and for a moment I wonder if I have been struck dead. But when my focus adjusts and I hear the faint sound of the television in the living room, I know I am still stuck in my dog house. My body aches from lying on the lumpy mattress for so long and I puff,

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groan and with a creak of the bed, I get myself up. I stand in the darkness, holding on to the door frame as I try to resume my breathing to a steady pace.

I teeter through the hallway to the kitchen and see the flicker of the light on the television screen flash across the walls.

“Momma?” I say, not looking at her. “What time is it?”

When I don’t hear her, I look up and notice her tony, white body, still in the chair, mouth open, not moving. For a moment I feel panicked and hesitantly approach the recliner. The creak of the floor doesn’t wake her. I look into her face, her eyes closed, and a peaceful countenance that I had never seen illuminated by the white television light. I shake her shoulder but she is stiff like a plastic doll.

“Momma?” I say with anger. “Momma! Wake up!”

I remembered her doing this to me as a child; violently shaking me early before the sun had come up. “What are you still sleepin’ for?” I asked her in a voice that mimicked hers.

There was still no response. I wonder if I am still dreaming. I walk to the bedroom, get the cigarettes off the nightstand and walk back to the front porch. There is no light outside and the breeze has stopped. I puff on my cigarette rapidly, seeing that there is quiet in the neighbor’s trailer as no doubt the young mother has put the kids to bed hours ago before resting herself for the night.

I fish out the check from the cigarette pack and look at the bold letters of Momma’s name behind the envelope window. Without Momma there would be no more checks to come. If I called the police or knocked on the neighbor’s door, they’d know she had died. No, no one could know.

When I finish my cigarette and throw it into the driveway, I know what I have to do. I walk back into the house, quietly and go to the cabinet under the kitchen sink. The garbage bags are in a box and I tear out two, then three and take them to the chair.

“A robbery at a local convenient store leave a customer wounded,” the late night news anchor is saying.

I look into Momma’s face and shake her. “You going to say anything to me now?” I ask her. Her small body only moves in a solid mass and falls back into the chair. “Not going to say anything to me now, huh?” I grab the first plastic bag and pull it around her extended legs. Her body is cold, her skin blotching from blood collecting at her knees and her calves. I tie the drawstring of the garbage bag into a bow at her waist. “Momma?” I ask again. “You want to leave me? Find. But I’m not going to be sorry for you.”

The next bad I pull over her head, her glasses mirroring the Auto-Mart car salesman on the commercial that grows louder than the regular news program. “They always make those commercials loud so you pay attention to them,” I tell Momma as I pull the bag over her crossed arms and tie the drawstring under her wrinkled, frozen hands.

I stop and cough and bend over before I can catch my breath. I try to lift her at first but I can’t get a hold of her right. I left her body, wrapped in the black bags, ink back into the chair. The wad of money has unraveled on the end table and I wad it back up, sticking it in the lining of my purse with the other bills.

I get my car keys and the third bad, go back to the porch, light a cigarette and walk to the car, opening the trunk. The screech of the trunk lid grates through the quiet lot and I stand there, waiting to hear anything from the neighbor’s who may have stirred from the noise piercing into their rest. All I can hear is the crackle of my cigarette and the faint news anchor’s voice.

I lay the plastic bag on the floor of the trunk and feel the sting of the smoke catch my eyes. The tears are nothing more than a mild irritation and I toss the

cigarette to the ground. I walk inside the house, determined, taking deep breathes. My hear races in anxiety and I feel more energetic than I had ever felt. The television pictures large football players running down a green, lined field. The feeling of adrenaline must be the same as mine as they reach the goal line in a burst of fuzzy glory.

I pick up Momma cradle her in my big arms like an infant, just as I did when I was to put her from the chair to her bed, from her bed to the chair and so on each day. I carry her to the porch and carefully climb down the steps. Before, when she was able to walk, I had only helped her down these stairs to the car. That was in the daylight, before the mailman came, after the neighborhood children had gone to school and their mother had gone to work.

Now, in the darkness, I had Momma in my arms, taking her from the house without anyone in sight again.

"Time to lie down," I whispered and with a grateful "Umph" I set her body on the plastic bag. I shut the trunk quickly before thinking twice, before looking at her figure silhouetted under the black plastic. I stand outside, lean against the bumper as the car sways back only slightly. I light a cigarette and stand there, straining to hear something other than the crackle of the tobacco or the sports caster in the living room.

I think of myself, standing in the dark, waiting for the school bus and wondering if I was to be taken far away. I pictured myself being escorted to a big brick building, full of color and pictures on the wall and people to talk to. I imagined feeling safe and without worry that I would be violently shaken and hit with a brook to whisk me from sleep.

"Git yourself up and stop lyin' there like some old dog," Momma would yell. "Ain't got no use for an 'ol lazy lump like ya!"

I felt the angry rush of tears stink my eyes and I walk to the house, pull the door shut and lock the door. I get in the car, start the engine and back out of the driveway. The engine may have wakened the neighbors but I didn't worry. I couldn't see any light other than those from the car, so I slowly drive down the road and turn up the quiet, empty street.

For what seems like hours I proceed down the dirt road that led to the lake. In the dark it looks like I am headed for no where, but I know the road had once been used for dump trucks to take out heavy clay earth that they used to build the grocery store's foundation. I stop the car in the empty dirt road and get out. The sky is clear and little stars flicker like the lights on the television. I reach under the dash and pop the trunk. I can see nothing but the road ahead of me and hear only the ending of the car.

I left Momma up and the plastic squeaks under my sweaty grip. With my heart racing and my breath short, I tromp into the brush next to the road and puff as long as I can bear. When I finally let go, the plastic with the bones inside clomps to the ground, making the shrubs and palms crackle. I bend over to catch my breath, then turn and make my way back to the car. My steps are caught by the dirt and leaves underneath. I wonder with each step if anyone will ever see them or if Momma and my footsteps will wash away with rain and breeze and time.

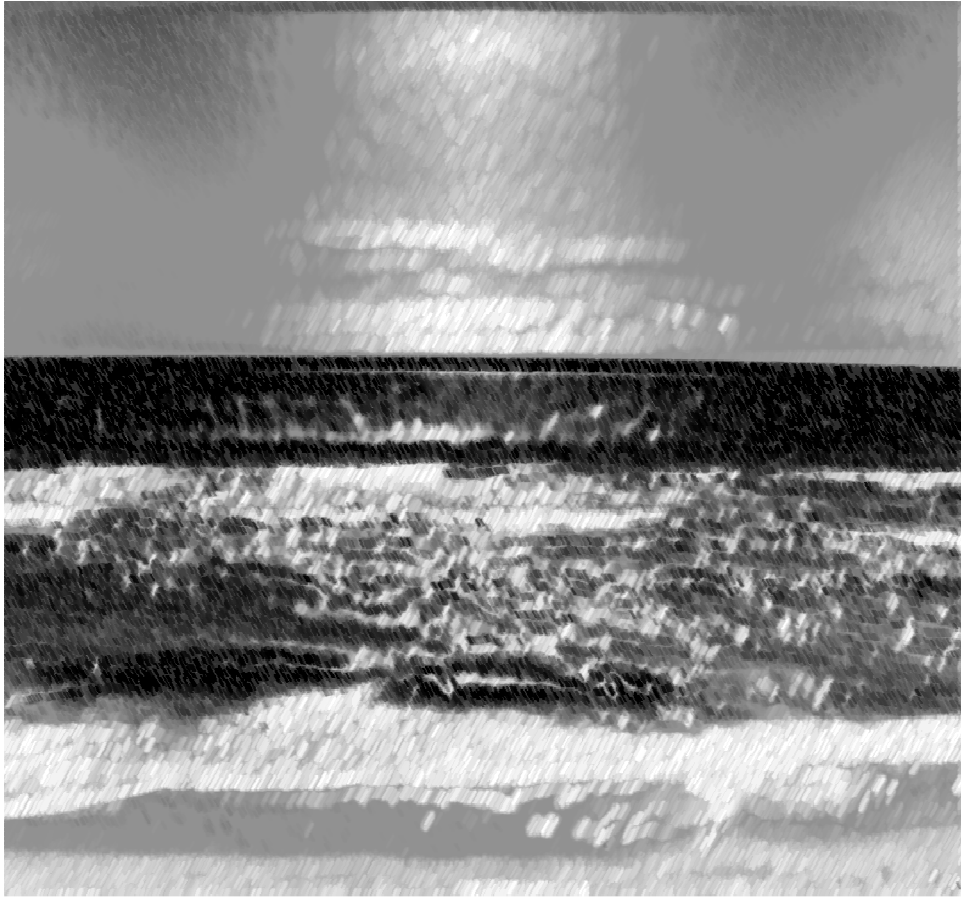
I slam to the trunk close and the screech echoes through the woods. I get in the car slowly, feel the car lurch from my weight and slam the door. I twist the wheel around in small, angled directions so the tires won't get stuck in the dirt. When I am pointed in the right direction, back toward the path I had taken, I look out the passenger window to the blackness where Momma had disappeared.

"Good night," I say aloud and drive back down the dirt road.





## Book Reviews





Bill Bryson's *Shakespeare: The World as Stage*

By Mateo Amaral

Bill Bryson is known the world over for his witty and amusing travel books, and the ever so popular A Short History of Nearly Everything. His ability to make readers laugh until they cry is one of Bryson's most alluring qualities. His concise, insightful wit is his staple, and when writing about any subject at all, Bryson can always make us bellow from the belly. One of his most recent contributions, Shakespeare: The World as Stage, is a short history of nearly everything Shakespeare. It must be noted that Bryson wrote this as part of the *Eminent Lives Series*, which are quick, accessible biographies of great figures written by great authors. This book is a change of pace from the travel writer we are so familiar with, but is sufficiently filled with Bryson's familiar, playful personality to make Shakespeare worth the quick read.

In a world where there are enough books written about Shakespeare to fill the Theatre of Britain's most famous Bard, Bryson's slim volume comes as a surprise. The amount of trees hewn to give way to conjecture on the life of Shakespeare is immense, which leaves the reader to marvel at how Bryson can seemingly provide fresh insight in so few pages; yet Bryson manages to do just that. In fact, the most ingenious aspect of Shakespeare is a lack of new information, and more importantly, subjectivity. Bryson's book is a completely objective look at what we know, and more importantly what we do not know, about Shakespeare. He points out that our spelling of "Shakespeare" is most likely not even correct. The amount of different ways it is found, even in the Bard's own signatures, (some of which we are not even sure are his), include a half-dozen different spellings, none of which are the one we use today. This comes from the bewildering habit of Elizabethans to vary the spelling of most words, so that one never spelled even one's name the same way in every signature. It is in these small details (we don't even spell his name right) where Bryson reveals the disturbing amount of information we lack concerning the elusive dramatist, to a point where we realize we know almost nothing. As Bryson puts it: "The idea is a simple one: to see how much of Shakespeare we can know, really know, from the record. Which is one reason, of course, it's so slender."

Bryson provides almost no guesses of his own, and focuses only on the facts, mostly in the form of written and legal documents, as evidence of Shakespeare's whereabouts and involvement in Elizabethan London and Stratford-on-Avon. Bryson admits even our picture of what Shakespeare looked like come from only three sources; one is most likely not even him, one was whitewashed centuries ago, which leaves the engraving on the First Folio, which is done so poorly, little detail can be gleaned from just that. Bryson continues on this empty-handed vein by reminding us that there are actually only a handful of days where we know exactly where Shakespeare was. It is this succinct, objective view that brings a refreshing perspective to our exhausted subject. Yet Bryson's tone is consistently light-hearted throughout. When introducing the "youth" whom more than half of the sonnets were written for, he says, "The matter of Shakespeare's sexuality—both that he had some and that it might have been pointed in a wayward direction—has caused trouble for his admirers ever since."

While no concrete conclusions can be drawn about Shakespeare's relationship with the "fair youth," Bryson makes sure to point out pure myths that have formed over the years. Many of them were formed by desperate, frustrated Shakespearean historians trying to save face or make a name for themselves. Oftentimes, normally trustworthy researchers were subject to wild speculation based on things like the number of word occurrences throughout Shakespeare's works.

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Other times they just lied. Unfortunately, many of our preconceived notions about Shakespeare seem to have come from such irresponsible guesswork. The final section is similarly dedicated to the claimants who believe the man from Stratford is a fraud. Bryson goes through the list of usual suspects, Bacon, de Vere, Oxford and even Marlowe himself, most of who died before many of his plays could have been written (because they reference events that would have taken place posthumously). To this Bryson says, “The only absence among contemporary records is not of documents connecting Shakespeare to his works but of documents connecting any other human being to them.”

It is when it seems we have almost nothing to go on to flesh out the life of William Shakespeare, that Bryson provides us with crucial evidence, and it is at this moment when the reader feels thankful for every written mention, or scrap of casual reference found on ancient parchment. We follow the life of Shakespeare by court dates, lawsuits filed against him, and royal recordings of his company’s performances where he is listed as actor or writer. His life is a long game of hide-and-seek through the crowded streets of Elizabethan London. He appears here, then there, and disappears for eight years at his most prosperous period, precisely when we wish we knew what he was up to the most. In the end, there seems to be enough evidence to paint a general timeline of his life, however, almost nothing is certain. We do know he was a fairly successful playwright, but as Bryson puts it, “We hardly know what he was as a person.”

Bryson’s chapter on the First Folios, although tedious at times, is a tribute to Heminges and Condell, the two men who put the first edition together. Considering there were in all likelihood less than 800 made, the number of existing first editions is astounding, especially when compared to everything of Shakespeare’s we don’t have. Even in the First Folios, Bryson shows us what is lacking. The First Folio was printed by different printers, and through forensic research Bryson concludes, “no two volumes of the First Folio were exactly the same.” Again we are shown the true mystery of the man and his writing. Most likely, no versions of any of Shakespeare’s plays exist today exactly as he wrote them. Some were almost certainly changed by people as common as the printers who did not like the wording. However even in his own conclusions, Bryson is always there to remind us of the fine line between conjecture and facts.

At its worst, The World as Stage reads like a list, or sheet of facts. Even the most dedicated of Shakespeare fanatics might want to at times cry “Draw thy sword, and give me sufficing strokes for death.” However, Bryson’s attention to detail, and exhaustive research, provide an in-depth, if somewhat abbreviated look at the cold, hard facts. I believe this to be a must read for Shakespeare fans and scholars alike. There are vivid images of Elizabethan London to be found on every page, and you will understand when Bryson muses, “Imagine what it must have been like...to be part of a hushed audience hearing Hamlet’s soliloquy for the first time...There cannot have been, anywhere in history, many more favored places than this.” It is lines like that where you will appreciate Bryson the historian, biographer, and writer. While Shakespeare: The World as Stage is a bit of a change from the Bill Bryson we know and love, we should be thankful for his quick humor and objectivity on an already overcrowded stage.

*Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee

Suzanne France

Coetzee's *Disgrace* was published in 1999, but thanks to "My Recommendations" on Amazon.com, I was finally introduced to this writer in 2008. If you've read Coetzee, chances are you picked up *Disgrace*, as I did, upon reading the first page. "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." The protagonist, Professor David Lurie, has become a frequent patron of his favorite prostitute, Soraya. As a source of introduction to Lurie's story, he describes the "certain freedom" he finds in Soraya and discusses his two marriages and "his daughter and his daughter's ups and downs."

The menace of the story, the problems that Lurie will soon face, builds with his trading in the comfort of a prostitute, who berates him for calling her at home. As a teacher of Romantic poetry, Lurie equates his feelings of Soraya to that of Byron. In what I later realized as Coetzee's key theme in all of his writing, the scholarly dissertation of knowledge that he would impress upon a classroom lecture, floats in and out of the scenes. But just as easily does he slip into the details of his lecture, does he revert back to the current situation at hand. "It teaches him humility... The irony does not escape him."

When Lurie sees Soraya out with her sons, he imagines a man at home, waiting for her, despite his protest that "ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy." Again, Lurie lapses back to his mention of a daughter and, himself, being a womanizer. When Sorayna commands him to never call her house again, "a shadow of envy passes over him for the husband he has never seen."

Once this quick introductory chapter of Lurie's ends, he wittingly embarks on another problem. He transfers his affections to Melanie Isaacs, a young student from his Romantics course. She is, as Coetzee says, "*No more than a child! What am I doing!* Yet his heart lurches with desire." What Lurie manages to achieve is, "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core."

After Lurie, not so ironically in the skills of Coetzee's fictional worlds, "he makes love to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter's room," he is found out by the young student's boyfriend. In class Lurie must continue his lecture of Byron, Lara, Scandal and Lucifer. The stage has been set by Lurie himself to imitate the art he uses as a compass to direct his life, and still keeps the idea that the research and studying of literature, "teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world."

Now Lurie becomes the target of a high publicity scandal that leads him to be removed from his position and resorts to living with his estranged daughter, Lucy, on her farm. There, she lives with a girlfriend, Helen, who is currently away and employs the neighborhood, family man, Petrus to help her around the farm and with the handful of rescued dogs. Coetzee, again, adds his touch of purposeful detail with the womanizing father, living with a lesbian daughter who rescues and cares for wild, unruly beasts.

The climax of the story shows up in a violent, beating of Lurie by a group of local thieves. They are "training" the youngest of the group to rape and pillage, using Lucy as their primary, hands on lesson. The relationship between father and daughter becomes even more strained as Lucy refuses to discuss, let alone retaliate against the men and boy who have violated her. Angered by his daughter's refusal to fight, Lurie becomes more and more drawn into his own confusion, frustration and lack of control. While he has always been the one to conquer, and even been the one to egotistically justify his lack of remorse or apology for the forceful

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advances to his student, now Lucy, a woman, is combating the abuse by remaining forgiving and passive.

While the ending has a hallow sort of resolution, this has been my favorite book so far this year. Coetzee's "sparse prose", as critics say, is intellectual without being suffocating. *Disgrace* is a well written, engaging novel that gives the reader an emotion of anti-empathy, rather than genuine concern for the protagonist. It is not that David Lurie is a character the reader wholly dislikes; by the end of the novel you *do* feel something for him simply because you see him change *slightly* within a steady timeline of events that lead him into the stagnation of being a lonely "old" man.

I have picked up a couple of Coetzee's novels since I fell in love with *Disgrace* early this year, but neither *Elizabeth Costello* or *Diary of a Bad Year* (his latest work) wields the same sort of story telling with traces of scholarly lecture. Instead I found that both novels lie heavily on dissertation and are only outlined by any character action or scenery. It is hard for me to get into any of his other works because the dialogue is too abstract and heavy-handed. I have read in other reviews that I am not alone in feeling this way about Coetzee. After reading *Disgrace*, each book they pick up afterwards in his lengthy collection is not of the same, exact sort and many readers abandon him entirely. I still hope to find another closer resemblance to *Disgrace* in his earlier works or, perhaps, he will conjure up another novel about our anti-hero, Professor David Lurie.

*Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* by Jillian Becker

Suzanne France

After ringing in the new year, I came home to turn on PBS. There, as their first production of 2008 was a “Voices and Visions” biography on Sylvia Plath. What a way to start a new year. I spent a lot of time picturing the black trees in foggy churchyards and picked up 2002’s *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*.

In 75 pages, Jillian Becker, the last friend of Plath’s, tells about the last days of her friend’s life. But even at 75 pages, it is by no means a quick read. I found myself going over and over sentences, just to firmly grasp the writer’s intent. She is completely honest and does not, as she clearly states, have the same interest as previous biographers, to make Sylvia look monstrous and Ted Hughes look blameless. She accounts,

In 1988, Hughes’ sister Olwyn introduced me to Anne Stevenson, the Plath biographer semiauthorized by Hughes. When, in Olwyn’s presence, I told Stevenson what Hughes had said at Sylvia’s funeral – that “everybody hated her” – Olwyn stopped me. Loyalty to her brother made her a fierce censor. “You can’t put that in,” she shot at Stevenson. In the end, nothing that I related about the funeral appeared in Stevenson’s book *Bitter Frame*, the text of which was approved by Olwyn. It does, however, carry Dido Merwin’s dying testimony that Sylvia was to blame for Hughes’ infidelity and the break-down of their marriage (Becker 55-56).

What makes this short memoir worth the read is not only that it gives a personal account into the last days of Sylvia Plath’s life, but it is told by someone who is completely honest. Becker angrily defends Plath just as any woman would for a friend who has been morbidly wounded by an infidel husband. I find a sense of relief in reading this book about Plath. It turns her well-known insanity into something a little more tangible. There are no black trees of the mind, or any other images that Plath has conjured in our mind from her poems. Instead, this account shows that, despite any emotional and mental handicap, she is a woman who has been left by the man she loves to take care of children and a career, alone. Only a friend can tell such a story.

Becker, Jillian. *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.







**Submission Guidelines**

We welcome and encourage all students to submit their poems, short stories, screenplays, book reviews, essays or works of literary non-fiction to our editorial committee for consideration in upcoming issues. All works are evaluated using a “blind” process in which no member of the editorial committee is aware of the author until after the final selections have been made.

Works may be submitted by email to Frank Montesonti at [fmontesonti@nu.edu](mailto:fmontesonti@nu.edu). Please attach your file in either .doc or .rtf format. All works should be thoroughly proofread before submission, as we do not wish to stifle creativity through extensive proofreading of any author’s work.

Anyone interested in joining the staff of the next GNU should email the next Editor-in-Chief, Matthew Amaral, at [matthewamaral@mac.com](mailto:matthewamaral@mac.com).