

# ***New Haven Review***







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# Paraphrase

**Andrew Battershill**

You said that for your translation seminar  
you wished you'd walked into the room  
and put a telephone and a hammer on the desk  
and given your whole talk  
pretending they weren't there.

In real life you'd brought nothing and  
said "um" eleven thousand times.

And I can't even tell you how much I  
wanted to eat a tiny amount of cereal  
out of the crevice where your neck meets your chest.

# Dead Man's Curve

*The slow crash of the  
touring musician*

**Jason Heller**

**An hour outside of Reno, sliced by a two-lane highway, there's**

a stretch of nowhere that gets muddy when it snows. I've only been there once, but I know it well. The mud has stuck with me. On a winter morning in 2006, the stuff was everywhere: on my guitar, on my amplifier, on my bags, on my clothes, on my skin. And on the shattered windshield of the overturned van I'd just crawled out of.

It wasn't my first wreck. When I was three, my drunken parents swerved into oncoming traffic one night, narrowly missing a collision but winding up flipped in a ditch by the side of the road. I don't remember the accident. I was too young. Today, the scars on my face commemorate an event of which I have no memory.

I remember Reno. That morning, I wasn't in the backseat. I was riding shotgun. My band was on tour; our roadie Bailey was behind the wheel. Being from Virginia, she was understandably inexperienced at winter driving. But she was the one among us with the least brutal hangover, so she'd volunteered to kick off the mad, ten-hour dash to Portland for that night's show.

When the van skidded across the icy asphalt and began fishtailing, I told her everything was fine. Instead of becoming scared, she grew angry. Her anger turned to rage as the van started to spin, eventually skating backward, in the wrong lane, down the highway. As luck would have it, I again avoided what might have been a fatal collision with another vehicle, and just like when I was three, the vehicle flew off the highway, flipped, landed on its roof, and skidded several yards—through the grass, through the ice, through the mud—before coming to rest. I hung there, upside down, cocooned in my seatbelt. The echoes of Bailey's *fucks* and *goddamns* rang in my ears.

She and I unhooked our seatbelts. Gravity righted us. We kicked out the remnants of the windshield and crawled on all fours into the mud. Getting shakily to our feet, we walked around the side of the van, slid open the door, and made sure everyone else got out

okay. Aside from a few cuts and bruises, there were no injuries. We were covered in mud, and thankfully nothing else.

The last thing we removed from the van was our equipment. There was nowhere safe to put it. An ashy dusting of snowflakes fell around us as we pulled our guitars, amps, and bags from the back of the van and laid them out in the mud. After a phone call to the police, we matter-of-factly began discussing whether there was any way we might still make it to Portland in time for our show, or if we should cancel it and head straight for Seattle. Maybe, possibly, one of us dared to bring up, we might consider canceling the rest of the tour.

We sat there in silence, covered in ice and grease and mud, and thought on that.

The next day, we were headed back to Denver in a rental. I think one of us called the venues we were supposed to play on the West Coast, just to let them know we weren't going to make it, but I can't be sure.

**Countless bands have experienced road accidents while on** tour. The most famous is Metallica, whose soulful, prodigious bassist Cliff Burton died on a snowy strip of highway in rural Sweden in 1986 after he was thrown out of a tour bus window and then crushed by the vehicle as it flipped. Other excellent groups, not as well known, have been hobbled or extinguished by touring mishaps. The Exploding Hearts, an insanely gifted power-pop band, suffered an accident in 2003—while on their way to Portland, just like my band was three years later—that killed three of the four members. The Exploding Hearts had barely made their mark, and who knows what tuneful, anthemic classics they might have produced in the future. But of course the loss of life was far more terrible. The average age of the deceased was twenty-one.

Most recently, the progressive metal outfit Baroness were involved in a nightmarish tragedy. In August 2012 the band's bus careened off a viaduct in England, crashing through trees and then

into the ground thirty feet below. Everyone survived, but not without serious and potentially debilitating injuries—not to mention a haunting association with the working-musician lifestyle that runs far deeper than any choking-on-one’s-vomit stereotype. As Baroness’s singer-guitarist John Baizley recounts in a harrowing blog post about the accident:

There was one moment in the crash that cut me deeply. For one heartbeat and one tiny sliver of time, I became disconnected entirely. It was, specifically, the moment I impacted with the glass. In that barest heartbeat of a moment, I came face to face with the infinite. I didn’t see a light, or the tunnel, or hear any music. Nor did I get a “best-of” montage of my life. Instead, I felt the tip of my nose brush up against the very same fate I had accepted moments before. I looked into a cold, unreflective mirror. It was the dark, silent, dispassionate logic of the end.

I have no idea if Baizley is a J.G. Ballard fan, but the singer’s account of his accident could pass as a deleted page from the author’s 1973 novel *Crash*. Granted, *Crash* fixates on the pathological eroticization—the melding of flesh, metal, and velocity—of car wrecks, and there is no lust in Baizley’s recollection. Ballard, though, has long been an inspiration to songwriters, and numerous tunes have been composed under *Crash*’s influence—most notably David Bowie’s ghostly 1977 track “Always Crashing in the Same Car.” The song’s lyrics don’t seem to reference any specific accident (of Bowie’s or anyone else’s), but its opening couplet might as well be the touring musician’s mantra, rife with both ambition and risk: “Every chance, every chance that I take / I take it on the road.”

**In a sense, touring musicians as a whole are always crashing in the same car.** At this point in history, the tales of touring accidents have oozed together and homogenized into a mythic narrative, a postmodern motif, a legend that ironically grows more symbolic as

it's substantiated by mortality figures. Pop and rock have been built in part out of such sounds and rhythms, as much Detroit steel as Detroit soul. Just as the locomotive informed the rickety cadences and endlessly rolling verses of early twentieth-century folk, so did the rise of the postwar commuter class—sired by suburban sprawl and Eisenhower's interstate system—streamline popular music into a sleeker machine.

And a more dangerous one. Acknowledged by some as the first true rock 'n' roll song, Ike Turner's 1951 single "Rocket 88" was an ode to an Oldsmobile: "You may have heard of jalopies / You heard the noise they make / Let me introduce you to my Rocket 88." By 1964, the peak of teen drag-race songs, Jan and Dean's "Dead Man's Curve" had christened the intersection of rock rebellion and auto fatalities. With blood.

"Dead Man's Curve" is a turning point. While not remotely concerned with the roving life of a touring musician—a mundane topic that wouldn't enter into the lexicon of the rock canon until the genre had ostensibly grown up in the 1970s—the song eerily prophesied rock's continuous conflation of fast cars with gruesome death. (Not that the topic doesn't leave room for a little levity; in 1978, Buzzcocks, the pioneering punk band, released a song called "Fast Cars" that contains the subversively nerdish lines, "Sooner or later / You're gonna listen to Ralph Nader / I don't wanna cause a fuss / But fast cars are so dangerous.")

Of the morose tour songs of the 1970s, Bob Seger's "Turn the Page" is most famous. The song drearily and self-absorbedly catalogues the banal miseries of being a musician "on the road again," an existential stasis that most stars of the decade tended to glamorize. A dozen years after Cliff Burton's death on the highways of Sweden, Metallica faithfully covered "Turn the Page." But in Metallica's hands—and with Burton as an unnamed, spectral absence lurking amid the song's minor-key murk—lines like "As you're shaking off the cold / You pretend it doesn't bother you" take on a preternatural chill.

The fact is that touring is no longer a romantic prospect nor an indicator of success. As detailed in hundreds of blogs and articles over the past decade, the rise of illegal music downloads, the poor economy, and the disintegration of the music industry as a late twentieth-century apparatus of patronage have all combined to form a perfect storm: the low-to-mid-level musician of any genre has increasingly been forced onto the road. Ticket and merchandise sales—that is, merchandise other than physical manifestations of recorded music—are how the struggling musician makes her rent. But that rent covers a living space that is increasingly left vacant. The van becomes dining room, living room, kitchen, and front porch.

One group in recent years, a joyously perverse and inventive noise duo called Friends Forever, went so far as to actually perform in their van. The 2001 documentary *Friends Forever* parses like postapocalyptic science fiction; after driving to the next destination, the grubby and fuel-starved twosome, in a heavily foot-trafficked area, put on ridiculous costumes, fire up a small generator, open the van's side door, set off a smoke bomb, and begin pounding out a visceral racket on guitars, keyboards, drums, and whatever else can fit inside the vehicle's confines. The audience organically gathers to gawk and ideally donate a couple dollars to the band's *Mad Max-meets-Zappa* spectacle. The van is no longer a means of conveyance or mere shelter. It is the stage.

If there's a class of working person that today's touring musician can best relate to, it's the long-distance trucker. Forced to battle the withering elements—both external and internal—of the interstate, the two seemingly disparate groups are often indistinguishable at your average roadside truckstop. If anything, the trucker is cleaner, saner, and demonstrably better paid. Not that there's a particular kinship between trucker and musician—that is, unless you consider the subgenre of country music known as truck-driving country, trucker country, or simply truckmusic. One of the kings of truckmusic was Red Sovine, the raconteur-style speak-singer whose music probed, with a surprising sensitivity, the ever-changing emotional

geography of the trucker's paradoxical state of being: both sedentary and itinerant. The loneliness of Sovine's songs sometimes assumes a morbid form. In his 1967 hit "Phantom 309," a hitchhiker comes face to face with the ghost of a trucker who died in a self-sacrificial wreck; in his 1975 chart-topper "Teddy Bear," the innocuous title conceals an alternately heartrending and hair-raising tale of a dead trucker's son, paralyzed from the waist down, who maintains his link with the world by CB radio. In 1980—while visiting Nashville, where he frequently went to record and perform—Sovine suffered a heart attack. He was behind the wheel of his Ford van. The vehicle crashed, killing him instantly.

**Six years since my own van accident, I find myself not dwelling** on it much. Then again, I have little reason to. I haven't toured since. There is one thing that reminds me of it, though: a song. As any musician who's been on tour will tell you, whoever rides shotgun in the van gets to pick the music being played in the stereo; it's just one of the many protocols and rituals among traveling musicians that have been handed down like folk melodies. The morning of the wreck, I had popped in a CD by a defunct post-hardcore band called Cap'n Jazz. The song "Oh Messy Life" was playing when the van began its sidelong skid into oblivion. Grimly, I recalled in a flash that Cap'n Jazz's guitarist Davey Von Bohlen, whom I'd gotten to know personally, had suffered a near-fatal van wreck while on tour with his subsequent band, The Promise Ring. I wondered if this was truly what was happening to me.

The moment the van flipped, I had no sense of the infinite. As weightlessness overcame us, as those tons of steel and glass and plastic began to whirl around with my body strapped within, I felt nothing. No fear, no worry, no sacred nothingness; just a matter-of-fact assessment of my current position in space and time, an erasure of emotion that John Baizley of Baroness seems to have shared. Maybe it was shock. Maybe it was the embrace of the inevitable that I'd long pondered, ever since I was a little boy and first understood,

as much as anyone of any age can, that life is finite, and therefore you should fill it with as many things that bring you comfort as you can.

Like music.

Today, whenever “Oh Messy Life” pops up in my iPod, those last few seconds of nullity before the van’s impact with the earth come flooding back to me. They didn’t frighten me then, but they do now. It amazes and horrifies me that I ever subjected myself to that perverse and contradictory kind of life—the immobility within movement, the confinement within freedom. The stale air of vans and bars, with the plains and mountains and oceans just a thin wall away. Then I remember: I did it because I love playing music.

And on those days I pick up my guitar, plug it in, and strum a few of the old songs, even smiling sometimes as I notice the dried streaks of highway mud that still cling to the sides of my amplifier.

The romance of the musician’s life isn’t easy to let go of, despite its dwindling returns. Like any who have braved the changing tides of writing, design, or other professional forms of creative expression in the past couple decades, musicians have been forced to find new ways to thrive. The working models that evolved slowly throughout the last century now outpace the metabolism of aesthetics itself.

It’s a curious position to be in. Commerce has always been a fickle variable in the artist’s life, but now the means of artistic production and distribution—touring included—have become almost frighteningly neutral. Licensing one’s music for advertising or television, journeyman session playing, work-for-hire commissions, short-term contracts, residencies, sponsorships, merchandising, crowd-sourcing, teaching on the side: All have risen in prominence to play larger roles in the musician’s toolbox. “Play hard, tour hard, and look for your big break” hasn’t become obsolete, but it’s no longer the default plan. In fact, there is no plan.

The *laissez-faire* playing field is crippling to some, but it’s liberating to others. Why tour when you can scrape together a modest living playing in your own town—perhaps even by playing in a cover

band or two, a tactic that younger, cooler musicians once looked down on but now consider more and more acceptable? Leasing music out for commercial use was also once seen as distasteful, and for good reason: It can demean the art and link it forever with hamburgers, dog food, or cheap insurance. But now, at best, that kind of ethical posture is seen as a luxury that most musicians can no longer afford. At worst, the no-sellout stance is considered specious.

I came of age in a musical environment supercharged with ethical lightning, and I bottled it inside myself, for better and for worse. When the iconic post-hardcore band Fugazi took strong positions and practices against marketing itself, merchandising its likeness, charging high prices for records and tickets, and singing about anything other than issues of earnest, urgent importance, I was of the age when that kind of crusading spirit spoke to me—and when it was workable within its subcultural and socioeconomic context. That was the early 1990s. But the sea change that came from the alternative movement of that decade fed directly into the democratization of music in the 2000s, and we now live in its inchoate aftermath. Disorder ensues after revolution; opportunists and demagogues thrive, while others struggle to maintain the integrity of the revolution's founding principles.

Falling more in the latter camp, I've opted to drop out. Some friends around me, who grew up in the same music scene I did, have adapted. They play numerous shows every week—in town or on very short (and relatively safe) regional tours—and supplement their incomes repairing guitars or running soundboards at local clubs. I can't say music didn't give me a bridge to my current livelihood. I began writing because I loved music so much. It wasn't enough that I played it. I had to opine on it, and I wanted to do so at length, and I wanted an audience for it. Reviewing local CDs for my town's alt-weekly paper led to writing about larger topics, editing, and ultimately becoming a novelist.

I still have the urge to play music, though. In front of people. To share it, to show off, to unburden my soul, to sleep soundly after a

half-hour set of screaming my fucking lungs out. That combination is encoded in a ritual imprinted on me by a mom who loved radio and a TV full of videos. So every once in a great while, I climb back up on stage and crank it up. When I do it, though, I'm never that far from home. Some nights, I pack up my guitar, say goodbye to my audience full of friendly faces and neighbors, and walk home.

# The Plate

Judith Chalmer

Along the road the winter birds are stuck  
to the trees. It's cold. Chocolate doesn't last

an hour on the plate. Something's wrong  
in the middle. Swallowing is hard.

The birds hang, round as apples, no more  
than an arm's distance up. Our failing steps

disturb nothing but us, not the still brown  
birds nor the rows of urban compost heaped

beneath coverlets of stiff white gulls,  
nor the hawks who are somewhere in this

strip of furrows and trees. We can't go far  
for fear of a sudden stitch, a catch of breath.

This level of illness is new. We turn to go home.  
I realize, again, I'm in love. It happened

in a sea of summer freckles. It happened  
as camembert softens in its skin, impossible

to refuse. Fingers full, I'm stuffed with love.  
Before I knew it the square and the oval—

angled jaw, wondering brow, incalculable, thin  
rays, all residue of smiles—were drilled

into my mind, described more distinctly, more convincingly than any text I've ever learned.

There are tests for what hurts her, ports and plastic tourniquets. The birds pillow their hearts

in stillness. I try not to worry. I try a few foods. Neither chocolate nor cheap novella helps.

But, alone while she sleeps, the sound loosed from my throat sings, helpless and bare

as any beast alive on legs to dance across ice in the glittering night: I am granted a great love.



# The Craft of Living

*Third-wave feminism  
before and after Elizabeth  
Zimmermann*

**Adrienne Martini**

## Before EZ

The year I was born, my hometown newspaper segregated its Help Wanted ads by gender. Even now, forty-some years on, that fact floors me. Roe v. Wade was only just working its way through the state courts. This past is still so recent.

My mother graduated with a BA in home economics, a degree that trained her for what society wanted her to be and, it must be said, for what she wanted to be: a housewife. A decade later, she was divorced, left without the picket fence in the suburbs and the 2.5 children. The social order quaked and her generation of middle-class white women was flung into an ocean of theoretical possibilities. These women could pick any boat to carry them across, except for the safe one they'd had. That dinghy was scuppered.

My mother worked a series of women's jobs that were no longer called women's jobs: childcare, secretary, teacher. She took in ironing. She kept us afloat. But she was exhausted, most of the time, and depressed. Despite living with a home ec graduate, I never learned to cook or clean or craft. I watched a lot of TV. I read a lot of trashy science fiction. I kept my house key in my backpack and ate cold cereal after school while I did my homework, just like so many of my friends. We were a generation of motherless girls.

We grew up, as one does, if one is very lucky. We went to college, where home economics was then called human ecology, or family and economic sciences, or any other name that disguised its true intentions, which was how to teach mostly women how to build a well-run home full of well-adjusted children. Not that any of my cohort would have wanted to go to college to learn to roast a chicken or balance the household books or sew curtains. We saw how that turned out for our mothers. We would do something important with

our lives, just like the generations of women who came before us were now urging us to do.

My little Italian grandmother—not my mother’s mother, but my father’s—refused to teach me how to make the red sauce we ate every Sunday at her house. She hated being a homemaker and wanted me to escape her lot. “You will pay someone to cook it for you,” she’d say, as I sat next to the dishwasher in the upstairs kitchen and watched her make supper. “You’ll be too busy being a doctor.”

I didn’t become a doctor. Nor did I go with her second choice, which was lawyer. She’d long given up on her third choice—nun—when I proved to be a shitty Catholic. She did suggest I think about converting to Judaism, because all her Jewish friends had maids. Instead, I majored in theater, moved to Texas, got married very young, and flailed into a career, one that didn’t require ironing. My knowledge of the womanly arts was limited to sewing buttons back on. I did learn how to really cook, however, mostly because I also learned how good food could be when it didn’t come out of a can.

And then, assigned a trend piece about knitting for the newspaper I was working for, I learned how to do it. I didn’t expect the lessons to stick, especially since the learning curve is steep. But there I was, knitting away—hats, mostly. During editorial meetings, where I was the lone female at the table, I knit because busy hands weren’t as compelled to throttle anyone. It was subversive, the knitting, something that a well-educated career woman shouldn’t admit she does. The illicitness exponentially increased after I was knocked up and waddling around the cubicles trailing yarn.

But this is about Elizabeth Zimmermann.

## **EZ**

It’s hard to know where to start when introducing the uninitiated to Zimmermann, or EZ, as the knitters know her. Let’s start at the end, then, with her 1999 obituary that ran in the *New York Times*:

Elizabeth Zimmermann, who brought a penetrating intellect and a sculptor's sensitivity to revolutionizing the ancient art of knitting, died Nov. 30 at a hospital in Marshfield, Wis., where she lived. She was 89.

And her beginning, also encapsulated in the same obit:

Elizabeth Lloyd-Jones was born near Devon, England, in 1910, the daughter of a naval officer and the woman who invented Meals by Motor, a British forerunner of Meals on Wheels. Her youthful memories, as recalled in *Knitting Around* (Schoolhouse Press, 1989), suggested a bucolic paradise, framed by plum trees and plum jam, governesses and private schools.

But in between, she went to art schools in Switzerland and Munich, met the man who would be her husband, Arnold Zimmermann, and fled the continent with him in 1936 after he spoke out against Hitler. The couple kicked around, eventually landed in rural Wisconsin, had children and lived their lives. In 1959, EZ started a newsletter about knitting, a craft she'd been taught by her mother, who had likely learned it from her mother, and so on.

She published four books. The first one, *Knitting Without Tears*, came out in 1971, the year of my birth. Her fourth book, *Knitting Around*, was published in 1989, the year I graduated from high school. When Zimmermann was in high school (or the British equivalent thereof), she wouldn't have been voted most likely to become the voice of the knitting cognoscenti. Her publishing career was born out of pragmatism rather than by ambition.

If you know nothing about knitting, the following tidbit of information won't fill you with enough wry horror to appreciate it. So a quickie bit of vocabulary and technique to catch you up: Fair Isle is an island off of the British coast where female islanders augment their income by knitting sweaters. The unimaginatively called Fair Isle sweaters feature two-color designs with repeating patterns. You've seen them, even if you don't know that you've seen them.

The Fair Islanders, since they made their living from knitting these garments, streamlined the process. The fastest and easiest way to make one is to do what is called knitting in the round, which translates to knitting a big tube that is cut in three places to add sleeves and a button band. But in the late 1950s in America, sweaters were simply not made that way. Americans knitted each piece of the sweater—two fronts, a back, and two sleeves—and then sewed them together, a needlessly time consuming and complex process that doesn't make your sweater any more structurally sound. Knitting in the round was something done in the Old World, where the socialists lived. Or something like that.

One of Zimmermann's first published patterns was for a Fair Isle sweater knit in the round. The editors at the leading knitting magazine who purchased her work rewrote it to fit the American style. Horrified and bemused, the ever-practical Zimmermann responded by starting her own newsletter, where she could control the expression of her work. With that, a small media empire was born.

But Zimmermann doesn't offer mere recipes, which is what knitting publications want. She is not an ur-Martha Stewart who insists there is only one correct way to achieve any given end. Zimmermann's patterns are conversations with every knitter about all the ways to knit a sweater, or a hat, or mittens, and EZ explains why she has found her approach the most practical. Her patterns are to knitting what Occam's Razor is to science.

So her books are about knitting techniques, yes. But tucked inside nearly every knitting tidbit, pattern, or technique is good solid advice for how to approach your life as well as your knitting. In *Knitting Without Tears*, Zimmermann offers a comprehensive guide to knitting needles, covering everything from walrus tusk to plastic to celluloid. But it's her digression on other uses for good old aluminum needles that sticks with you.

A #6 aluminum needle has been known to furnish an excellent emergency shearpin for an outboard motor. It once saved us seven

miles of paddling. Then I had to spend hours re-pointing the needle on rocks, having nobly, but foolishly, offered the business end instead of the knob end for sacrifice.

And then there's this:

No two people knit alike, look alike, think alike; why should their projects be alike? Your sweater should be like your own favorite original recipes—like nobody else's on earth.

And a good thing too.

And this:

This [checking the gauge; the number of stitches per inch] is almost the only measuring and deciding you will have to do for yourself (after all, no one can do it for you), and it is important to do it accurately and conscientiously. Otherwise you may sup the porridge of regret with the spoon of sorrow.

And this, on how she didn't invent any of the ideas she's sharing, only codified or "un-vented" them:

One un-vents something; one unearths it; one digs it up, one runs it down in whatever recesses of the eternal consciousness it has gone to ground. I very much doubt if anything is really new when one works in the prehistoric medium of wool with needles. The products of science and technology may be new, and some of them quite horrid, but knitting? In knitting there are ancient possibilities; the earth is enriched with the dust of the millions of knitters who have held wool and needles since the beginning of sheep.... One likes to believe that there is memory in the fingers; memory undeveloped, but still alive.

Reading any of Zimmermann's books is like knitting with her. Yes, she can help you over the rough parts of the Kitchener stitch

or the German sock heel, but what matters most is the life wisdom you absorb from her while your hands are occupied. Zimmermann passes on more than a skill; she give you an inheritance of advice.

It's what I wanted most from my own grandmother, while I sat in her kitchen and watched her cook. She told me plenty of stories, including those about her mother, the formidable Mama Lane, whose given name was unpronounceable by my toddler father, and his interpretation of her name stuck. I named my daughter Madeline after Mama Lane, only to discover years later that Mama Lane's legal name wasn't Madeline at all.

During those afternoons with my grandmother, my hands were only responsible for grating cheese and pouring water into glasses. When I asked what kind of cheese it was, my grandparents would only tell me that it was from the Italian store. Even now, I crave her manicotti and her pasta fagioli. For years, I've tried to un-vent them, to reverse engineer them from first principles. My dad and I agree that my efforts have been close but not quite right.

What I need is an Elizabeth Zimmermann of my family's food, who can do for me what Julia Child did for French cuisine. Zimmermann is like the knitting world's Julia Child, earthy and smart, translating a useful skill into practical steps for a generation of women clutching for bearings in a brave new world. I imagine Zimmermann and Child are eating a hell of a lot of butter together in the afterlife, because if there isn't butter there, I can't imagine why anyone would want to go.

## **After EZ**

I was well into my own knitting pursuits by the time I found Zimmermann. I'd spent most of my first baby's infancy knitting a series of adult-sized hats in an effort to avoid losing my mind again. After my first baby's birth, I discovered that my mother had failed to tell me about one of her own family's traditions, which is severe post-partum depression. Two weeks after becoming a mom, I was on a

locked ward in the same hospital I'd birthed in and unable to stop crying for more than a few seconds at a time. Modern pharmaceuticals gave me more help than they did my mother and her mother and her mother before that. The birth of my second child was significantly less fraught and only involved the usual number of tears.

I won't say that knitting was a cure, but it did help me keep my hands busy, which in turn kept my brain's keel even. I'd hold hats in progress above my infant daughter's sleeping face—she refused to sleep anywhere but on the lap of a human being for the first three months of her life—as I worked on them, the working ball of yarn on the sofa next to me. Small pieces of fluff sometimes covered her like colorful snow.

A finished hat meant a trip out to the yarn shop, which was one of the most exciting days ever in my new small existence. The women there were my mom's age and would coo over the babe while I browsed. My own mom lived far enough away that even monthly visits were impossible. But these surrogate grannies did just fine, thanks, and interactions with my own mother were so fraught that it was better this way. I knitted enough hats that I ran out of heads to put them on. The excess were dropped in the Goodwill box.

Time passed, as it does. There was a cross-country move and the second baby, who actually slept in an actual crib for hours at a time. It felt like a miracle. I kept knitting but moved beyond hats into mittens and sweaters and shawls. Yes, shawls, which I can't seem to wear unironically but still enjoy knitting regardless. I have a career, too, one that would have been difficult at best for my mother's generation. Female college professors and writers existed then, but the barriers to entry were higher than any I'd ever have been able to surmount. Had feminism's second wave never happened, I'd probably be in a suburb somewhere and soul-suckingly miserable. Which isn't to say that I'm not occasionally miserable now; just that it is almost always my own creation.

Zimmermann's *Knitting Without Tears* fell into my lap, the gift of a knitting friend, who felt that I needed it. My kids were five

and two; I was at a crossroads. My kids were old enough to need less minute-by-minute care but still too young to be independent. My first book failed with not a bang but a barely heard sigh. My wheels weren't even spinning, just up to their rims in the muck of everyday routine. So reading *Knitting Without Tears* became one of those life lacunas, a moment where you wonder if you've lived up to your potential. My grandmother would have been disappointed, I thought. Maybe she still would be. I can't hire anyone to cook for me, and wouldn't anyway because I enjoy it, mostly, even though the tyranny of three meals a day can be a drag. I've hired cleaning ladies off and on but can't quite make it work, mostly because they want to talk to me while they clean and I am unwilling to have that much of a relationship. My grandmother would be appalled by how much I do around the house as well as by how much my husband does, too.

Domestic skills don't lessen who I am. I am not invisible or oppressed because I know how to knit. But I still can't make a decent red sauce, damn it. My birthright was crushed by the end of sex-segregated want ads. I'm okay with that. Besides, my grandmother couldn't have known how the world would look four decades on. She did her best to keep me from falling into the same trap she had fallen into. She couldn't have known that specific trap would disappear, only to be replaced by ten more, the teeth of which my generation hasn't figured out how to avoid. We're un-venting centuries of being told who we are and what we should be but haven't yet hit on the elegant solution.

I work. I teach classes. And I clean, cook, and knit. I sew, too, but only dabble. I think a home economics class would be swell. I'm not a homemaker. I have domestic tendencies, though they don't sit well, even as I take pleasure in them. We were supposed to do so much more, though at the same time it's hard to tell exactly what we were supposed to have done, because my generation has no road map. It's hard to tell when you're doing it right if you have nothing to measure against.

So there's EZ. She was her own woman, both a product of her time and removed from it. Knitting was just part of who she was, and she was so much more. Yet she understood, too, how knitting could be connected to everything else—her family and history, her passions and ambitions, her fierce intelligence and uncrushable will. She jerryrigged boat motors, had babies, and ran a business, without apology. You could do worse.

# Three Poems

Emily Schulten

## Swan

I was thinking of you when the radio told me  
that a family of swans had been shot to death  
that night in the suburbs, a father and his cygnets  
laid on the grass in a line, sloping toward the pond,  
their necks craning, and I wanted that to be  
a good enough reason to call you. Their mother  
was missing, the neighborhood with flashlights  
looked around storm cellars and marigolds  
for her, or even for a feather—the promise of her.  
I wanted to tell you that I remembered  
finding you in the kitchen, the evening you tried  
to make my name with the whipped cream can,  
to surprise me with the strawberries. How sweet  
it tasted to be sticky then, the lovely mess we made.  
The next morning you called to tell me  
your mother was dead, and I lied about the swans,  
I told you they'd found the one that was lost,  
she was swimming.

## **To My Old Love, Visiting the Hospital**

You brought me toys shaped like organs  
while I recovered from giving one away,  
sponges that grow 600 times bigger  
when they're submerged in water.  
You filled a bedpan and we started  
with the ear, watched it for a minute,  
it didn't change. So we dropped the brain,  
heart, nose then kidney into the water  
and left them by the window.  
You weren't there when I was discharged.  
They put me into a wheelchair  
and stacked vases onto me, onto the chair,  
flowers, some dying.  
The nurse asked what she should do  
with our body parts, which had risen  
over three days like loaves of baked bread.  
She held them above the trashcan, but  
I wanted to keep them, save one for you,  
so I offered her lilies to make space in my lap.

## Modern Ruins

The Civil War fort grows  
from the water before us, out of coral  
and rainbowed bands of fish.

We toe the moat, hike up  
to the third tier, inspect the grass  
growing from bricks, and stalactites ice-cycling,  
as if these vaulted gunrooms  
have always been here.

Could we be more beautiful this way—  
torn open in places, our brick and mortar  
falling to the ground,  
beaten by storm and sea, in complete solitude  
inching toward Cuba?

The sun presses its gold  
into the bricks and shoals.  
Catamarans board passengers.  
The salt and sand stuck to our skin  
scrapes our legs where they touch.

Your arm's around me. We watch  
as ruins fuse with small, clustering, birded islands  
and then dissolve into complete nothingness.

Tonight, there, the stars will be clear.

# Albatross

Alexandra Ghaly

*for ch. baudelaire*

Baudelaire taught me how to whittle the bones into  
Maori tattoo blades; I learned which caterpillar  
to infect and when to kill it to get the right  
pigment and that the cheeks should be carved in grooves  
so that men would see me and know courage, know that  
I killed the albatross which sculpted my face. So,

not knowing I was infected, I hunted him  
by sea, arms pounding into oars. Each swing pushed my  
flesh into the handles, blood pooling in the grains  
marrow sucked into blade until my arms became  
flaccid, hollow—fell to the keel like crushed shafts of  
feathers. I prayed that my shoulders would sprout wings but  
I felt the murdered bird around my neck, and when  
I closed my eyes I saw him, and wept; clumsy and  
ashamed on wet deck, white wings beside him like oars.

# The Anatomy

**Suad Ali**

## **1. I have something to tell you, a secret.**

I don't want to tell you, not really, but something, or perhaps someone, is trying to make me. This thing or one is whispering in my ear, sticking needles in my arm, poking me in the side.

*Go ahead. Tell them. Tell them everything.*

But who is this person, a whispering presence, this force? Sometimes I think my real face has been painted over, again and again, like stage scenery that's been used for many seasons. I can no longer remember what I'm supposed to look like.

## **2. Father asked me to get milk and a bag of onions from the**

grocer. I took the usual route through the wadi, across the sand, around the green apartment buildings. I passed the crumbly shacks where the laborers live, with bedsheet front doors, clothes hanging on metal racks in overgrown thickets, old carpets pounded into the dirt. This leads to an alleyway that smells of sewage and spoiled milk. You can see into the silent homes without doors. Untended children, as young as two, play with broken toys and discarded furniture, while cars race down the narrow lane and delivery men shuffle past on ancient bicycles. Between the mosque and the white walls of a large villa, the alley becomes dark. Trees and vines clog the passageway.

This is where Yahia and Percy called out to me. Something told me to keep walking, but something else made me stop and listen and walk into the squat stone building. There were no lights, but after a few moments I could see. Broken light bulbs and bottles, tin cans, brown paper bags, straws, newspapers, chicken bones, two mismatched shoes. A dead bird lay on the windowpane as if it were only sleeping.

There was a smell, hard and clean and violent. There was a bucket of yellow liquid and Yahia had to turn off his phone. Percy

came up behind me and grabbed my arms, twisting them into a painful knot behind my back. I tried to speak, but Yahia hit my face. I remember how his eyes found it so difficult to find my own. He spoke but I could not hear the words, or rather I could hear the sounds but could not assemble them into the correct shapes. I only noticed what his face was telling me: that he had something to do but was afraid and compelled to do it. I felt sorry for him, even as I discovered what this thing was.

Percy tightened his grip and reached under my abaya. He pulled down my underwear. Yahia reached under his dishdasha and was doing something. It seemed to take great effort. His eyes were closed, his jaw clenched.

Percy was breathing hard. His breath smelled like cardamom, ginger and curry powder. Yahia opened his eyes and stepped forward. I could see what he'd been doing under his robe. The room was suddenly bright. I saw the white flashcards Mother had bought three years before when I was having trouble with multiplication and division. Yahia touched me. He tried to kiss me, but I turned my face away. He lowered himself, pushed up inside me, and that's when another girl came to take my place. She was a holy person, a superhero. She took my place and carried my suffering. I felt bad for her, but it was impossible for me to stay. I had to get home. I had to buy milk and onions for dinner. Mother would worry if I was late, and Father would be upset.

**3. I have always had a weak memory, but an hour later, eating dinner, I had somehow managed to forget everything. I was still a normal girl. Nothing bad had happened. Everything was okay.**

I ate as though I had never eaten, as though it were my profession, as though I had not been watching my carbs and calories for more than a year, weighing the pleasure of each cracker and biscuit against the future unhappiness of fat. Mother smiled and patted my arm. She is old-fashioned and superstitious. She thinks it is healthy to eat as much as you can force into your mouth. My older brothers

seemed confused and slightly disappointed. They looked to Father, but he only stared at his plate. He left the table early without finishing his meal. He went outside and did not come back for many hours. He does not take alcohol, of course, because it is forbidden, but when he came home early the next morning, his eyes were red and he smelled of cigarettes, beer and things for which I have no name.

Later, I began to remember. I turned on the radio so that no one would hear me cry. I was glad, for once, to be the only daughter because it meant I had my own room. I began to see what had happened, one image at a time, like a video running on a slow computer.

The girl was quiet and still, a corpse. She did not scream or kick. Her eyes changed color as soon as it began, wearing the knowledge that it was useless to fight. It would only make things worse.

Our bodies do not belong to us. I see that now. This is something else I see in the girl's eyes. She is beginning to understand. If I stop and squint at the first image, I see this, a dull yellow speck in her eye.

They own our bodies and they always have. I was too stupid to see this before, or maybe I saw but did not understand. Or maybe I understood but pretended not to.

My body, especially the unnamable part, is not my own. I cannot even touch it now, or feel it, or see how it is connected to me. It is a diagram from one of Father's anatomy textbooks, or an exhibit in one of those museums where strange objects are pickled in old jars. It is a cadaver at the medical college, a thing to be probed and cut and divided from itself. At best, someone, a struggling medical student, will see my body's weight and substance, the screams that make no sound, and he will be moved to nausea.

**4. I'd thought I was safe here, I really did. How could I have been so foolish?**

I'm ashamed of my stupidity. I'm almost sixteen years old. I should have known better.

## **5. We don't have to do it, you know.**

Of course we do.

We could do something else.

What?

She's a whore. It doesn't matter what we do with her. Her body is unclean.

But that would make *us* unclean.

No, we are pure. We are here to do God's work. To cleanse the act, to make the clocks run backward as if what she did, that filthy act, had never happened.

She carries the shame herself.

Yes, we are doing her a favor. We are preserving her beauty. We aren't condemning her, not entirely.

I couldn't do that to her.

No, that would be cruel, but we will make her even more foul on the inside.

This is the right thing to do.

Yes.

Okay, let's do it.

**6. I read a book once, a secret book we weren't supposed to read, that said it was an act of love, not sin. It was something beautiful shared between two people. This was not how the clerics had described it.**

Now I wonder if they were right. They must be clerics for a reason. They understand how the world moves.

They never meant to rape me, you see. That wasn't what they were sent to do. They had mercy on me. They spared me. Because of my great beauty. Everyone always says how beautiful I am. Such a lucky girl. A marriage will be easily arranged.

It won't be easy now.

They had been sent to throw a bucket of acid on my face, to eat the flesh and melt it into a thing of great ugliness. I study at the English-speaking school. The teachers would call this irony.

They were supposed to watch the features drip off one by one. I can see how they might have enjoyed this, or rather, how it might have had a peculiar sort of attraction. Like when you're swimming underwater and your sister swims by and her face ripples and bends and blows like the desert sand. Except when you come up for air, your face is back to normal. Your beauty has not been erased.

It would have taken courage to throw the acid and watch it burn, to be victimized by the violence of my screams and wails. But of course it was not only my face that was supposed to be deleted. It was the shame that I brought upon myself and my family. That's what had to be expelled, like an obscene word painted on a school-yard wall.

**7. It came early. I was only eleven. I was frightened. Mother was unprepared, which caught me unprepared. Some of Mother's friends looked at me funny after this. Like there was something wrong with me. She did not speak to some of them anymore. Or maybe they no longer spoke to her.**

Father stayed away. Mother spoke to me.

You are a woman now. You must cover yourself. Make peace with the shailah and abaya. You will never walk outside without them again.

Think. When you have something precious, you cover it. You do not want it to spoil. You do not want anyone to touch it, to steal it.

I understood the metaphor but not what it pointed to. What did I have that was precious? No one had ever treated me as if I were precious or as if I owned something of value. Not at all. They had always looked at me, especially now that I was a woman, as if I were a thief who could not be trusted around their valuables.

The black robe and black veil were hot and sweaty and uncomfortable and awkward. That's all I understood. I could not play most of the games I enjoyed. I could no longer run or kick a ball. I could only return to myself when I went into my bedroom, locked the door, and removed the costume that everyone agreed I must wear.

I thought the clothing was the worst of it. The clothing, the bleeding, the headaches and terrible stabbing pains in the stomach. But no, that was only the beginning.

My female beauty, if that's what I have, and the way my body is slightly different than theirs, is a great curse. All the men say it is, and I thought this was wrong and unfair and hurtful, but now I see they were right.

**8. We came from Syria—we had to escape from Syria—because** father is a progressive man. He is a middle-class professor who opposes the regime. We came here to the United Arab Emirates because it's safe, comfortable, affluent, liberal, tolerant and good. At least I thought it was. But maybe that's only Dubai. Maybe Abu Dhabi is different.

This was the mistake I made, to assume that one thing is the same as another. I can be very stupid sometimes.

**9. She deserves her punishment.**

She deserves worse.

Much worse.

Alhamdulillah.

She removed her veil in the presence of a man.

They were not related by marriage or birth.

This is a great sin.

A crime.

An insult.

She was racing from one sin to another. Where would it have ended?

We saved her.

She is indebted to us.

She should have thanked us.

**10. It could have been worse. They might have killed me. Honor** killing. They use phrases like this without irony.

Would death have been worse? I'm not sure.

**11. Do you want to know a secret?**

Yahia is my cousin. Percy is his best friend. I was supposed to marry Yahia one day. I won't have to now. It almost makes everything worthwhile.

That's the first time I've laughed since it happened.

My brothers asked them to do it, and Father didn't stop them.

I didn't want to leave Syria. My friends, my school...

Father made us leave. Assad is too oppressive. He is a tyrant. I watch Father's eyes and lips when he speaks these words, but there is never a flicker of doubt or self-consciousness.

**12. Do you want to know a secret? I want you to tell everyone you know about what happened.**

But I don't want you to tell anyone. Forget everything I said. Cut out your tongue. Torture your memory. Burn your eyes. Forget that I ever existed. Forget you ever met a girl with my name. When people ask you, say nothing.

**13. This is the last secret, I swear. After that, I will leave and you will never see me again.**

They were right. I feel shame. I hope it wasn't too difficult for them, being forced to immerse themselves in my fetid waters. They had such unrelenting mercy. I should thank them.

I want to scratch out my eyes and tear my skin from the bones. I want to bathe in acid and paint my face black so I will never have to look at it again. I hate my beauty and I hate this body that is not mine. I want to staple the shailah and abaya to my flesh so that It will never come off and no one will ever look at me again.

# **New Years**

**Mikko Harvey**

The well-dressed men are lingering  
in the lobby, not wanting to get wet.  
It is not my place to speak for the rain.  
If it were, these men would follow me.  
They would see how all rain is different  
and tonight's is so light it is almost mist.  
You can walk in it for hours without getting wet.  
But that is not my place. My place is the curb  
with a cigarette. And it is not your place  
to speak for cigarettes. The Chinese discovered  
gunpowder long before the Europeans, but rather  
than bullets they launched the first  
fireworks into the night sky. My cigarette dies  
and the only light comes from construction  
workers. Inside of a ditch they dug themselves  
the men shovel gravel. They wear hardhats  
with headlights so as to see with no hands.  
They will work through the night, making sure  
the street is mended by morning.  
Then, there will be no trace of them.  
In their place will be well-dressed men  
with leather soles. It will be Monday  
and the ground will be dry.

# **The Great Man**

**Barry Jay Kaplan**

**After the last breath, the body was just a long dark shape, the silver head turned toward the window, or perhaps toward a particular person, perhaps seeking something from one of his many children gathered in a tight mass around the bed, though we all agreed later how unlikely that was.**

*At last*, I whispered, daring anyone to think I hadn't said *amen*. My sister Bitsy choked on a laugh. "You're awful," she whispered and squeezed my arm, then continued sniffing into her handkerchief.

We'd been standing for hours, some of us for nearly a day, I even longer, as soon as word went out that he'd taken a bad, perhaps a fatal, turn. The disconcertingly fresh smell of pine came in through the windows that opened onto the back garden, in sharp contrast to what had just transpired on the bed.

There was much to see to before all this was done. I was usually the one who did what needed doing.

**And so the Great Man was dead. My brothers and sisters were gathered in the house where most of us grew up to see to his memorial service. We excluded from the preparations the participation of his current wife; she knew why and I was too much of a gentleman to air my grievances. Suffice it say that none of us needed any longer to shield her inexplicably contentious behavior from the world. "Let her sink," Bitsy said to anyone who'd listen.**

My father was a Great Man but not a great man to most of my half brothers and sisters, with a few notable exceptions; it was common knowledge in the family to which of us I refer. To the circumscribed, publicized, petty, and frenetic society in which he moved with such apparent ease and pleasure, he was a "lion," a "mountain," his talent was "magisterial," his wit variously "dry" and "caustic," as a social commentator he was "without peer." As a result of this talent, this force of personality, this "greatness," he occupied many social worlds

and when the Great Man died there was an extraordinary amount of details to be arranged, having to do with strata, glamour, and personnel. Grief took a back seat to spectacle.

There was also a small but vocal cadre of naysayers who had long trumpeted their revisionist assessment thus: a small talent stretched to its limit, his books written with cynical calculation to seem tossed off and wry, sprinkled with easy and shallow aphorisms, bolstered by bookstore and the occasional television appearances that spotlighted what Americans liked to believe was a writer: homely but friendly looking, tall and slightly stooped, unrepentantly randy, with a big from-the-chest laugh, not averse to letting his fans know just what he thought of his competition, and winking to let everyone know he was helpless in the face of the truth.

**“How much are we getting?” Gwen asked. “I mean, after it’s all divvied up. I mean, boo hoo and all that, but seriously, what’s the ultimate take?”** She and Arthur were nibbling shrimp toast in the pantry.

“Even if it’s a lot, divided so many ways,” Arthur said. “Sorry, Henry. We must sound horrible. You should get a larger share. You deserve it.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want anything.”

“Want it or not, you’re going to get it.” There was an unpleasant edge to his voice; Arthur was always a bully. “I just never had the stomach to stay in the same room with him for very long.”

“You are disgusting, Arthur.” Gwen scooped up the last of the shrimp. “Why don’t you go and drink something?”

“Good idea,” Arthur said, adding: “Don’t sign anything, either of you.”

**Greedy and legally entitled as they were, none of my brothers and sisters was prepared to deal with the details of the disposition of the estate. A chorus line of lawyers was even now tap dancing on the steps of the townhouse, each representing the interests of this or**

that party. There were the former wives and common-law pretenders, the older estranged sons, the adored and adoring, wryly tolerant daughters, the under-tens who were taught his place in cultural history, the toddlers who knew daddy by the smell of Johnny Walker, the nieces and nephews he adopted, the strays he fostered, and others, strangers, the issue of liaisons not made public, who showed up on the days succeeding his death, most bearing the GM's mark: eyes, nose, mouth, gestures, repeated with minor variations, so that none of us felt completely unique; that quality was left to him alone and left to us was making what we could with the resemblance. Some of my brothers grew beards, others grew fat. Some sisters colored their hair or wore theatrical make-up, some even had their faces surgically remade. The Great Man commented publicly on the subject without referring to any of his offspring in particular but this omission was loud with bite; I spent many hours consoling my insulted siblings after one of daddy's rants appeared in an article in *Allure*.

The house was visited by the journalists, the photographers, the social analysts, the television news crews, the editors, the agents, the fans. There was too the unfortunate biographer, who was hand-picked by my father to do the legend justice, polite and eager and insistent, dismayed but not discouraged that none of the spawn would speak of the great and the dead. He was exiled to the garden to chat up former students of the GM who primarily seemed eager for their names to be linked in print to his, all the while burnishing the luster.

Should I have, could I have, did I even *want* to keep them out? There was daddy and there was the Great Man; it was an endless source of confusion and anxiety, a frightening, slightly sickening thrill, being a son and a fan.

**The day I discovered who he was really was, at least to me, at least as far as I was concerned, began with my slow climb up the staircase following his voice, finally locating him in what was once, I believe, a dining room. I remembered the room from family meals when I had just learned to walk: the color of the walls a deep blood**

red that was said to stimulate appetite but made me lose mine. The house was maze-like, and grew more so as the wives became younger and the GM less patient with fussing. Rooms led into rooms leading past mirrored hallways so that without him as a guide, I could never be quite sure where I was, even though I had spent the first fifteen years of my life there.

The GM had spiky white hair (gelled, to set the record straight), and had not yet quite perfected that air of loose-limbed affability his fans so loved; I did mention that I was a fan? He was wearing jeans and a pale blue shirt. He was very tall. Before we got down to business, my business, he made me listen to him read, from the reissue of one of his books, a new introduction by his pal John Updike, then brought out a box of photos, showing me one of him and William Styron and John Cheever drinking at the Cedar Tavern, another of him and Tennessee Williams running naked into the surf in Provincetown, another of him and Susan Sontag lighting cigarettes, and on and on. I was twenty-two. I had just spent what should have been my last semester in Davenport College at Yale instead at Austin Riggs, recovering from a nervous breakdown. I had come to hear his reaction to the memoir I'd written.

"What'd you want to do this for?" he asked. "Not to get my approval, I hope."

I looked down, around, not at him. Papers were everywhere. There was no desk. He wrote on his lap, using a stack of magazines to cushion the Docket brand legal pads to which he'd dedicated novel number eight. I sat in an armchair opposite him. He cradled his chin in his hands, elbows on his knees, waiting for my answer.

The silence went on and when I finally dared look up saw the slow shake of his head: once again I had disappointed him.

"It reads like a case study," he said. "Is that what you think you are? A case study?" He found a cigarette pack crushed under his leg, took one out, lit it and leaned back. "All this complaining about the past. A privileged past, I might add. You think I had anything when I started? You think I had your opportunities? I *made* my opportunities."

He pointed at me with his cigarette. "Let me tell you something you don't know. I married all my wives with a particular eye for siring good-looking children." His eyes were open very wide and he laughed. "Have you taken a look at your siblings lately? A pack of beauties, and that includes you too, Henry." He laughed again, that famous laugh, choking and wheezing and weeping. At the end of it he tossed my manuscript into my lap. "Write fiction, sweetheart. It's the only game in town for an honest man and I think, God help you, that's what you are."

He was right, of course. I'd held back the story I wanted to write, afraid to hold the truth up to the light, afraid that if I told the story of my life it would be clear that it was only my life with him I'd be telling. Narcissist that he was, that's what he really wanted to read. *What was it like being the son of the Great Man?* He wouldn't care what I said about him, what awful stories I might tell, what secrets I revealed. He just wanted me to admit that he was the star of my life, that all I could manage at that point was a supporting role. And of course it was inevitable that he would be my first reader but since that was the case, I couldn't write it. He'd have to be dead for that to happen and I told him so.

"At least you have something to look forward to," he told me back.

Can I be blamed for choosing myself over him? My siblings would understand. In fact, they'd cheer. I know they would. I'm sure of it.

**As funeral preparations went on, I had managed to avoid being** alone with my only full-brother, Ashton. He was the Great Man's oldest son; they had not spoken to each other for many years at the time of the GM's death. He was known among the rest of us as the Damaged One or the Most Damaged One, a disappointment, the biggest one, to the Great Man.

"We drank a lot together when I was a kid," Ashton said, cornering me on the stairwell to the basement where I'd gone to replenish the wine supply for the endless parade of sympathizers. "Cept I

turned out...well you can see for yourself, huh? A car wreck. A ruin.”

“Well...”

“You’re right. As usual. A ruin would suggest that I was something else once, something pure and worthy and ... and I wasn’t that, I was never that. Oh yeah, a pretty boy. Ha ha. Well, I saw to that.”

It was true; he’d lost his good looks a long time ago, carved them out of his face as sure as if he’d taken a knife to himself, but not before he’d married a series of women and had a series of children. Just like the GM. Ashton said, “You know what my problem was? No imagination.” He stared at me for a long moment and for the first time I saw that he hated me and how that hurt him. He raised his glass with exaggerated ceremony. “I still like to drink,” he said. “And I’m good at it.”

We didn’t speak for a few minutes but I sat on the step above him and put my hand on his shoulder and he gripped it and held it tight. “Jesus,” he whispered, then clumsily embraced me and climbed over me to get out of the basement.

**I made several decisions over the next few days: There would** be a closed coffin. There would be no viewing of the body by anyone but the immediate family, which was large enough, thank you. What was the point, after all, of letting anyone see the fingerprint of how he died? His agent and publisher were eager to be let in and I said no to them with the serene and unquestionable entitlement of the bereaved; and at the last moment, the limos lined up along the block, changed my mind and gave them both the nod. I was in charge. I knew how to play the scene. My brothers and sisters were glad to let it go to me. No one dared defy me now, and I quelled any nascent rebellions that made themselves known, mainly of the girls, protesting that daddy would like this or not like that or find something cheesy or pretentious ... the girls could go on like this all day. Given how the GM had won their hearts early on and left them now with only sentimentality mixed with their drink of choice, I was not surprised.

They wept on my shoulder. They knocked on my door late at night to talk. I could handle the girls.

Ashton stayed drunk for the next few days and had to be speed-walked to the funeral and propped up in a chair, almost as if it was he who had died. The others—Carlton and Frederick and Brick and Bing, the twins, Sylvia and Gregory, Flip (for Philip), Van, Earle—oh who wants to be bothered with the full list? It's so long it takes on a kind of comic fecundity that seems thoughtless on the GM's part, actually vulgar.

I arranged things with the funeral home. I drew up the seating chart. I ordered the flowers. I conferred with the obituary editor of *The New York Times*. I hired the limousines. I bought a new suit and brought in someone that morning to shine everyone's shoes. There were a lot of balls to keep in the air but it was in my interests to do so and I so did.

**Afterward, my sister Char, hair in wild disarray and still dressed** like the teenaged nymphet she once was, came to say goodbye. "Is this the same outfit you wore when you seduced Bill Mundy?" I asked.

Char laughed to be remembered that way. "One of the *triumphs* of my adolescence," she said and gave the skirt a little flick of her fingernails. Then she turned serious; someone had died, after all.

"The last time I saw him he was so..."

"The last time you saw him, sister, he was falling down drunk."

"Now Henry..."

"He landed on top of the twins, as I recall, and you told him you would never speak to him again and then insisted he get a car service to take you home."

"I simply asked if he would be so kind as to call a taxi."

"And you didn't flinch at the hundred dollar bill he stuck in your bra either."

She stopped crying. "You're terrible."

“I have a good memory.”

“For irrelevant details.”

“For salient facts.”

She put her hands on my shoulders. “You’re all he had, you know. Henry, the Loyal. None of us were any good to him. And now we just want his money.”

“Who says I don’t?”

“It’s not the same thing,” she insisted. “All the rest of us ... we’re all monsters. I’ve always known that. But you.... You were better than the wives. You had such ... *patience*.”

*And now it’s paid off*, I thought.

“Oh look at you. Don’t be sad, baby.”

How did everyone so misunderstand me? Was my impersonation of the dutiful son so expert that it had crossed the line into true service? Char put her arms around me and pressed her face to the lapels of my jacket. She smelled like camphor and gardenia. “Come and see us soon. I’ll invite everyone up to the Bay, and we’ll all get drunk and talk about how we hated him.” She gave me a quick kiss on the ear. “You’re exempt.”

**Ashton died during open heart surgery a few years later. Most** of my sisters live in the West or in Europe and those that live in the East hunker down, winter and summer, and aren’t heard from. The brothers are hard, if uninspired, workers brightened by a few who make a profession of idleness and are on their way to whittling their inheritance to nothing. I became the de facto spokesman for the GM. I moved into the house, took up residence in the blood-red dining room, became his legatee, his heir, his face, in fact, for I came to resemble him more and more as the years went on.

And I wrote novels as he had challenged me to do. I gave up the idea that my life apart from his life could be anything anyone would find worth reading, and dove full time into the attention his name brought me. I even dared to suggest, as one can do in fiction, that his end was not as had been formerly assumed, that the accidental

fall might not have been accidental at all, in fact, that one of his children—but which? and why?—might have been at the root of it, its cause. Titillated as I imagined my siblings might have been, they remain silent on the subject.

*As the GM's son*, the interviews always begin, and I am glad to expostulate on all that experience has been. I rarely tell the truth. I suggest, for example, in all the blushing modesty I can muster, that perhaps the Great Man was not 100 percent responsible for all his novels. Who is there to hold me to the truth? Who knows any of it for fact, in fact, but former wives and a cotillion of disaffected brothers and sisters, none of whom currently owns the spotlight as do I? A borrowed spotlight? Maybe. Who's to say? His advice was to write fiction, wasn't it? So I'm making it up as I go along.

And as for the Great Man himself ... well, I do think he might have admired the way I've handled the only obstacle that ever really held me back.

# Love Poem

Caroline Gambell

You fill the kettle with snow.  
The pipes were run through with poison three weeks ago.  
We did not expect to be here now, conducting this experiment.  
You said: “A mind enclosed in language is a mind in prison.”  
I said: “I want to be quiet with you.” You promised  
we would build our silence on creaking pine floors,  
wind through the chimney, the icy bloom of breath. You said you could  
survive for over a year on a diet of those small sounds. That, with time,  
the sound of steam rising off my tea will be enough.  
But all I can hear now is the rush of blood in my ears, and sometimes,  
the snow warming in the kettle—settling in on itself,  
relieved to have permission to be water again.

# **We Also Build Icicles**

**Emma Schaeffer**

it is a difficult  
process, somewhere  
between threading  
needles and balancing

pennies. they must be  
layered like candles  
but without the warm  
envelope of wax,

chiseled and dimpled,  
but without the use of hammers  
or anvils. and they must  
always be rooted

in the upside down, instilled  
with the conviction  
that sky is ground.

# A More Extravagant Sense of Self

*An interview with Rebecca Solnit about apricots, fairy tales, Frankenstein, and The Faraway Nearby*

**Bidisha Banerjee**

*We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do and we do it without questioning.*

—Rebecca Solnit

**Winner of the Lannan and National Book Critics' Circle awards,** among others, Rebecca Solnit is a peripatetic writer who trespasses across disciplines, transforming them. She's a mapmaker who has heightened the possibilities of cartography and civic identity in *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*; a historian of art, technology, and walking who has deepened our understanding of the nature of the modern self in books like *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* and *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*; an activist, often compared to Howard Zinn, whose trenchant *A Paradise Built in Hell* has enriched the stories told by some of the key popular movements of our time; and an essayist in the tradition of Thoreau, Borges, Woolf, and Eduardo Galeano, whose panoramic, dream-like meditations on the color blue in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* seems to have inspired Beyoncé Knowles and Jay-Z to name their daughter Blue Ivy.

An anti-memoir that elaborates the scope of the memoir, *The Faraway Nearby* is Solnit's most intimate book to date. It begins with 100 pounds of apricots from her mother's fruit tree that end up on Solnit's bedroom floor. Solnit's mother can no longer care for the tree as her brain has become a fairy-tale site, a "neuron forest" overrun by the strangler-vines of Alzheimer's. Compelled by the overwhelming pile, and hoping to gain perspective on her troubled relationship with her mother, Solnit begins reading fairy tales. In the interlocking essays that follow, Solnit's own brush with cancer and the loss of her loved ones nestle against meditations on Scheherazade, Mary Shelley, Che Guevara, the Buddha, the Marquis de

Sade, and the Library of Water, an Icelandic art installation comprised of glacial melt-water assembled in glass columns inside a city library. Extraordinary encounters ensue: mirrors, labyrinths, friends, strangers, visual artists, readers, moths who drink the tears of sleeping birds.

*The Faraway Nearby* is Solnit's most visceral book to date. She gets a mammogram and is "irradiated by those machines whose vises clasp your breasts like a lobster clamping onto a clock." During a biopsy, she hears "the whirring sound of a tiny drill entering my flesh again and again through the hole in the table." Solnit approaches these ordeals through the entwined history of the microscope and of seventeenth-century *vanitas* paintings, which warned against ephemerality, while subtly celebrating it, by depicting subjects like a lobster grabbing a pocket watch or a semi-decaying basket of apricots. Facedown on a table, partially anesthetized, Solnit cranes her neck to view a "new *vanitas* picture"—lush images of her breast, blown up on a monitor and resembling "a night sky, hemispheres of darkness with pale streaky strands like clouds or vapor or the Milky Way in a desert night when the stars are so numerous they blur into radiant fields. Some of the bright areas, the microcalcifications or tiny calcium deposits that looked pale in that dark sky, were the grounds for concern."

Throughout, these particulars become case histories that illuminate Solnit's preoccupations: the nature and boundaries of self; the possibilities and, crucially, the limitations of empathy and storytelling; and the pleasures and terrors of closeness, distance, and estrangement.

I met Solnit at her home in the Mission district of San Francisco. She led me past a hallway filled with books and positioned us in her nest-like bedroom, near the window. The late afternoon sunlight tilted into dusk.

**Rebecca:** It doesn't feel like home yet because I'm still finishing the New Orleans *Atlas* and have a lot of other projects. There's a lot of things I want to do that haven't happened yet, things like finding a sofa... But it's getting there. And it's a beautiful, beautiful place. Some of the parts of nesting—I think it's the appropriate verb here—are fun. I just planted a back yard. And I'm really liking living on this side of town. It's really sunny. I live in the Bahamas of San Francisco, O thou who livest in the—not the Siberia—where would you be from?

**Bidisha:** I'd call it [the Richmond district where I live] Inner Mongolia. Because of the Chinese and Russian influence.

**R:** That's actually perfect. One of the maps I wanted for *Infinite City* was going to be the world mapped onto San Francisco. And Jaime Cortez's "Tribes of San Francisco" [which playfully maps the locations of various ethnicities and interest groups in San Francisco] took that idea and did something else with it, but I like the idea of seeing Siberia, Russia, China.... I don't think we have an India, but we definitely have a Salvador, a Guatemala, a Samoa and—

**B:** And a Bahamas.

**R:** It's funny how different it is. Last night I had dinner with some folks at 10th and Irving. And it was windy and cold and foggy, and I thought, it won't be like this when I get home, and it wasn't. Not to rub it in. Actually most of the nature is on your side of San Francisco. The air is fresher, and you have Ocean Beach, which is my favorite place on earth.

**B:** Yes, and we have foghorns.

**R:** You can't hear the foghorns over here, but sometimes you can hear mariachi music.

**B:** It's a good trade.

\* \* \*

**R:** So you took a look at the book?

**B:** I did. How did you come up with the title? How is “the faraway nearby” different from “the nearby nearby”?

**R:** I have two kinds of books. I have a bunch of books where the most beautiful title arrived early, and it wasn't a problem at all. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*—the title came to me before I knew what it went to. It was like having a collar waiting for a dog to walk up. And *Hope in the Dark*—I had the title right off the bat. And then I have a few books where I feel like I never quite got the title right, and the title was a lot of work. And this one had a number of titles that fell by the wayside. And it was very hard to describe it, the same way it was very hard to come up with an image for the cover. Because it's about these warm intimate things—apricots and bodies and family life and things like that. But it's also about the Arctic and spaciousness and emotional distance and coldness.

*From the Faraway, Nearby* is a funny title that Georgia O'Keefe came up with. Funny because most of her titles are very modernist. *Abstraction in Blue and Red*. Or *Seven Poppies* or *December Clouds*. Those aren't real titles. But they're like that. Simple, descriptive, trying to stay out of the way of the visuality. But *From the Faraway, Nearby* is this completely poetic title for the most surrealist of her paintings. It's an antelope skull with way too many antlers, hovering above one of those northern New Mexico landscapes. But it's also how she used to sign her letters to the people that she felt close to, although they were far away. And the literal language of near and far is interesting in the ways it doesn't describe emotional distance. You can be completely distant from someone next to you in bed. You can feel close to somebody on the other side of the world,

or someone who died two hundred years ago but whose work speaks to you. And navigating that closeness and distance—that funny exercise where what has been far becomes near, and what has been near becomes far, where suddenly you’re standing in the middle of a country you’ve dreamed about for a long time. It was such a beautiful phrase. I’ve never borrowed a title before. I tried to come up with parallel constructions, but the original was just so delightful that I decided to use it.

**B:** One of the neat things about that painting is how it compresses distance. You see the antlers, and there’s mountains in the back. The scale—it seems like the antlers are huge, and the mountains are small. In your book, there are so many dimensions through which you look at faraway and nearby. What were some of the tensions that interested you?

**R:** One of the things is having distance on your own story. We’re so compelled by our own stories. Of course. We’re made out of stories. It’s the material of your psyche as much as flesh is the material of your body. But the ability to stand back from your story, to see it as a construction and to see yourself as a storyteller, to get perspective on your own story and also to try and imagine the stories that other people are telling, and to have some kind of empathy for those stories. The book is so much about empathy, which for me is the ability to enter somebody’s story. Which is to say that empathy is both a means of travel and a storytelling art. What is it like to be my mother? I have to tell myself stories about her: well, her father died when she was ten. Well, this happened. Well, this is what she was so fearful about. This is what it felt like to be her. That’s a kind of travel where, suddenly, what seemed far away, because it’s inside someone else’s head, you’re imaginatively trying to conjure. It’s not an unreachable galaxy, if you observe somebody deeply and listen to them, particularly if they want you to know them, particularly if there’s a rapport, somehow you manage to cross that infinite distance.

**B:** Yet you also talk about the human self being a kind of patchwork of areas that are alive, and some that have become deadened—either intentionally or not. [*The self is a patchwork of the felt and the unfelt, of presences and absences, of navigable channels around the walled-off numbnesses.*] You talk about the limits of empathy as well as moments where you yourself froze. Some of those moments were the result of experiences you had in childhood and other moments have more to do with having the right balance between feeling boundless compassion for the world but also knowing when to shut off. Can you talk about the journey that you've made in terms of opening yourself up empathetically, but also sometimes choosing to draw back?

**R:** We talk about people so much—what a beautiful sky! Sometimes I forget to migrate. In the morning I'm in the kitchen where the sun is, and sometimes I stay there, on the east side, and suddenly it's like, "Oh I forgot to come west, where the sky is, where the sky is beautiful now."

We talk so much as though people are autonomous, discrete, self-contained individuals. But trauma is intergenerational. In some sense—I didn't go into it much in the book, but there's a public trauma of pogroms and holocausts and things that affected my father's family that becomes the kind of mess that was my parents' marriage, that becomes the difficulty that's my childhood. And a deep lack of awareness.

One of the great projects of the second half of the twentieth century was becoming emotionally aware and maybe more emotionally articulate and literate—for people in the West. I only really know the United States version. What are the consequences of my acts? How do I really feel? What do I really mean? These questions weren't being asked much before the Fifties and the Sixties that are now very routine for us. So there's a funny way in which the whole country in some sense—I don't want to say the whole world because there are so many cultures that have other processes going on—but

maybe the West has been engaged in this process, and also engaging with Buddhism and spiritual questions, and meditation and rethinking human nature.

And, individually, I had a really difficult childhood. And I was very, very, very shutdown. I think when you're a kid, things are enormously traumatic. If you truly experience them, they would destroy you. You have no tools to deal with it and so you don't experience it because you're not there. Where was I? I was not in my body. I was not in my family. I was not in my city. I was not in my classroom. I was in Narnia, in fairytales, and of course endless horse books and all kinds of other marvelous, strange places.

I found the Snow White fairy tale really useful. It really did feel kind of like being frozen and then you thaw out. Also, one of the things we don't talk about that much, or not in ways that I've found useful for my own experience, is that as you acquire the tools to be able to deal with your own history, your own history begins to thaw out. And it comes to you. So the past gets relived and somehow addressed. There's a kind of empathy to yourself at that point.

Some people have these marvelous childhoods and they're fully deeply feeling creatures who never get shut down. Other people never reverse the process. They shut down and just stay closed. You know I was lucky enough that I'm a traveler by nature. I kept moving and things kept changing and I kept exploring and kept asking questions, and I had good fortune in who and what I met. Things continued to change.

**B:** You talk about joy and sorrow or happiness and sadness as perhaps inadequate concepts. You suggest that perhaps we should be talking about depth of feeling and shallowness of feeling.

**R:** That's something that came up very much in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, a book whose title came late in the game that I like completely. The title, that is, not the book. My books often spring from each other. Both *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and the book on Eadweard

Muybridge [*River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*] came out of *Wanderlust*. And *A Paradise Built in Hell* is also very much a book about empathy and human nature and calamity. And I was actually writing it while I was going through all these events here. And there's a funny way I could have written it as: oh my mother fell apart during the 1906 earthquake [in the book], and I went through a terrible break-up during the Halifax explosion, and into the Mexico City earthquake, during which my terrible diagnosis came about, and then I underwent medical treatment during 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, which was the actual trajectory, which was very, very interesting. And unsympathetic people made really bad jokes about it. You're looking at me and thinking, "Yeah, they must have been really bad!"

**B:** No! I'm sorry to hear that.

**R:** There's a language very much in the United States of wanting everything to be easy and comfortable. You know, nothing ruffles your feathers, nothing challenges you. And it's something I've said in *A Paradise Built in Hell* as well. There's a depth of emotion that most people don't live in all the time. And it's difficult and demanding and can be kind of harrowing. But it's also profound. One of my dear friends' mother died a week ago this midnight. And it was interesting to recognize what I knew from my mother's deathbed. You're wrung out, you're exhausted, but it's a little bit exalting too. The old spiritual language we had when we talked about saints and raptures and exaltation speaks to it. There was a willingness and a desire for profundity, which is very different than comfortableness. Often, profounder joy or happiness requires that vulnerability—that rawness—that exposure to go deep. And that's not what's being sold to us as happiness.

**B:** A lot of what I think about is: how do we in our post-religious or secular age still make room for a lot of those positive values that those old religions gave us? And I hadn't made that connection to emotion and depth of emotion. Where do you see some of the places in post-religious life where it's okay to embrace depth of feeling?

**R:** Well, it happens in disasters without people choosing it. Which is why disasters are so interesting to me. They can be like a crash course in Buddhism. Suddenly you have non-attachment to the past and the future, and to the material. You're absolutely present in the world around you. You have a deep sense of connectedness to the people around you. You have a certain kind of fearlessness that's not weakened but strengthened by awareness of death and mortality. And often a kind of heroic generosity. And it's fleeting. It's pretty amazing when it's given to you as a gift. Though disaster is not a gift. I'm not pro disaster. But that consciousness and the things that come out of that can be just remarkable. It always feels to me it's as though an earthquake shook you awake. If you normally want to stay awake you need some kind of practice of awareness, whether it's Buddhist or an overtly spiritual path, or just being somebody who's deeply conscious and deeply empathic. But I also think that what's interesting about religion is that it assumes that you are on a journey. And there are things that without that context might seem miserable or difficult. This is very Christian language. You know, this kind: Refinement of the soul. The crucible of suffering. To use very old Christian language. But there is something to that. I think the attempt to avoid all suffering—or to regard it simply as negative—doesn't look at the fact that a certain amount of suffering happens no matter how hard you try to avoid it. And that maybe if you're not just completely running scared with your eyes closed, it teaches you something. It's part of the process of becoming. Not that I'm pro suffering, or that I'm pro disaster. But there are disasters, and there is suffering. So what are you going to do about it?

**B:** Well, you talk about how Buddhism offers the coolness of distance from your emotions. One of the things I found really interesting is that at the beginning of your book, you talk about a gift, or inheritance, or windfall of apricots from your mother. And that kind of leads you down various fairy-tale threads. But then you come to this anti-fairy tale, which is the story of the Buddha.

**R:** It's both really isn't it? When I reread the miraculous birth of the Buddha, I was like, oh yeah, Jesus and Buddha are both great fairy tales. Or fairy tales are also stories of the miraculous. You know, the miraculous Parsival born to find the Holy Grail, or something like that. The miraculous person who solved the riddle. Buddhism is a fairy tale and it's also an anti-fairy tale. An anti-fairy tale in that it doesn't lead to happy endings and the completion of one's own pleasures and acquisitions. It's funny that you called it anti—because to me it was a fairy tale run backwards. There's this person and he already has jewels and palaces and luxuries and dancing girls and ornaments and carriages pulled by deer with golden harnesses. The luxuriousness of the *Buddhacarita* description is just somewhere between luscious and ridiculous. And his story starts where fairy tales end. He goes backwards into sorrow and old age, sickness, and death—and wrestles with them because a fairy-tale palace isn't really a solution to it. I find fairy tales really interesting for thinking about one's life—or at least the fairy tales interest me in their tasks and their propositions, but not their conclusions ... oh, let me find it in the book:

[Reads:] As I was approaching this chapter, I woke up in the middle of the night and thought something I should have written down at the time. The empty shell of it that washed up on the shores of morning was to the effect that sometimes an extraordinary or huge question comes along and we try to marry it off to a mediocre answer.

So I think fairy tales ask fantastic questions, but I don't love their

answers. It's funny that "happily ever after" feels like an inadequate answer. And a lot of memoir now is like that—"now my life is completely together, now my problems have been solved." And I'm not sure I trust those answers, or particularly like them ...

But you know, it's funny how much the apricots begat the book. And now it's a little shocking that it's coming out. Did I really write that book? Do I really have to talk about it in public? As I went through the explorations and literal journey that led to Iceland and beyond, but also the metaphysical journey, with my mother, at first the apricots felt like an allegory, and by the end they felt like an invitation to tell a story which I'd never been free to or able to tell before, in some sense. They were kind of an exhortation, or an invitation to tell a story that came in the form of a hundred pounds of apricots.

**B:** One of the things that feels spacious enough to hold together all of these different things we've been talking about it is the structure of your book. You talk about the Russian doll structure, and there's an element of the *1001 Nights*, as well as, maybe, *Frankenstein*?

**R:** I hope so. Well, *Frankenstein* is also a Russian doll of a book, which seldom gets commented on because the story is so compelling. People don't look at the formal structure necessarily. But I'm glad you think so. And then it has that thread holding it all together.

**B:** Yeah. Is that what you call it, the thread?

**R:** We called it a running footer in *Wanderlust*, because I did that with quotes in *Wanderlust* that ran across the bottom of every page, a second narrative line that moved at its own pace. But it felt more meaningful to have the single continuity that we do with this narrative thread that runs all the way through *The Faraway Nearby*. I always feel coincidences are auspicious—it's like you're attuned to the pattern. It was exactly the right length when the designer laid it

out. I was expecting her to say, oh it's five hundred words too long, it needs to lose seventeen lines—or something like that—and, you know, she just put it in there and it fit perfectly. So, it's a book with 13 chapters and a table of contents, and 14 chapters actually. Except the 14th chapter isn't in the table of contents because it doesn't have a sequence. It couldn't come before or after anything, it's just with.

**B:** How did the structure reveal itself to you?

**R:** It was really quite wonderful. I had originally thought I was going to have four sections—one about north, one about apricots or something. But I was watching a Kurosawa movie with somebody—it's actually in the acknowledgments—and something happened. He took the DVD out of the player and then it disappeared for months. So instead we started watching another video ... which was Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*. He didn't know much about *The Arabian Nights* so I started explaining the structure. You know, the story within the story. And suddenly I had this apprehension, while lounging around watching videos on a Saturday night, of what the structure of the book would be. I think this was only about three months before I started writing it. (I sat down June 1, 2010 to start writing it.) So I had the sense of these nesting—of the Russian dolls and the story within the story. Which is why the first and last chapter have the same name. The second and second-to-last have the same name, the third and third-to-last have the same name. There are six chapter titles that repeat and one that's unique. With the sense that there's a kind of mirroring. And it's also very much about mirrors and symmetries. I love the form of books, and I felt, as with the *Atlas* and some other things that I've done, that I wasn't just writing a book, but I was making a book. You know, there's a physical structure that you hold in your hands when you hold a book, and I wanted to play a little with the architecture of that structure.

**B:** You talk about how writing in a sense takes you away from the

here and now. As opposed to cooking or something like that. How did you approach the process of writing something that required a lot from you?

**R:** It's one of those things where I definitely wanted to write it. I wasn't so sure if I wanted to publish it, but this is what I do for a living, and that part is nice. And maybe people will enjoy it—oh my the sky is getting beautiful!—and maybe it will even be useful.... So, we'll see what happens when I put it out there in the world.

I wanted to think through those things. And it's funny because my relationship with my mother continued to change. She died June 7th.... At that point it felt like those difficulties were mostly over. It's how the second chapter opens—that pile of apricots contained unripe, ripe, and rotting apricots. And the stories I tell about my mother are in various stages of ripeness and they fall away. This one, it was just so hard to get it right. Finding the balance between being true to my own experience and how difficult she was for me without just being bitter or unaware of what she thought she was doing, and what was driving her. Because she was very much driven by these unseen forces, which were the stories she told herself. And that's part of why it seemed meaningful in the context of this book. It wasn't just that I had a difficult mother, but that my mother told herself stories that made herself unhappy—and unhappy specifically about me. And when the stories fall away, as they did, when her memory went—all the resentment, and bitterness, fell away too. And she apprehended me almost for the first time. At almost 80. Without that screen of stories between us. And so maybe the stories were a kind of distance, a far away, and it was only possible to be close to her when the stories stopped.

And it's a funny thing. We tend to think we really need our stories. Buddhism is skeptical about stories. And at least wants you to be able to notice you're telling them, and to pause them. But it's also interesting that Alzheimer's, which so many people are terrified by, strips you of your stories. But are these stories these wonderful

shelters and jewels you own, or are they our balls and chains and prisons? What does it mean to lose your stories? Is it always a bad thing? So, that all made perfect sense for a book about storytelling. And for thinking about the relationship between storytelling and empathy. On the one hand we tell ourselves stories to try and understand and connect to other people. Sometimes there's a more direct apprehension. On the other hand, we can alienate ourselves from people by the stories we tell about them. Whether we resent them or decide we have nothing in common with them because of their category—because of their color, or because they're immigrants, or gay, or because of resentments, or something. The use of stories is so central to my book. This thing with my mother was an interesting case history. Stories aren't necessarily wonderful, and they don't necessarily bring us closer. There are these other stories. And what do we do with them? What do we think about them?

**B:** You also use art as something that actually has the power to break old stories. And maybe tell a new story. You talk about your friend [Ana Teresa Fernandez]'s project with the shoes made of ice that melted when she stood in an inner-city gutter, and the labyrinth that you enter.

**R:** And Yoko Ono's all white chess set. Yeah, I was really fortunate. Look, the clouds are pink now.

**B:** This is such a beautiful place to sit.

**R:** I'm just wondering, if I build a window bench, will it face away? Or I'm wondering if it can be built so there will be two seats that face the window. It seems like a good idea. We could each sit and still be looking out.

**B:** It's a good place to try to make a panorama of this part of the city.

**B. BANERJEE**

**R:** Yeah. Where were we? Visual art. It's funny. Some people are cinema people, some people are literature people. And I've always been a writing person, but I've always been strongly visual. When I was young, I thought making books meant drawing as well as writing. Because that's what kid's books look like. When I decided I was going to be a writer, when I was six. Instead, I've been around visual artists my whole life. And it's been such a blessing and a gift. I feel like nobody asks bigger or more fundamental questions than artists. A lot of times in literature and MFA programs, there's so many assumptions about what writing is, how you do it. The medium—you're probably going to do it on your laptop. There's no physical questions. So you don't have to think about process and medium in the same way. Artists can conduct a kind of philosophical conversation through making mute objects speak. And this engagement with the material of the world, and finding the intellect and the spirit of the matter of this world. I've been so blessed! I've been around Ann Hamilton and Richard Misrach. And dozens of extraordinary artists. My friend Ann Chamberlain who was dying—

**B:** Whom you mention in the book.

**R:** Who made that amazing archipelago of white islands connected by red threads. It became such a beautiful metaphor that powers the book. My friend, Elín Hansdóttir, in Iceland. Well, she really lives in Berlin, but she is Icelandic and was in Iceland that summer, who made the labyrinth. Ana Teresa Fernandez who made the ice shoes. That was such a powerful way to break Cinderella's story: Put the glass slippers on. And melt the fuckers with your feet. With your body heat. Go to war with the story and win. And not to make it easy, but to put your feet in ice until the flesh won out over ice.

So, yeah, it's not necessarily narrative. And that's also interesting. Ana Teresa—there is kind of a simple narrative: "I've made high-heeled shoes out of ice. I will wear them until they melt. And thus I will win the battle of the story." But Ann's piece—the archipelago of

white islands connected by red threads—Yoko Ono’s all white chess set, Elin’s labyrinth—there’s narratives implicit in them. You can literally travel in the labyrinth. You can think about what games you can play on that chessboard where both sides are white. There’s a kind of openness that’s an invitation that I like. It’s a kind of non-story that invites all stories to arise. And maybe all stories to pause.

But it was nice to have, without trying, these visual masterpieces. They’re mostly by women, so maybe that’s not the right word. But these amazing works of art just kind of rise to become part of the narrative. As there were when I was living in Roni Horn’s Library of Water. There was an artist who got me to Iceland. And the person who was dying of breast cancer as I was being treated for it was an artist. My life is full of artists, and so it felt like they belonged in the book. There’s something so magical about it. All those works of art that I’ve just described. They’re like fairy tales for our time. Because they’re so strange and magical and enchanted. Without being silly and Hobbit-like and other-worldly, they’re fairy tales for the here and now.

**B:** So, if I understand it correctly, the Library of Water has these glass columns that are full of melt-water from different glaciers.

**R:** Yeah.

**B:** What was it like for you to see these columns of water and know that they were from individual, specific glaciers that were melting?

**R:** It was wonderful! Roni Horn’s Library of Water room was like a map of Iceland. Not a literal map because it wasn’t laid out to give you the precise geography of that heart-shaped island. But it was this wonderful—and I never worked hard at figuring out which one was which glacier. But to know that most of the glaciers were represented by these columns was to be in Iceland in miniature. And the strange thing was my little apartment was underneath it, underneath this

observatory-like space looking out over the Breidisfjordur archipelago in rural Iceland. So it was sort of under the glacier, like the title of Halldór Laxness's book. I've always lived up high, except then. And people would occasionally come and peer in the room. And it wasn't just ground level. It was a little below the earth on the top of the hill. So I felt like a zoo animal with people looking in, which was less wonderful. And they erected a little fence for my benefit just to try and encourage them to not look at me like a zoo animal. So, it was a little odd, there was a kind of exposure there. There was a sense that I was part of the Library of Water, and I was an exhibit in some ways.

**B:** It definitely seems like that whole period was a convalescence period.

**R:** It was kind of isolating, and incredibly peaceful. At times, I was like, why didn't I go to Mexico with all the warmth and the color and liveliness? But there can be a lot to contend with. And it was wonderful. It was a contemplative time. And I really did get to experience the white nights and the light in the Arctic. I only regret that I didn't spend more time exploring—that I didn't take more boats through the archipelagos and things like that. The quiescence of some of that time was great, in its own way.

**B:** One thing I was really struck by—you talk about visual art, you talk about Chinese art—but there's very little science fiction in your book. A book called *The Faraway Nearby* to me suggests the future. Except you talk about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

**R:** Who, of course, wrote science fiction. *The Last Man* is even more science fiction because it's set in the future. It's truly one of the very early science fiction novels. I love Ursula K. Leguin's *Earthsea* quintet, and the *Dune* books were a big influence on me, but I haven't really been a science fiction reader. Science fiction is often impersonal

in a way, and this was really personal. It doesn't necessarily address these really deep personal things that I wanted to address. I don't pay that much attention to it, and in this context, it didn't have any particular place.

**B:** It definitely feels like technology is changing our consciousness. And you've addressed that in your Muybridge book.

**R:** Yeah. And I'll address it again. I was actually talking at dinner last night with poets about will there still be children who fall in love with books the way that people before ... like you must have been one of those kids where books were these magic boxes you learned to open up and with which you learned to enter other worlds. When kids have all these digital video ways of doing that, are there going to be kids who fall in love with books in the same way? But also the kind of hive-mind of everybody being continuously connected feels like it's this funny middle zone we're stuck in. There's this technologically-mediated state that's neither the introspection of true solitude nor the exuberance or vulnerability of deep connection. But it's just lots of texts and tweets and posts.

**B:** The shallows, perhaps?

**R:** Yeah. And wonderful things happen with it. I don't mention it in the book, but I got on Facebook to follow the Burmese uprising in 2007. And I've stayed connected with old friends. But also with all kinds of movements. So I feel really positive about that aspect of the technology. Technology can be used for many things. But it's very hard not to use it for this kind of—it's like eating potato chips out of the bag continuously. There's a kind of distractedness that you just munch down on, absent-mindedly, with technology. And that, I think, is bad.

**B:** I wanted to ask you about how your new book relates to *A Field*

*Guide to Getting Lost*. Did it grow organically out of it? There's strands of this book that talk about the Burmese uprising, and David Graeber [the anthropologist and historian of debt, who helped birth the Occupy movement]. What was it like to bring all of those dimensions of your thought together?

**R:** You ask such good questions. There's two facets of that. One is, I would look at *Field Guide* and I would think, I want to be her again. That license to have an absolutely intuitive and associative trajectory rather than a linear narrative where you're on a didactic mission, the way that *A Paradise Built in Hell* does. It was something I longed for—to be free to be as lush and subjective and meandering as possible. And also, I felt a tremendous responsibility. *Field Guide* I think was mostly written by 2003. And that's when the war in Iraq started. I had five years in which I was very much a public citizen in a way I hadn't been before. I became a much more political writer through my fabulous relationship with Tom Engelhardt, the Fred to my Ginger of writing. It's more than any other editorial relationship. There's a real symbiosis and collaboration. And he's brought out possibilities for me that have been pretty amazing.

Look at that crescent moon through the warped glass! Can you see that?

**B:** I can't see it.

**R:** You might have to come forward.

**B:** [Kneels on the floor next to Rebecca and gazes up into the sky, where she is pointing at the moon.] Now I see it. Whoah!

**R:** I really knew as soon as—that the apricots were going to prompt a book. And I was itching to write it, but I was under contract to write *A Paradise Built in Hell*. And under contract to do the *Atlas*. So I had two huge projects in the way. But it was wonderful to feel

license to write as beautifully as possible. It's not up to me to decide whether the book is beautiful. But I know I was trying to write—not in the sense of frills—but this kind of lushness and sense of description. I'm friends with poets and I read poets. And I feel much closer to them than novelists in that freedom to have that kind of richness of associative power. It was such a pleasure to have again.

**B:** You hold up Scheherazade as a working class hero.

**R:** Yeah. Well, she's a maker. She saves her life by the stories she tells. Like somebody building a boat to sail off their desert island. The sultan's view of women and marriage is this murderous desert island, and her stories are more and more elaborate. She sends a whole fleet out from that island. Yeah, she's a working class hero. You know, make the means of your liberation. And make it beautiful.

**B:** The means of production in this case would be her stories?

**R:** Yeah. Which is also her survival. What do I call it exactly in there? *Scheherazade, like a working class hero, seized control of the means of production, and talked her way out.* So yes, the means of production is the story. Essentially, there was a battle of the stories. There was a story in which women were fickle and treacherous and had to be murdered after they slept with men. Her story was that there were stories within stories within stories. Which is also a kind of womblike thing. And the fact that she's actually apparently giving birth to sons while she's telling these stories. Every story is a vessel that contains other stories which could contain other stories. And there's also the sense of generations. That within the child is the seed of her child, who will have a child, who will have a child. Maybe.

**B:** Well, it definitely feels like you accomplished a Scheherazade-like task. It feels like you talked your way out of a complex and complicated

set of circumstances. But this book also addresses the reader very personally. You use the second person. It also feels like an invitation.

**R:** I hope so. Were you invited?

**B:** Definitely.

**R:** Good. One of the single essays that's been the biggest influence on me is ["A Scary Abundance of Water"]. Barry Lopez wrote a story about his childhood that was about the ecstasies of space and light and freedom and roaming around the San Fernando valley in the 1940s and '50s before it was really developed. But also about the intense sexual abuse he suffered. It was in the *L.A. Weekly* about a dozen years ago. And one thing that was really powerful about that story and impressive is that he made it clear that these things happened to him, but he didn't think he was special, or suffered uniquely.

There's a real tendency in the solipsism of memoir and first-person narrative which has been shaped by the way therapists have taught us to tell our stories. Which is supposed to be storytelling that brings us to solutions. But I think it's that very form of storytelling that's a problem. Because it's a story that, when you tell it, it's a kind of selfishness ... the me, me, me that's ultimately just isolated. Both in thinking you're so damn special because of your suffering. And not feeling deeply connected to other people's stories, and not telling your story as inextricable from the people you impact as you yourself are not innocent. You don't *see* yourself. You're not an island with all the red threads traveling to other islands. You're isolated. And Barry told his story in this very beautiful way so that you could see that this kind of thing happens to many people and everybody has this heroic struggle to become and to survive, and to make sense of it, and to not be destroyed by suffering. And that generosity was really profound.

And I wrote the book—you know, I had a really minor brush with cancer. And a mother who was difficult. But was clearly also in difficulty herself. But I've also had a very lucky life in some ways. People read my books and invite me to go live in Libraries of Water in Iceland. How charmed is that? And I'm corresponding with the friends in Iceland. We're still very connected. I may see all of them this year. And we're still in each other's lives. And that's always a question for me. How do I tell my story in a way that resonates with your story, and that invites your story to come out and bloom and be fully present for you? And invites you to question it and retell it, or distance yourself from it. How can I tell a story that's not just ... these things happened to Rebecca Solnit, but here's how things happened to us. Here's what perhaps we can make of them.

Here's what one particular set of circumstances was, and what I made of it. What's your story? And what will you make of it? And do you need to remake it? It's that sense that was so important to me. It's that invitation to everybody. Because we're all made out of stories. We all have this work to do. What is this story we're given? Is it a magic carpet or is it a prison? How do you break the story the way Ana Teresa melted those ice shoes and make other stories? How do you become fully aware that you're the storyteller rather than just feeling like: "Oh I'm unlucky. I've always been unfortunate, nobody loves me." How do you see yourself telling the stories? It's not like I've solved it and that I'm completely conscious, etc. My crummy old stories show up like uninvited guests, or rats, in the house, and nibble away at good things. But at least I'm like, "You're a rat, I know I invented you, but I'm going to tell a cat-shaped story and get rid of you."

**I decide that this is a good place to end, and turn off the recorder.**

Afterwards, Solnit and I continue our conversation, and circle back to her antipathy against the conventional memoir format, so narrowly focused on individual suffering and redemption. Locating her own self in the interplay between so many people, places, and stories,

Solnit says, allows her to explore “a more extravagant sense of self.” It’s a phrase I carry with me as I walk from Solnit’s balmy section of the city to my own cold and foggy district, along with the taste of her apricot liqueur and the memory of her finger pointing at the crescent moon through the warped glass of her window.

# **Maria Works at Ocean City Nails**

**F. Brett Cox**

**We're standing outside of Ocean City Nails, where Maria works,**

when Bobby walks up. Bobby was always a fat kid. When he was younger his mother Patti, my dad's cousin, used to say that it was okay if he was a fat kid, that when he was a teenager he'd get tall and slim down. When he turned thirteen he started getting tall but he didn't slim down any. He's fifteen now, at least I think he's fifteen, and when he walks up he kind of jiggles all over. None of it's muscle.

"Sup," Nick says. It's me and Nick hanging with Leo while Leo's waiting for Maria to get off work.

"My dick," Bobby says. "Got to get me some tonight."

Bobby's always going on about getting some, acting bad. Like anyone would even give this fat fuck a handjob under the bleachers Friday night if they were so bored out of their fucking minds they could convince themselves it was a joke and better than being bored. He's shameless, though, totally fucking shameless, thinks it's funny, knows it's stupid, just goes right ahead. When the Demetrios twins started filling out he waited around after school just so he could follow them down the street to their uncle's restaurant and then come tell us how he followed them down the street to their uncle's restaurant and had to get himself some of that. He was such a hopeless fat fuck they didn't even complain to their uncle, who would have been happy to chop Bobby's balls off and serve them in a salad.

"My Big Fat Greek Pussy," Bobby would say to us and then laugh like it was funny.

"He just got out of the clinic," Nick says. "The one where the celebrities go for sex addiction. You a sex addict, Bobby?"

"Fuck yeah," Bobby says.

"Asshole," Leo says. Leo's never had any use for Bobby. I don't mean like the rest of us who know Bobby's a stupid fat fuck and don't pay any attention. I mean getting this wrong look on his face whenever Bobby's around. My grandmother Bataglia used to say that there was a difference between dislike and hostility. It's okay

to dislike someone, you can't be a human being and go through life without disliking some people, but you shouldn't feel hostile toward anyone. Then she'd quote something—she used to teach in a college—in this old form of Italian that even my dad, who spent a year back in Italy when he was about my age, didn't understand. She'd quote it like it meant something to anybody besides her. The point being that the rest of us kind of disliked Bobby if we thought of him at all, but Leo felt hostile toward him, and I never understood why. It's not like Bobby mouthed off about Leo's sisters, because he didn't have any, just the two older brothers, and one of them died in the war. And it's not like he talked shit about Maria. Nobody, including Leo, talked shit about Maria. Even stupid fat fuck Bobby understood that.

“Whose asshole? Yours?” Bobby says to Leo. “You got a personal problem? Something stuck up there?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Leo says.

Bobby laughs and doesn't notice Leo shifting his weight and clenching and unclenching his right fist, but I do, and I say, “So when is Maria getting off work?”

“Soon enough,” Leo says, his fist still clenched. Bobby's grinning like the fucking moron he is, hands stuffed in his hoodie pockets, bobbing up and down on the balls of his feet so everything's jiggling.

“Let's go in,” says Nick, who I can tell also sees how pissed Leo's getting.

Leo's fist finally relaxes. “Whatever,” he says, and we all go into the salon, Bobby too, still grinning, not caring that nobody wants him there.

Inside Maria's working on some old lady's nails. They're the only people in the place. I don't recognize the old woman. She kind of looks like my grandmother O'Donnell but not quite. Grandma let her hair go and didn't give a shit. This old lady's hair is some kind of fucked-up orange. Like anyone would think that's real. She's sitting straight up in a padded chair that looks like my dad's recliner and

she's got her hands stuck in something that looks like one of those rollaway TV stands. Everything else in the place looks beat to shit but this TV stand thing is bright and shiny. Maria's sitting in the chair by her.

"Hey," Leo says.

Maria looks up at Leo and he doesn't say anything else, just nods. Then she looks back at the old lady, who looks like a ghost next to Maria. Even with her hair tied back and in her Ocean City Nails blouse and slacks that make her look like she should be working in a hospital, Maria just drowns the old woman right out, her and the beat-to-shit recliner chair she's sitting in—the whole room, really, like Maria was some sort of special effect they spliced in over the boring real actors.

"Look at you, Madge," Maria says to the old woman. "Looking so beautiful. You're all ready to go out man hunting."

Madge snorts and I think for a second I see her drool but then I look closer and she's not. "I've had a man. One was enough. I don't need another one."

*"Ow! Jesus Mary and Joseph!"*

Somebody's yelling and me and Nick and Leo all look toward the back of the store where the tanning booth is. There's some kind of partition beside it, which is where the yelling came from. Even Bobby is distracted from a moment from staring at Maria.

"Waxing," Maria says without taking her eyes off of Madge's nails.

I immediately think of some woman lying back there with her legs spread and I know the others are thinking the same fucking thing, especially Bobby, but we don't say anything because Maria is right there and so is the old lady Madge.

"Waxing," Madge says. "Shaving. My mother always said these young girls should never start shaving."

"Oh come on, Madge," Maria says. "You want us to look all hairy and gross?"

"She said that if they just let it grow for a while when they first

start becoming young ladies and don't start shaving it'll just grow in like fine down and nobody will ever notice."

"Really," Maria says, like she was seriously considering this as some kind of option. "Did you do that?"

"*Ah! Jesus Christ!*" From the back.

"Oh, no," Madge says. "When do we ever listen to our mothers?" And she and Maria both laugh like it's the funniest goddamn thing in the world.

"Listen to you," Maria says.

"I guess it wasn't so bad," Madge says. "A little blood every now and then."

Maria laughs again, reaches over and flips a switch on the side of the thing that looks like a TV stand. "There! All dry now. You're all done." She stands up and pulls the thing away. Madge's nails are this bright candy red that practically glares. So now there's this blotch of bright red nails and this patch of faded orange hair and some dried-up pale old woman I don't know in between. Maria helps her out of the chair. Madge barely comes up to Maria's shoulder and looks like she's going to fall flat on her face but manages to shuffle over to the cash register behind Maria and pay for her nails. She shuffles on out the door and I realize she's even older than I thought she was. I wonder if someone is picking her up or if she's walking home, and why she's here at closing when I thought old ladies did this sort of shit during the day because they didn't have anything else to do.

When Madge finally leaves Maria says, "Give me a minute guys," and goes in the back. The yelling has stopped.

Bobby starts in like I knew he would. "God damn! That girl back there was getting her pussy waxed."

"How do you know it was her pussy," I say. "Maybe it was her legs."

"Fuck no," Bobby says. "It was her pussy. That little squeak right at the end when she was yelling? That's how they sound when you're doing something to their pussy."

"Oh, right," Nick says, "you're such a fucking expert."

“Fuck yeah,” Bobby says, looking back where the yelling came from. “Might have to get me some of that.”

“Right,” Nick says.

I look at Leo but he’s not listening. He’s too busy waiting for Maria.

When she comes out, she’s not in her Ocean City Nails uniform anymore. She’s got a short jean skirt and a white tank top and a leather jacket that stops before the top of her skirt, and she’s put on boots that make her taller than Leo. Her hair is down and sprawling all around her face and her lips are the same color as Madge’s nails were, and her own nails, which I hadn’t noticed one way or the other before, now look really long and black, black as her hair. I thought girls usually wanted their nails to be the same color as their lips but I guess not.

Leo’s not looking pissed anymore. He’s just got that kind of stoned look he gets whenever Maria’s around and dressed to go. Can’t say I blame him. Standing next to Maria he fades like shuffling old Madge, and it’s not just that Maria’s half Portuguese and half Italian, at least that’s what I think it is, while Leo’s pale Irish ass should be on a poster for the Celtic Festival, should be wearing a fucking kilt. I wonder sometimes what it’s like, being Leo with Maria.

“Let’s go,” she says.

Nick looks back at the partition and Maria says, “Oh, Tiffany? What a wimp.”

“She coming out?” Nick says.

“She went out the back,” Maria says. “She’s already gone. I’m outta here,” she calls to whoever’s still back there. “Lock up! See you tomorrow.” She takes Leo’s arm and we follow them out the front door.

Leo starts walking toward his car. “Let’s take Tommy’s car,” Maria says. “There’s more room. You don’t mind driving, do you, Tommy?”

“No problem,” I automatically say, although I’d really hoped

that Leo would drive so I could get fucked up if I wanted to. Time was I wouldn't have given a fuck but after last summer when my cousin Dennis got killed and they cut his body out from behind the wheel of his car and there was an empty fifth of Jameson's under the seat I've tried to have some fucking sense about shit like that. Dennis was a good guy. Leo looks pissed but doesn't say anything. We walk the block up to the Dunkin' Donuts where I'd parked. Nick starts for the rear passenger door and Maria says, "Wanna sit back with us, Bobby?"

"Fuck yeah," Bobby says, rocking up and down on the balls of his feet so everything's jiggling more than ever. Leo looks like she just asked him to go clean out the toilets at that pizza place her father used to own but he doesn't say anything, just gets in the back and slams the door. Maria gets in the middle and Bobby gets in beside her. Nick shrugs and takes shotgun. I get behind the wheel and we take off.

"Where to?" I say, trying to sound like some sort of limo driver, but I don't know how a limo driver sounds, so I guess I just sound like myself. I start to ask where they want to get some beer but then I think if I'm stuck being the designated driver then somebody else can worry about it.

Nobody says anything for a second, which makes sense. Nick's waiting to see what Leo wants, Leo's waiting to see what Maria wants, and Bobby's got to be so freaked sitting by Maria in back that he doesn't give a fuck what we do as long as we stay in the car as long as possible.

"Let's go down the shore," Maria says. "I want to see the ocean."

"It's dark, yo," Nick says. "What's there to see?" He laughs this little laugh that's more like a cough and before Leo can tell him to shut the fuck up Maria says, "I like it at night. It's beautiful at night. Let's just go down there and drive for a while." I could swear I hear Bobby breathe in sharp and then let it out like somebody punched him but I'm not sure. "Okay," I say. Service with a smile.

Maria makes it sound like it's some huge fucking expedition

but really it's only a couple blocks from where we are to Lynnshore Drive. Something Mr. Tomlinson said in social studies pops in my head. Urban density. He had some chart up on the screen comparing Boston with New York and Chicago and shit like that. I don't know why I remember, because Mr. Tomlinson is a fucking bore and his fucked-up Power Points don't even have any sound or animation or anything, but I remember that phrase, *urban density*, and I see as we drive how at night all the houses and stores and shit are just gray on black like that chalkboard Mr. Tomlinson never uses but never seems totally erased. It's so easy to forget with all this shit piled up on top of itself that there's a whole fucking ocean back there somewhere. We go past the coffee shop where my dad goes every Sunday morning to pick up the *Globe* and brings back giant coffees for him and Mom. There are two or three kids about our age hanging out in front and some older guy sitting in a chair by the entrance talking on a cell phone. We go past the Oceanside House Assisted Care Retirement Home, where some of the windows are lit but most of them aren't. I wonder if Madge lives there. I wonder if she's right now standing in front of her door having trouble finding her keys.

The street in front of Oceanside House ends on Lynnshore Drive. "Which way?" I say.

"Which way you guys want to go?" Maria says, which surprises me a bit, but there you are. Nick shrugs even though Maria probably can't see him do it. Leo says, "Take a right," and before Bobby can open his fat fuck mouth I turn right and we're driving along the shore just like Maria wanted.

All the big houses with their ocean views roll by on the right, and Lynn Beach is just a blot on the left. "Turn the music down," Maria says. We've been rocking Mastodon but I turn it down and put the window down too. It's chilly but not too cold. I take a deep breath and the air just smells like air. During the day this stretch of the shore smells like low tide even when it's high tide, but it's better sometimes at night.

With the window down things look clearer somehow and I can

see the waves rolling in. It's low tide and the beachfront looks the same color as the water, which is the same color as the sky. There's a three-quarter moon. There are darker blotches on the beach, rocks, washed-ashore kelp or some shit. They look like holes where there used to be something.

Nick is chill shotgun looking straight ahead. I look in the rear-view mirror. Leo has his arm around Maria but is staring out at the houses to his right. Maria is leaning into his shoulder, but she's got her ass pushing against Bobby's, and her left arm is—no. Fuck. I wait for the next streetlight and yeah, fuck me, she's got her hand on the top of Bobby's thigh. Her nails look like they're exploding every time we pass a streetlight. Bobby's moving a bit and singing along under his breath with the music but I can't see his left hand and I know, I just fucking know, he's got it in the hoodie pocket trying to position it so he can rub his dick without anyone noticing, or maybe he even sneaked it into his sweats for a clearer shot. Oh my fucking God. Maria's talking about how beautiful the ocean is, how she wishes it were summer so she could just dive in and swim swim swim. Bobby's mouth is hanging open even more than usual. He looks fucking hypnotized. I can swear there's movement on his left side underneath the hoodie. That stupid fat fuck. If we get out and there's a damp spot on the crotch of his sweats I swear to God I'm going to beat the motherfucker with a tire iron.

"You wanna keep driving?" I say, trying to calm down. "You wanna go on to Nahant?"

"I know what," Maria says, and then stops like she's waiting for someone to say, "What?" So I do. "What?" I say.

"Let's go up Lynn Woods."

"What the fuck is at Lynn Woods?" Nick says. "We won't be able to see two feet in front of us."

"It's great in there at night," Maria says. "It's like you're on another planet or something. Like a fairyland."

As hypnotized as Bobby is he still manages to snort when Maria says *fairy*.

“Can you even get in at night?” I ask.

“I know how,” Maria says. “I know just what to do. Right, Leo?”

“Whatever,” Leo says. He’s back to staring out the window.

“C’mon, Bobby,” Maria says. “Want to go to the woods?”

Bobby says, “Sure,” just as we go under a streetlight and I look back and can swear I see Maria squeezing his thigh, clutch release clutch release, like she’s working out with one of those hand grips trying to get strong. “Sure! Fuck yeah.”

So when we get to the rotary I bear right and go downtown past the common. There’s a few cars out but basically nobody’s there. I don’t think I’ve been to Lynn Woods since I was in junior high. I go down Walnut Street toward where I think the turnoff is for the main entrance but Maria says no, turn here, and we wind up on Lynnfield Street at a small dirt pulloff. There’s a fence between the lot and the start of the woods with a gate like at a railroad crossing or a parking garage. It’s down, so you can’t drive past it, but there’s nothing to keep anybody from getting out and walking. We park the car and everybody piles out. “Come on,” Maria says. “I know exactly where to go.”

Bobby runs ahead and makes a big show of charging up to the gate like he’s going to jump it, once, twice. The third time he just ducks under it and stands on the other side and goes, “Ta-dah!” like he’s some kind of fucking miracle. Nick does jump the gate but stumbles when he lands and almost goes flat on his face. Leo and I duck under and Leo hangs back to give a hand to Maria when she ducks under even though she doesn’t need any help. When she’s ducked down I pretend like I’m not looking at her tits, which even in the dark you can tell are about to fall out of her top.

“This way,” Maria says, and as we follow her into the woods I realize that nobody ever said anything about stopping for beer.

Somebody gave a talk at school once about the history of the woods, comparing them to Central Park or some shit, but the fact is there’s nothing park-like about them at all. There’s paths and a reservoir, and I guess it’s nice enough to walk around during the

day, but mostly it's just trees and bushes and more trees and bushes and an assload of rocks, some of them pretty fucking huge. Maybe it is historic. The guy at school told us that some pirate had some kind of underground bunker or some shit that was filled with treasure but it got covered up in an earthquake, and then a couple hundred years later some dumb fuck spent his life savings digging a tunnel trying to get to the treasure but he never found it.

I've heard Dad and Nick's Uncle Don and some of the other adults talk about what a hangout the woods were when they were in high school, booze and dope and sex for sure. I guess some of the kids still hang out there but I don't know why. Why go out in the fucking dark and dirt and get eaten by bugs or freeze your ass off when there's always a parking lot or somebody's house? I want to ask Maria this exact question but she and Leo have gotten ahead of the rest of us. There's just enough moonlight that I can see them, barely. Bobby's trotting along, huffing and puffing and jiggling, trying to catch up to them. Nick's just a little ahead of me with his hands in his pockets and his head down like he's watching each step he takes. So I jog up beside him and ask him.

"What the fuck?" I say. "Why are we marching through the fucking woods?"

"Cause Maria wants to. And what Maria wants, Maria gets, yo. Like that song in that movie."

"What movie?"

"The one with what's-her-name, you know, with all the old-time gangsters and shit, where she killed that guy?"

"Oh, yeah. I watched that on HBO. My dad thinks she's hot."

"You don't think she's hot?"

"I guess."

"You'd fuck her till your dick broke if you got the chance."

"Well, yeah."

Nick laughs, and then I remember. "Wait a minute. The song's not from that movie."

"It's not?"

“No. You’re thinking about the senior musical last year. The one about the Yankees and the deal with the devil or some shit.”

“Fuck the Yankees.”

“I know, but that’s what you’re thinking about. That’s where the song’s from.”

“Whatever. So what’s the song from the movie?”

“That’s the one where she kills the guy and says they all had it coming.”

“Whatever,” Nick says again, and then he points to where the others are up ahead of us. “Bobby’s struggling, man. Can’t keep up. Look at that.”

“Fuck him.”

“Probably the most exercise he’s had all year.”

“Maybe he’ll have a fucking heart attack and keel over.”

“Harsh, yo.”

“No more ‘gotta-get-me-some-of-that’ shit.”

“He’s harmless.”

“He annoys the fuck out of me.”

“Well, yeah.”

The wind’s picked up and the leaves in the trees are making about as much noise as the ones crunching under our feet. I zip up my jacket. The others have gotten into this clearing with a big flat rock in the middle. We get to the clearing and Maria and Leo are off to the left. It’s still wicked dark but with the trees set back from the clearing the moonlight comes through a little more. I can see Maria leaning back against a tree and Leo leaning in kissing her. Bobby’s standing beside the rock, which comes up almost to his fat gut. Maria’s jacket is on the ground at her feet. Her top is pushed up practically under her chin and her skirt’s up around her waist. I can see the curve of her tit rubbing against Leo’s jacket and the curve of her ass rubbing against the tree. Leo’s moving against her and she’s moaning.

“Fuck,” Nick says. “I gotta take a leak,” and he goes off into the woods like nothing’s going on.

I look over at Bobby against the rock and he's not even trying to hide it. He's got his hand down his sweats and the front of them is moving like there's an animal down there. He's saying something quiet, over and over again, but I can't make out what it is. I want to go over and slam his fat pig head against the rock. I want to go over and yell at Maria and Leo. *What the fuck is wrong with you? He's right there watching! I'm right here!* But I can't move. I just stand there watching them, just like that fat fuck, watching Leo grind into Maria and Maria wrap her arms around him and dig her nails into the back of his jacket, and I could swear they're cutting grooves in the leather, and before I know it my dick is hard and I try to pull my jacket down but it doesn't matter because nobody's looking at me.

I hear a crunch in the bushes and look over and Nick's standing there looking too, but he doesn't come back over. I can't see his hands and I wonder if he's jerking off too.

Suddenly Maria gives this gasp like she's about to sneeze and shudders all over. Then she pushes Leo away and pulls down her top and her skirt and walks over to Bobby like nothing's happened, like I'm not even there, and says, "Like what you see, Bobby?"

Bobby's just finishing wiping his hand on the side of his sweats, and then for once in his life he's perfectly still. "Like it?" Maria says again.

"Yeah." Bobby's voice is flat like he's pretending to be a robot.

"Me too. I like it a lot. And I like you too, Bobby. I really do."

"Fuck," Leo says from over by the tree.

"Shut up, Leo," Maria says, and then to Bobby, "No, really, I do. You're a stupid little fuck, even stupider than the rest of them, but you know exactly what you want. But you're so afraid of it, so fucking ignorant, and in a weird way, Bobby, that's kind of endearing. It really is."

It's so dark now I can barely see them, but just like back at Ocean City Nails, Maria's more visible than the others, more there.

"You know what you are, Bobby?"

Bobby doesn't say anything.

“Well, I do. Get up on the rock.”

Bobby doesn't move.

“Leo, come over here and help Bobby up on the rock. You too, Tommy.”

In my head I say, *What the fuck is wrong with you?* In my head I say, *Fuck you freaks, I'm outta here.* But when Leo walks over and grabs Bobby by one arm, I walk over and grab him by the other, and I don't know why, and we push him up against the rock and then pull him over on top of it. He's heavy as fuck, like I knew he would be, and the fact that he's not even trying to resist just makes him heavier. Why isn't he putting up a fight? I look back and Nick is still standing off in the bushes. Maria doesn't seem to notice him at all.

I've got Bobby by the ankles and Leo has his wrists, and Maria walks up, and I still want to scream at them and run away but at the same time I'm ready to stand there and hold Bobby down. Then Leo steps away and Maria says, “Get back, Tommy,” and I do, and Bobby just stays lying there spread out on top of the rock. He's still saying something over and over I can't understand.

“Bobby Bobby Bobby,” Maria says and shakes her head.

She walks up to the rock and stretches her arms out over Bobby, who's not saying anything anymore. Leo comes over and pulls Bobby's hoodie and t-shirt up and his belly looks swollen and pale and his tits look like a woman's plopped above his belly. Leo steps back. Maria leans over Bobby and starts moving her hands up and down him, and he's not moving, not jiggling any more, not making a sound. Then she holds her hand out and Leo steps back up. He reaches in his jacket and pulls something out and places it in Maria's hand. She takes it and Leo steps back again. She flicks her wrist down and back up and all of a sudden there's a knife blade hovering over Bobby's fat gut. I yell something but it's not words, it's just a sound. I can make the sound but I can't move. If she was holding the knife over me, I couldn't move.

And then the blade goes down. She starts moving it across Bobby's chest and belly, short strokes, up, down, sideways. Bobby's

flesh quivers and I can see lines of blood starting to form, starting to drip down his side onto the rock, but he just lies there and doesn't make a sound. She makes a couple of final strokes under Bobby's left tit and then motions toward Leo with the knife. When he comes up and takes it, Maria leans over and whispers something to him. He shrugs. "You're no fun," she says out loud. Leo shrugs again and pulls a cloth out of his jacket pocket and wipes the blade. Then he does the same thing with his wrist that Maria did, only up first and then down, and the knife closes and he puts it inside his jacket. While he's doing all that Maria's gone back to work on Bobby, only now she's using her nails. She's put her fingers together like she's going to do a karate chop and it looks like she's tracing over all the marks she made with the knife. Bobby's moving around more and he's talking again but I still can't make out what he's saying. When she finishes she steps back and shakes out her hands. I can hear the click of her nails. I take a breath and realize I can't remember the last time I did.

Maria goes over to Leo and takes his arm like he's escorting her somewhere. She kisses him on the cheek and then looks over at me and smiles. "Tommy knows how to have fun. Don't you, Tommy?"

Bobby has slid off the rock and is lying in a heap on the ground, and now all of a sudden I can move again and I run over thinking he's dead. But he's not. He's breathing. He looks like he's asleep.

"He's fine," Maria says. "Help him up."

I reach down to try to get him up and I see his chest. There's a bunch of marks on it. It looks like writing in some sort of foreign language. I stand over Bobby and stare at the marks and try to make sense of them, and then I realize that the marks are letters, but they're backward. When Bobby stands in front of a mirror later, he'll see the words fat fuck carved into his chest.

I shake him like I'm trying to wake him up, and he coughs and sits up. Leo comes over and we help Bobby stand up. "You OK?" I ask and then immediately think, *He's not OK. I'm not OK. Nothing is OK.* But Bobby stands up and brushes the leaves and dirt off himself

from where he fell on the ground and pulls his t-shirt and hoodie back down. "OK," Bobby says. "OK."

"Yeah," I say. "Let's go."

I start to help Bobby to get walking, but Leo pulls me away and leans into me, holding onto my arm. With everything that's happened I don't know what he's going to do. I'm afraid he's going to bite my ear off, I'm afraid he's going to kiss me, but all he does is say, real soft, "You're not going to tell anybody, and you're not going to forget." Then he lets go.

Maria and Leo start walking back toward the car and Bobby walks right behind them, not exactly like nothing's happened, because he's walking very carefully and his body isn't jiggling and going all over the place like it usually does. But he doesn't act like he's hurt or anything either.

I look back at the bushes where Nick was standing but he's not there, and I don't see him while we're walking back to the car, and when we get to the car he's not there either. I unlock the car and Leo puts Bobby in the passenger seat and then gets in the back with Maria. I sink into the driver's seat and feel like I've just played full court all night. It's like I can barely lift the keys into the ignition. "Home, Jeeves," Maria says, and laughs.

All the way back Maria chatters to Leo about work and school and what they're going to do this weekend, like we just picked her up from Ocean City Nails. Leo says, "Yeah," and "Right," and "Sure," but mostly lets her do the talking. Bobby leans back like he's asleep. I take them back to the parking lot where everybody's cars are. Bobby gets out and doesn't say anything. He just starts walking toward his house three blocks away. Part of me thinks I ought to walk with him until he gets home but the rest of me is exhausted and just doesn't care, doesn't care if I never see him again, or Leo, or Nick, wherever he is.

Maria and Leo get out. Leo heads straight for their car but Maria comes up to my window and leans in, smiling. She says, "Thanks for the ride, Tommy. Let's do it again sometime." She reaches in and

touches my shoulder and I think my heart's going to stop all over again but nothing happens. Her nails are still wet. She didn't wipe them off.

I look at her hand with its wet nails on my shoulder, and then I look at her and try to think of something to say that will get her to tell me everything I need to know. But I can't. I just stare at her, and her smile fades and her face sags and for just a couple of seconds she's not drowning out everything else. She's just there. For the first time I can remember, she looks like she doesn't know what she's going to do next, and it seems like that makes her unbelievably angry. She starts to say something and stops. Then she gets her smile back and squeezes my shoulder twice, hard, before she takes her hand off and turns around and walks away.

When Bobby and Leo and Maria are all gone I drive back down to the shore, past the coffee shop where the kids are gone but the guy is still out front talking on his cell phone, and past the retirement home where all the lights are out. I park on Lynnsore Drive and get out and walk over to the sea wall and down the stairs to the beach. There's some guy out walking his dog right by the water. You're not supposed to walk your dog on the beach, they've got signs posted. The moon is gone. I look out at the sand and the water and the sky that are all one big dark blot, and then I turn around and look up at the houses that look out over the ocean, and I think about when my grandmother Bataglia was dying. She lay in the hospital bed with the tubes going in and out of her, and she was pretty much with it right to the end, but one day I was there when my folks were out of the room, and she just lay there with her eyes closed and the monitors hissing and clicking, on and off, and she said, "Something's wrong." Over and over again. "Something's wrong. Something's wrong."



# **Something that Stands Still**

**Christina Seymour**

It was a quiet question for my first grade teacher to push her nail into my finger to help out a splinter.

I pulled away. It was a *classroom*.

She probably knew my trust was shaken: saw me looking down afterward.

At home that night, I felt famous by the gas stove in the kitchen,  
my mother roasting the end of a needle on blue flame.

She took my hand and worked the something out while I pretended  
it hurt, made the needle a knife, the scratching deeper.

I did this because I wanted more somethings to work out in the kitchen—  
the dog at our feet, birds asleep in the yard, the dishes listening  
to my cry and her calming whisper.

# **In Muddy Water**

**Craig Parmelee Carter**

**The old man knew someone was watching him. He propped**

the clam rake against his shoulder and eyed across the mud flats towards the shore. The black pickup was parked on the rise, just as it was the day before. He slipped his hands under his sweater and pulled out a pipe and tobacco pouch, and with his silvery eyes fixed on the pickup, scooped the bowl into the pouch and packed it firm with a bent finger, then struck a match on the butt of the rake handle and sucked the flame into the bowl, discharging cloudy curls of smoke. He tugged the brim of his fisherman's cap over his brow, shielding the glare of the late day sun which was drawing down on the horizon and stealing the warmth of the autumn afternoon. Daylight was short, but if his back didn't quit he could keep on for a while longer. He plunged the rake into the dark water and pressed the tines downward, pumping them toward his hunched body, dredging up pulpy black gobs of muck.

Virgil looked on from the shore, gnawing on a jerky stick and gulping Ballantine Ale from a can. Dribble streamed down his chin and he blotted it on the dog-eared collar of his flannel shirt, then raised a hand to the windshield and wiped through the fog, surprised to see the old man still there. The tide was completely out and the flats oozed a rotten egg funk that thickened the air and drifted like death over the waterfront and down the side streets. Although easier in the low water, digging clams was still back-breaking hard and it was getting cold and dark and Virgil worried the old man had been at it too long. He drained the can and crushed it with his thumbs, then reached for a paper bag on the floor and twisted a new one from the cluster, popped it open and set it in the cup holder. Then he opened the door to the truck and stood, urinating, finishing just as the old man waded out of the flats and started up across the bar.

Stiff with arthritis, his gait was awkward and willful and he hunched over as if bucking a headwind. His hands were blistered and worked raw. He swung a wire bushel basket from one while the other balanced the wooden rake handle in the crotch of his stooped shoulder. Virgil eyed the basket, half-full of mud-stained round clams that ranged in size from inch and a half diameter to brawny four inch jumbos resembling wet lumps of coal. Exhumed from the mud, they shimmered and hissed and knocked their shells together as they shifted around in the basket, pumping in instinctive retreat. The old man set the load on the ground, unburdening himself to re-light the pipe clenched in his molars.

“Virgil,” he squawked out the corner of his mouth.

“How many you get?” Virgil asked.

He looked over Virgil’s truck; at the crumpled front fender and the empty cans in back. “Some.”

“You going out again tomorrow?”

“Weather’s gonna turn,” he said, lifting the rake to his shoulder. “Could be last chance.” He turned and started up a dirt path toward the hill; to a salt-battered cottage that overlooked the tidal flats and the open water beyond. Virgil finished his ale, comforted by whiffs of rum-apricot pipe-smoke that lingered even as the old man in the giant boots disappeared in the night.

Digging the depleted heels of his Wellingtons into the door jamb, Virgil pried the boots free and dropped them in the foyer, where they joined a earthen collection of, sweatshirts, baseball caps, and Carhartt work-wear. “Shelly!” he hollered, “dammit Shell!” He raised a knee to their bucking black Lab. “Down!”

From the upstairs bedroom she had heard the pickup; would have habitually met him at the door. “Be down in a minute!”

She sat at a vanity table that had been his mother’s. It was simply constructed, yet richly veneered in birdseye maple with a beveled swing-mirror that had developed a modest craze, as though revealing the vague heartache of difficult years. People told her that her eyes sparkled—that they could always tell how happy she was when

they saw her eyes. They told her that sparkle came from down inside. She studied her eyes in the mirror. Did they still look this way? Lines framed them and branched out, forming the pathways where tears ran when she cried; when she thought of the child she carried—their child, and wondered what kind of father he would be.

She heard condiment bottles rattle and hit the floor as the refrigerator door flew open and shut, then his heavy advance on the staircase.

“I’ve been trying to get you for the past hour, Shell. Why the hell didn’t you pick up?”

“I never heard it ring. I was out with the dog. Why were you calling?” She rubbed up to him and pressed her nose to his shirt.

“I wanted to know if there was beer in the fridge or if I should stop is all.” He started back down the stairs. “Doesn’t matter now.”

She reached down and laced her sneakers. “I’ll run out. We need tomato paste for dinner and I think we’re out of coffee. Take a little nap and I’ll be back by the time you wake up.”

Virgil slumped on the couch and tuned in to *The Wheel*. He heard the car start and tires backing over the crushed stone and mustered to the kitchen, reaching through the assorted bottles stored for occasion. He poured a heavy shot of gin and drank it down, then returned to the living room, dispensing as he walked and leaving a spattered trail on the hardwood floor. He solved a puzzle on *Wheel* and celebrated with a drink. He thought of Haley; the endless hours he’d spent with his sister in imagined rivalry with the contestants of the cockamamie game show, and how she was always first to come up with the answer despite his age advantage. He raised his glass to her, then switched channels for a replay of the entire show, solving one puzzle after another while working down the bottle, drunk as a boiled owl by the time his wife returned with the makings of dinner.

The old man stirred the smoldering embers in the fireplace and added two splits of seasoned cherry, prodding and jabbing them with an iron poker until they erupted in flame. The small cottage

warmed easily despite its age and lack of modern defense against the bitter New England winter. An aluminum stock pot rattled on the gas range and steamy froth escaped the lid and sizzled on the burner. He lifted the lid and poked at the spitting shells, all opened in surrender, then raised the pot over a rust-streaked iron basin and dumped. He scraped the rubbery meat from the shells and chopped them in a wood bowl, mincing them to a watery slosh for chowder stock. Then he washed the bowl and chopping knife and honed the edge on a whetstone, returning it, finally, to a hook on a buckled pegboard partition. He turned to the empty shells in the basin, picked out the larger, and set them on the hearth to dry before the fire, then adjusted a knob on the flickering oil lamp and settled into a stuffed chair; its upholstery threadbare and pale, but unwaveringly favored like an old dog. He examined one of the shells, running his thumbs over the familiar contours; the rough growth ridges of the exterior and the contrasting smoothness of the bowl inside; the silky mother-of-pearl and the cloudy purple and chalky glaze that resembled flat white paint. He closed his eyes and thought about the empty shells; the times he spent walking the beaches and searching the water's edge for the perfect one to relay to her; smooth and clear enough for him to pen a note on the inside; a declaration of how he liked the way she wore her hair, or an invitation to meet for a bicycle ride in the morning or a walk on the beach after dinner, and for her to inscribe her replies, and to candidly reveal how much she cherished their friendship and dreaded the passing of summer. They exchanged their exotic stationary through secret caches they'd pre-arranged: the knot in the big maple, the third cedar pole in the split rail fence, the old church mailbox—once the hornets had gone.

The old man sipped apricot brandy and thought of her, just as he did most nights, until the fire burned low and he eased hypnotically into the gratifying solace of sleep.

Virgil got off work at 4:30 the following afternoon, stopped at South Street Bottle Shop for his habitual purchase and pulled into the parking area by the mud flats at 5:00, but the tide was up over

the bar and it would be several hours before it would be low enough for clamming. He sat in the pickup drinking ale and watching gulls as they picked muscles from grassy clumps and dropped them from aloft, cracking them on the rocks below. It was well past dark when he finally saw the flickering lantern outside the cottage and the silhouette of the old man tottering down the path on the hill. Virgil was once again letting off the excess of his consumption, this time in the cover of a Douglas fir behind a stone wall, and not visible to the old man as he trudged up to the pickup. He watched in silence as the old man paused for a moment at the cab, then edged down the rise onto the sandy clearing. The lantern cast a yellow hue that shrouded him as he moved and revealed the empty shells he carried in the basket. He extinguished the flame at the water's edge and crossed the bar in darkness, then waded slowly outward, disappearing in the cold oblivion of the flats.

Nearly twenty-five years had passed since he'd lost his wife and daughter to the sea. They'd perished in the early morning hours when their schooner, *Starlight*, sailing on an educational charter two hundred miles out of Halifax, had slammed into a submerged object; possibly a steel container dislodged from the deck of a cargo ship or perhaps a sleeping whale. The collision had jarred them from their bunks during their off-watch, immediately flooding the cabin, filling it entirely by the time they could pull on trousers and jackets and make it up on deck, which, to their astonishment was awash with sea water; the foredeck already under. Confronted with an inexperienced captain who was paralyzed at the helm, there was little that Emma could do but hold tight to their daughter and try to calm the frantic crew. Although a flare had been fired and an emergency radio call dispatched, the life raft had not been deployed in time. Within minutes the vessel went under, slipping entirely into the unforgiving darkness of the North Atlantic—all souls lost.

In the chill of the October evening, nearly waist deep in muddy water, the old man picked empty clamshells from the basket and returned them, one by one, to the sea. Having first taken the meat,

he had cleaned the shells, dried them, and written on their insides in black ink his confessions and apologies, his affections and his fears. Reflections and meditations; fragments of poems that echoed his sadness and the agony and longing that filled him. Prayers, he hoped, that would somehow cross the boundless seas and reach her, that he might be visited and comforted and they would again share this secret correspondence and be connected just as they had in the springtime of their youth. He took each of the inscribed shells and dropped them down, planting them in a deep hole where the mud gave way to a void; a portal to the abyss where she might discover them and understand how sorry he was that he, the proper captain and master of their intrepid *Starlight*, had not been aboard; had not been with his wife and daughter, but had been shore-side with pneumonia while an unseasoned relief captain piloted the ill-fated vessel to her grave.

Squinting in darkness, Virgil watched him emerge from the mud flats. He took a deep slug from his can and watched him come up across the bar and out of the water, stopping first to light his pipe, then the lantern, and then working his way up the rise to the parking area and the pickup. Virgil gestured at the empty wire basket, "I thought you were done with that a long time ago."

"With what?"

"Jesus Christ, Pop, with trying to channel the dead with clamshells."

"I thought you were done with that," he said, eyeing the can in Virgil's hand. "It shouldn't concern you."

"We worry about you, Shelly and me. You never moved on."

"I couldn't move on. Never even wanted to."

"Come on over our place tomorrow. I'll go out in the morning and get enough for Shelly to make her baked stuffers. You bring the chowder. We'd like to see you, Pop."

Virgil woke Saturday morning in sobriety. Invigorated and fresh, he felt a renewed sense of conviction as he kissed his wife and

laid a hand tenderly on her belly, then dressed and slipped quietly from the house, hurrying to catch the low water. It was cold and gray and freezing rain bounced like pellets of glass off the hood of the pickup. He pulled into the parking area and looked out across the desolate flats. He spit the grounds from the last mouthful of coffee, yanked his chest waders up over his jeans and sweatshirt, pulled a wool skull cap down over his ears and stepped into his boots. He lifted the clam rake from the bed of the pickup, walked down the embankment to the sandy clearing and looked out at the low water rippling on the flats. It was blowing steady out of the north, and the raw sleet bit his face. A lone gull swayed on a nearby rock, squinting stoically into the wind as it ripped across the dark water, breaking gray spume from the wave tops. Virgil hitched a mesh catch bag to a leather belt cinched around his waist and headed down across the bar and out into the flats; the shallow water first just covering the lowers of his boots, but quickly flooding over the tops. Wading deeper and further from shore he was in over his knees, and when he felt the bottom go soft and workable he thrust the rake into the mud and began to dredge. He felt nothing at first, then a few heavy lumps—stones, he suspected, with maybe a clam mixed in. He brought the rake to the surface, plucked the flotsam from the tines then cast it down again. He pulled it toward him, dragging the tines through the muddy bottom, feeling through the wood handle anything it came across. Something felt like sticks or a submerged branch and he drew it to the surface. A spider crab was snarled in the tines; its body impaled. Virgil worked it free, severing its thorny legs as he tore them from the tangle of seaweed. He edged outward in deeper water, moving further from shore, pausing as the waves lapped the crotch of his waders and splashed his chest. The mud had become squishy. His boots sank over the ankle and he bunched his toes with each step to keep the suction from pulling them off. Sleet whipped his eyes and he squinted toward the shore at the pickup, trying to determine where the firm mud would be. His boots

squished deeper with each step and he thought of the sink-holes that the old-timers talked about—places in the mud that were just hollow underneath and that if you stepped in one you'd never get out and probably never be found. No one knew where they were or how deep they went. They could move around, they said, from season to season, and you'd have about as much chance of guessing where they were as guessing the lottery.

Virgil had never heard of anyone falling into a sink-hole in these flats or anywhere else, but the thought chilled him and he turned his boots in the muck and started back towards the shore and that's when he felt it give way as though he'd stepped in a vat of syrup and there was nothing—no resistance underfoot as he plunged downward. Water flooded over the top of his chest wader and filled the entire cavity with its fluid weight, and realizing he was helpless to fight it, he filled his lungs to cry out but emitted nothing but a muffled gurgle as his face went beneath the cold water.

He saw only the blackness of the deep water which entombed him; never saw his father, who had been baiting crab pots on the bar and had seen his son's head and thrashing arms go under. And as he lost consciousness he never saw the old man charge across the flats and sink himself, cutting away the flooded waders and lashing the pot floats to his son's arms that yanked him to the surface and floated him to shore.

The old man's body was never recovered. Lost in the bowels of a muddy catacomb or picked apart by crabs and urchins, or as Virgil came to believe, it simply passed through the murky portal to the eternal abyss where he knew he would find peace, joined in the everlasting company of Virgil's mother and young sister.

A memorial gathering was held in the cottage. The attendance was sparse—the few relatives that remained, some friends—mostly locals, Virgil and his wife Shelly—five months pregnant. The wind whipped snow across the turbulent water and made the fire inside crackle and dance. Clamshells graced the fireplace mantel and windowsills, propped

on their edges with votive candles illuminating the inscriptions inked in his hand. One was set in evergreen cuttings from the hillside and signed, as though in final farewell. Virgil picked it up and read quietly:

Alone I must face the winter of life  
But after the winter comes spring  
Forever gone the cares and strife  
That peace—with God—shall bring

# Story Playlist

*A short story project amid  
the renewed interest in  
short fiction*

**Noah Charney**

**Life is short and there is a lot to read. I comfortably finish about** thirty books a year, reading for fun, without it feeling like hard work. That means that I might have a good thousand books or so in my future. The quantity of books out there is simply too daunting to consider, with around 300,000 new books self-published only last year, to say nothing of those published by established houses. These numbers are best left wash over you, maybe provoking a momentary sigh of dismay. Clearly, a plan is needed. How best to determine which books to include in the finite number I can read in my lifetime?

I'm interested in the quality books, the must-reads, the "classics:" ancient, old, modern, and contemporary. From Homer to Beowulf, from Chaucer to Boccaccio, from Walpole to Swift, from Twain to Poe, from Joyce to Hemingway, from Carver to Dahl to Murakami, there are canonical authors I've never read, or read too quickly, too young, or too little. I'm more interested in experiencing at least one fine text by the great writers, than in covering the pantheon of great books. As a writer, I understand that reading is the best training that I can undertake to improve my own craft. Writing without extensive reading is to exercise a muscle, but without understanding the diverse actions that muscle is capable of. Reading great authors inspires, refuels, energizes, and teaches, as well as adding moves to your repertoire. I would love to read every book of merit that's ever been published, but the laws of time and biology are against it.

Good thing I've come up with a plan.

**Recently, a number of high-profile publications, from *Esquire*** to *The New York Times*, have cautiously celebrated the revitalization of short fiction. The year 2012 saw a handful of exciting new short story collections from bankable authors (some best-known

for their novels) like Karen Russell (*Vampires in the Lemon Grove*), Nathan Englander (*What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*), George Saunders (*Tenth of December*), Ron Rash (*Nothing Gold Can Stay*), and Jess Walter (*We Live in Water*), to name a few. These collections have been both critically-acclaimed and have sold well—a rarity. Short fiction collections often receive praise, but rarely sell anything like novels. The only exceptions are stalwarts of any genre, who happen to publish short fiction collections as well as novels: Stephen King, Elmore Leonard, Joyce Carol Oates, Haruki Murakami. Such authors boast legions of fans who will buy anything they publish, from novels to story collections to dishwasher instruction manuals. The real excitement, emanating from publishers particularly, is that now lesser-known authors, first-time authors, and novelists publishing short story collections for the first time, are all encountering both critical kudos and good sales. The short fiction genre, until recently proclaimed dormant, if not dead, seems to be rising once more.

If that makes short fiction sound like a zombie, that's not my intention. Perhaps we might rather say that, from a publishing perspective, short fiction was simply comatose for a time. A few decades ago, a short story in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, or any of dozens of other magazines could launch a career, or fund a young writer while they wrote their first novel. A promising short story might prompt a publishing house to come calling with an offer of a book contract, based only on the potential shown by that one story. Stephen King off-set his meager income working at an industrial laundry by selling scary short stories to a host of magazines (*Cavalier*, *Moth*, *Contraband*) that no longer exist, just barely supporting his young family, before his first novel, *Carrie*, made him an international best-seller. Since King's youth, three things have happened that changed what short stories were capable of, career-wise.

First, most of the literary magazines that once paid a few hundred bucks for a short story have folded, or gone digital, or effectively

closed the short fiction arm of their publication. With the Internet Age came a proliferation of good writers who were willing to write for free, in exchange for being published and thereby reaching some imprecise number of readers out there in the digital universe. It is not hard to get short fiction published in a magazine these days, but is nearly impossible to get paid a dime for it. Even the once-mighty short fiction stalwarts, like *Esquire* and *Harper's*, rarely publish short fiction anymore. Only *The New Yorker* remains a fixture on the short fiction scene, publishing a story prominently in every issue. High-profile venues for individual short stories, therefore, have slowly disappeared, replaced by hundreds, if not thousands, of small-scale online magazines with limited, diffused readership. With so many semi-pro magazines out there, each with a few thousand readers, the chances are slim that any single published story will garner much attention.

Second, short story collections stopped selling well, falling far below novel sales, and often below non-fiction. In response, publishers grew hesitant to release short story collections, unless they were by well-established authors. The collections they did publish were not given the benefit of muscular publicity and marketing schemes, which means they were doomed from the outset (it's no secret that the amount publishers invest in marketing largely determines which books sell well). In the Internet Age, young authors were encouraged to focus on novels, as short fiction would not pay the bills or spark renown, either singly in magazines, or gathered in story collections.

Third, especially in the first decade of the twenty-first century, publishers determined that readers wanted a lot of book for their money, and so began to favor longer novels, or fatter-looking normal-length novels. I have a copy of Daniel Silva's *The Defector* that is the size of a concrete block, but which appears to have been printed in size 16 font, triple-spaced. I read it in two days, and suddenly felt like a speed-reading wizard—another intention of the publishers. You feel accomplished, and eager to jump into the next book, when you quickly finish a big book, even if its length is padded-out. Doorstop novels proliferated, and when short story collections were

published, they were usually “Complete Works,” in order to make them as large and long as possible. None of these three factors encouraged the writing or sale of short stories, or the publishing of first collections.

This state of affairs may be changing, and this very season feels indicative of a renewed interest in the short story. This is due to two primary, linked factors. Alas, magazines have not suddenly renewed their focus on short fiction, nor have they begun to pay for it. A single short story is still unlikely to win a young author their first book deal. But the eBook era, coupled with our collectively shorter attention spans in the face of the number of distractions that vie for our limited attention, means that short stories can now thrive once more.

With so many digital gadgets and apps and TV programs and newspapers and magazines competing for the spare half-hour we might have to ourselves, on the train, waiting in line, relaxing in bed, we have become skittish of longer commitments of time. This even manifests itself in article length. We have a new term, “long reads,” for proper feature articles of longer than 2,000 words. As a writer for magazines myself, I know that the preferred article length for on-line consumption is a measly 800 words, while even print magazines are hesitant to ask for more than 2,000 words, with a 1,200 word cap fairly standard. This means that readers are happy to commit to an 800 word article, but are less inclined to tackle anything much longer. Because magazine and newspaper editors think we want this, we have been trained to want it—I now set aside the longer feature articles in my Sunday *New York Times*, preferring to browse the shorter pieces. Enough ink has been spilled about shortening attention spans, blamed on quick-cut editing in television, bite-sized videos on YouTube, and so on, but how can a possibly alarming decline in tolerance for long-form reading help writers?

It may re-invigorate the short story. While we might hesitate to commit to reading a 400- or, god forbid, 600-page novel, we can reasonably expect to finish a short story in one sitting. The payoff

is different of course, approaching the last line of a 10-page story versus a 600-page novel, but that sense of accomplishment, completion, satisfaction is similar—it’s a high that avid readers might equate with crossing the finish line—whether marathon or sprint. We feel accomplished, our time well-spent, happy that we can check another box on our to-do list. Book publishers recognize this, the appeal of completion, and have responded by offering “singles.” Publishers like The Atavist and Byliner specialize in nonfiction that takes less than 90 minutes to read. Kindle’s eBook Singles series follows a similar pattern for fiction, publishing individual works that are halfway between a long short story and a novella (all under 120 pages in length, the general cut-off separating novel and novella). The short story, like the mini-essay, becomes a vehicle for a single purpose, idea, or turning point. It is like a lyric poem to an epic poem: it sustains, over a shorter period of time, with perhaps more intensity, a finite world, concept, thought. Even its more complex and riddle-bound embodiments (like the puzzle-box stories of John O’Hara, each one of which begs for a book group to pick it apart) feel digestible, at once satisfying and easy-to-commit-to. A great burger, as opposed to a 15-course tasting menu.

The second factor that has propelled the growth of the short is the ability to buy digitally—instantly and cheaply—and download directly to a reading device. Printing costs for an ultra-thin book of 40 pages are not much less than printing a book of 200 pages, but a publisher could not get away with charging for the short work anything like what they can for a 200-pager. Such a tiny printed book would feel wastefully slender, an unsatisfying hankie of text. With eBooks, however, the length is immaterial—when we download something, the file looks just like any other. We also have the illusion that we haven’t paid for it, since our credit card info is already loaded into our Amazon or iBookstore account, and we simply click a button to purchase and receive the digital book on our reader.

The costs for these “singles” are small, usually a dollar or two, so they are as easy to buy as a track on iTunes. Short stories may

begin to have the appeal of hit songs. You could buy the whole album for a more substantial price, but that may be more than you'd care to commit to. You can instead buy only the tracks you want, for 99 cents each, and then create your own playlist. You lose out on the feel of the album as a whole, but relatively few bands bother any more creating albums meant to be listened to all the way through, in one sitting, to convey a complete thought or idea. The era spawned by The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* is coming to an end, and there aren't many in the vein of Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska*, Neil Young's *Harvest Moon*, U2's *Achtung Baby*, and David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* these days. Most albums are assemblages of individual songs, and can be sold as constituent parts. Even if the artist feels differently, the consumer can access work piecemeal, creating personal playlists. Such freedom of selection might inspire the desire for do-it-yourself short story collections.

We have not yet reached the stage when Amazon will offer the purchase of George Saunders' new story collection either as individual stories, at 99 cents each, or the whole thing for \$20, but surely that is on the horizon. And it may not be a bad thing. Story collections, like albums, are rarely complete thoughts, necessary to read from cover to cover, in the order presented. The beauty of each story is that it is, in itself, a complete thought, a faceted gem in your palm. Collections are at their best when they are coherent, but most are simply a collection of individual stories, often first published elsewhere, and often written over many years, with no concept or character that links them together.

These observations led me to the idea of a short story playlist.

**In 2011, I read twenty-seven books. I considered that a pretty fair number, a bit less than one a fortnight (a book every thirteen days, if you're keeping score). Last year I was determined to better that record, aiming for thirty—I ended up with thirty-eight (a book every 9.6 days), and felt pretty darn good. Not being in the least obsessive, I keep a tally in the back of my Moleskine datebook, a**

manual journal to which I stubbornly and lovingly cling, despite my various iApparati.

I read more than your average American: about ten times more. One in four Americans read zero books last year, and the average American read three. Three books a year may seem like very little, but with Americans watching an average of 28 hours of television a week, or 14,560 hours per year, who has time for books?

Despite being well ahead of my fellow citizens, I feel under-read, particularly when it comes to the “great authors.” I love reading, but what I love even more is finishing what I read—getting to the end. The act of getting to the last page, drinking in that often-memorable or explosive final sentence gives many of us a visceral pleasure. Which is where short fiction comes in. Despite other commitments, distractions and, occasionally, boredom, we know we can get to the end, without feeling that we must commit ourselves to days or weeks, when the siren song of thousands of new articles, songs, videos, TV shows, films and, dare I mention, real-life friends and experiences also shout for our attention.

Combining my wish to read more authors in order to become a better writer myself; to finish more texts, and enjoy that high of completion; to investigate what happened to the short story, why it seems to be making a comeback, and how 21st century reading habits can help it to thrive, we come to my Story Project.

I will read a short story each day, for a month. I will read the story at night and then, the following morning, re-read it and write a short essay about the experience—being sure to stay within the magical 800-1200 words of today’s online attention span. I will comment on what I liked or disliked about the story, why it and its author are worth reading, what makes the story and/or its author unique and, most importantly for me, what I learned as a writer by reading it. I’m approaching this as a month-long master class in fiction, in which I will learn at the feet of fellow writers who all happen to be masters of short fiction. At the end of the month, I will focus my collected thoughts and lessons into a longer article (a “long

read”), reflecting on the experience, and what I learned about the short story as a genre, one that seems poised for a renaissance.

But I don’t plan to stop there. As this is the story of a writer reading stories to learn how to write better stories, its natural conclusion would be for me, after ingesting 30 great stories by 30 fine writers, to put what I’ve learned into practice. I will write my own short story, the first I’ve written in years, to bring my Story Project to its natural climax. This story will be published, along with an analysis essay: talking through my decisions, and why I wrote the story as I did, in the vein of a DVD with a “director’s commentary” feature.

**How did I assemble my playlist of 30 short stories? I’m an old hand at learning from fellow writers. For the past year, I’ve written a weekly series for The Daily Beast called “How I Write.” Each column is an interview with a writer I admire, with unusual, odd-ball, and targeted questions about the writing life and writing techniques, tricks of the trade, likes and dislikes, behaviors and quirks. Many of these authors have since become friends, and it’s great to swap stories with them about life in the writing trenches. My original all-inclusive list of short stories was based on recommendations by my fellow authors (who were universally thrilled by the project, and eager to recommend unusual stories I might not otherwise consider), tips from English professors, and a large helping of the universally-acclaimed “classics” of the genre—the kind of stories that appear in numerous collections, and are mandatory reading in many literature classes and writing classes. In order to keep the list length reasonable, I’ve only considered stories originally written in English. No story can be more than 50 pages in length. I have personal preferences, too. I like stories with a sense of creeping dread that urges you to read on. This doesn’t mean, necessarily, horror stories or thrillers, but those tend to be my favorites, so I lean toward suspenseful stories, regardless of genre. My goal is to quickly expand the number of authors whose work I’ve read, but also to juxtapose a wide variety of writing styles side-by-side, read on consecutive days, so that the**

memories are fresh. While I will read them in chronological order of publication, I will be looking for ways to arrange the list according to other criteria, as one does with a playlist or—and I’m dating myself here—a “mix tape.”

My initial list was around sixty stories long. That’s two months’ of reading—not a lot, but my concept for the Story Project is one month, so I had to trim. Some of the stories I’d read before, but, as exemplars of the genre, are worth re-reading specifically for the project. The scariest thing I’ve ever read is H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space.” Yes, it’s over-written and, yes, the idea of an alien color pattern floating in the air doesn’t sound particularly horrifying, but just thinking about it gives me a pleasurable sense of heebie-jeebies. The second-scariest thing I’ve ever read is Stephen King’s “Children of the Corn,” but it strikes me as a clean act of horror alone, whereas the story I prefer to include in my list, “One For the Road,” is not only frightening but is also far more literary, with the feel of a centuries-old folktale, but one which Carl Jung could write a dissertation on, with this curdling moment when a father, who ran for help when the family car was stopped in a snowstorm, submits to his familial instincts and rushes to help his wife and children, though we know that they have become vampires, glowing eyes in the snowbound darkness. These two stories are included in my list because one informs the other. By gathering “singles” that respond to one another, either actively or through the eyes of a modern reader in the midst of a project like this, I hope to learn more from the collectivity of the story “playlist” than I could reading each “single” alone.

With assistance from the editors of the *New Haven Review*, I’ve come up with the following list:

1. Ambrose Bierce “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne “The Minister’s Black Veil”
3. Mark Twain “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”

4. Edgar Allan Poe “Fall of the House of Usher”
5. Washington Irving “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”
6. Rudyard Kipling “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi”
7. F. Scott Fitzgerald “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”
8. W. W. Jacobs “The Monkey’s Paw”
9. H. P. Lovecraft “The Color Out of Space”
10. Edith Wharton “Roman Fever”
11. William Faulkner “A Rose for Emily”
12. James Joyce “The Dead”
13. Ernest Hemingway “Baby Shoes”
14. Charlotte Perkins Gillman “The Yellow Wallpaper”
15. John Cheever “Reunion”
16. John O’Hara “Good Samaritan”
17. James Thurber “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”
18. Flannery O’Connor “A Good Man is Hard to Find”
19. Raymond Carver “Cathedral”
20. Shirley Jackson “The Lottery”
21. O. Henry “The Gift of the Magi”
22. Isaac Asimov “Little Lost Robot”
23. Roald Dahl “Man from the South”
24. J. D. Salinger “A Perfect Day for Bananafish”
25. Joyce Carol Oates “Where are You Going, Where Have You Been?”
26. Stephen Millhauser “Eisenheim the Illusionist”
27. Woody Allen “The Whore of Mensa”
28. Annie Proulx “Brokeback Mountain”
29. Stephen King “One for the Road”
30. Nathan Englander “Free Fruit for Young Widows”

I’ve read, at some point, nine of those thirty. Those that I’ve read were largely assigned in high school or college (Jackson’s “The Lottery” being the poster-child of high school assignments), and I’m curious to revisit them as an adult, and as a professional writer, to

see what all the fuss was about. Englander's "Free Fruit for Young Widows" stupefied me when I read it in *The New Yorker*. I hadn't even planned to read it through—I was just browsing the magazine, scanned the first paragraph, and was drawn into its vortex of wonderfulness. I'm curious as to whether I can identify its roots, if I read it last, after twenty-nine other, older "greats." I know Roald Dahl from his children's books, but I've heard how creepy his grown-up fiction can be, and I'm curious to try him out for this reason. Other stories were recommended by fellow writers or professors and represent a playlist that I feel will be cohesive, even if it is heavy on my personal preference for tales of horror, suspense, and creeping dread.

This is by no means definitive—it's just the thirty that have been selected for this particular project. I'd welcome suggestions as to what else should be on the list, or what I should read, once this initial project is done. This list is only in chronological order—lining up my "playlist" of short stories is something that can only be properly done once they've all been read. The result will be a more coherent list, somewhere between a college syllabus and those carefully-curated mix tapes we used to make for potential sweethearts back in the Bronze Age of cassettes and high school crushes. The later ordering of the stories will provide form and lucidity to a list that could seem haphazard. If we imagine this playlist of stories as its own collection, readable and even publishable as a unit, then its order is paramount to our bringing an assemblage of "singles" and making of them a rational album—which I think the best story collections do. Having only read a few of the listed stories ahead of time, those I particularly wish to revisit will, I expect, be enlightened and will enlighten other stories that they influenced or were influenced by. There would be no Lovecraft without Poe, and no Stephen King without both past practitioners of the art of literary horror. "A Good Man is Hard To Find" and "Cathedral" inspired just about every short story writer to come after them. The most recent of the

stories, “Free Fruit for Young Widows” should reflect the stained-glass light of all of the previous stories, as Englander is a voracious reader and student of his art form.

**The *New Haven Review* will post my response essays to each story on its blog, and publish the final article at the end of the project, with my reflections on the experience. The resulting short story that I will write myself, and its accompanying director’s commentary, will be published later, as an eBook single.**

I’d love for you to join me, and read along with the stories I cover, to send comments, and to make suggestions on the *NHR* blog. In the end, I hope that this Story Project will both satisfy my desire to read more authors, and help fuel the renewed interest in short fiction in general, while also suggesting the values and limitations of short-form fiction.



# And the Winners Are...

*Three poems*

Henry Jacob, Maggie Guarino-Trier,  
and Joanne Paone-Gill

*We are pleased to print here the winning poems from the 2013 New Haven Free Public Library Poetry Contest. Henry Jacob, Maggie Guarino-Trier, and Joanne Paone-Gill won in the teen, youth, and adult categories, respectively.*

—The Editors

### **First Crocus in New Haven**

Gray sheets of late winter sky  
Reflect from fallen snow,  
And rest on patches of shaggy grass.

On the Green and in the yards,  
After the raw bleach of earth,  
Hope begins to show.

A soft, purple cup holds a strand  
Of the sun: it smells of honey,  
Conducts the darkness into light.

—Henry Jacob

**Shine, Child, Shine!**

Speak, child, speak!

Let the birds fly

out of your lips

and up into the sky.

Shine, child, shine!

The world is a song.

Extol its virtues

all life long.

Sing, child, sing!

Make up the words.

Compose a tune,

harmonize with the birds.

Laugh, child, laugh!

Don't tat the lace.

There are fairies to visit,

there are pigeons to chase.

Run, child, run!

Climb in the trees.

Talk to the squirrels,

capture the breeze.

Sleep, child, sleep,

Now the day's done.

But your promising life

has just only begun.

—Maggie Guarino-Trier

## Resilience

Blindness visited us when  
Dad turned 52. She didn't call in advance  
to let us know she was coming. She just  
showed up one day looking for Dad  
...and stayed.

Life changed.  
His business sold—  
never a complaint was heard  
no tears, no anger  
Just acceptance.

My father sat in the kitchen  
elbows on the table  
sightless eyes closed, thinking.  
Thinking.

Then I saw the light in his eyes.

Yes. The sun rose and  
swept away the darkness.  
He raised himself  
went to the basement and slowly  
carefully ... refinished it.

Life changed—  
a shed, a deck, a fence  
laughter, playfulness.  
The light in his eyes remained.

He saw through his blindness.

—Joanne Paone-Gill

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**Christina Seymour's** poems have appeared in *Connotation Press*, *Third Wednesday*, *Three Rivers Review*, and *Backbone Mountain Review*. She lives in Morgantown, West Virginia.





