PLYMOUTH WRITING PROJECT is the NEW HAMPSHIRE CHAPTER of the NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT, and hosted by Plymouth State University.
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Standardized Reality
Carolyn Bordeau
Teacher Lore

The fear in his eyes pierced my heart. His expression would have fit the face of a driver who had just run over a small child. His face drained of color, his mouth silently shaped the “O” of “Oh, no.” Instinctively knowing I had to perform a rescue, I hurried between the rows of desks.

“Tyler, what’s the matter?” My whisper sent a shiver through the thick silence of the testing environment.

“I wrote in the wrong space.” His panic was almost palpable.

“It’s okay. This will be okay. Show me what you did.” At that instant I felt less like a teacher than a mother, or a nurse, or an EMT, repeating comforting phrases, asking to see the wound.

“It all belongs in this one box but I ran out of room and I didn’t even pay attention to the pages and I had way too much to say about this and I’m still not done but now I’ve used up the space for the next two questions and we are almost out of time….”

“It’s okay.” With my voice, I layered authority atop the calm. "Tyler. Listen: here is what you will do. Take a plain piece of paper, put your name at the top, and write the answers to the other questions there. We will attach this to your test booklet."

He chewed his lip, clenched then unclenched his hands, looked away from me, out the window. I knew he didn't believe in the possibility of salvage. His instincts were better than mine.

"Tyler. Listen: think about what is important here. Is it writing inside the lines or is it what you actually say?" Nothing about Tyler fits in the box either. He doesn't read the class assignments; he reads the other, longer book by the same author. His hair is colored red or green or blue and sometimes braids stand straight up from his scalp. He wears a blue and white serape or a black ICP t-shirt to class. He sings Vivaldi in the school choir. He skips school for three days to sit at the bedside of his dying grandfather. He wants to do well on this test.

Beginning to get through to him, I warmed to the logic of my argument. "The people in charge of these tests are teachers." I remembered a woman from the State Department of Education who had impressed me as somebody who actually cared about kids. "Teachers care about what you know, not whether you write the answers inside the box."
"Okay." His shoulders relaxed. He believed me. He picked up his pencil, sorted through his thoughts, and went back to work. In the renewed silence, the clock ticked. The worm of my own doubt began to nibble.

Would it be okay? Was it more important to color inside the lines than to soar with your mind so fully engaged that you forgot the directions, forgot the lines, forgot everything but the thought that drove you forward? That would be utterly ridiculous. Yet I had read those directions aloud, over and over, sounding the bold print with measured tones: "Plan your answers to the open-response questions so they fit in the answer spaces provided...."

Plan your answer. Plan. As my own confidence drained, I planned my answer. I would swim upriver through the channels of authority to see what would happen to Tyler's test. I had assured him that it would be okay; I needed to assure myself.

My department head responded with the same confidence I'd shown Tyler, and promised to contact the state to confirm that the attachment would be read. A few days later, he brought the puzzling news: because the tests were scanned into a machine, nothing outside the box would count.

Machine scanned? They must have misunderstood. This was an open response section, not multiple choice. What has a machine to do with evaluating a paragraph of student writing? No, I could not accept this. It was surely a mistake.

I tracked down the e-mail address of the one human being I knew at the State Department of Education, that kind woman who had been an English teacher for many years, who knew students, who valued their voices. I explained the situation. I awaited her reply. It was crushing.

She had checked with her colleague in the office of Measured Progress. Responses are scanned into computers. The computers will not pick up anything outside the box. Nothing could be done. It has to be fair to all students, she said.

I exploded with questions: Why do answers have to be scanned? At what point do actual human beings enter the picture? Isn't that the point at which a judgment enters? Can't the same judgment be made of a response on a piece of paper as one inside the box? Is there no way to deal with a special case? What if the machine breaks?

No answers came. Her final e-mail simply said: This is the reality of "standardizing" state testing.
The Picture

Gail A. Bourn

Author’s note: After attempting to write a poem about my grandmother’s unknown friend I wrote this short narrative. While conferencing with three of my peers in writing group, their questions and comments helped me to remember more details about this story.

ON CHRISTMAS MORNING, my husband came into the living room carrying a beautifully wrapped present. Grinning like a little boy, he placed the box on my lap. It was about the size of a shirt box so I thought it was a sweater or something. He was pretty predictable when it came to gifts. “Come on, open this present first!” he begged. Having this much excitement about a present was out of character for his practical manner. My curiosity was getting the better of me. I began tearing off the Christmas wrapping paper exposing the box cover. I immediately recognized the thirty year old Jordan Marsh box. Lifting off the cover, and parting the tissue paper, I revealed the picture of my grandmother when she was a young woman posing next to a man with brown curly hair. In silence, I just stared at the restored picture, in its antique enameled oval frame with the dome glass.

My husband, sensing something wasn’t quite right, said, “What’s the matter? I thought you would be excited to have this picture of your grandparents restored. I found it in the upstairs closest and wanted to surprise you by having it restored and framed. I thought you could hang it ups in the hall with the other family pictures.”

My thoughts went back to a cool, rainy August afternoon, when I climbed the old wooden stairs that lead to my Grandmother’s attic. Now that both grandparents had passed away, the contents of the attic had to be sorted through before the antique dealers and movers came. I had looked forward to the couple of hours in the attic with my memories of my grandmother. Going up into the attic was like traveling back in time to the early 1900’s. It was a perfect day to be up in the third floor attic with the open rafters and beams exposed. My Grandmother’s high collared, long black dresses brittle with age hung from the rafters.

That day, the old steamer trunks with their large brass hinges and lock were the object of my exploration. Heading over to the largest black trunk, I jigged the lock until it came loose allowing me to swing open the two halves of the trunk. Inside the trunk were 3 drawers on one side and a hanging section on the other. I can envision Grandma, a young girl of eighteen years, packing her precious belongings carefully into the trunk in preparation for her voyage from Sweden to America in the late 1800’s. Carefully wrapping the few fragile items she could pack in the steamer trunk.

The trunk still held some of her personal belongings from Sweden. Opening the top drawer, I spotted some old tintype pictures of her and her family in Sweden. There were
pictures of when she was a young girl playing with her brothers and sister, her parents by the lake, and family gatherings.

Looking at the pictures reminded me of times when we would sit around the old oak dining room table. Grandma would tell stories of her life in Sweden growing up with her family. She was very cautious with the details she put in her stories, never mentioning anything that would create gossip, especially stories about any male friends. She would talk about her long boat trip from Sweden to America. The boat ride sounded horrendous with passengers who were violently seasick and the stench of vomit in the lower cabins. In a storm at sea, the ship would rock and roll when the ocean waves would swell to ten or fifteen feet. After that transatlantic crossing, she said she wouldn’t get back on the boat to return home. Grandma would say, “I just came to America to help my sister, Isabel, with her new baby. I didn’t want to live here for ever.” But after a couple of months helping her sister in Connecticut she decided not to return to Sweden.

While at a church social she met a young Swedish man. The family gossip is that she started dating him that day. Alexander, my grandfather, was a true “Swede”, tall, muscular, and a ruddy complexion. He had been in America for a few months and worked at the local shoe factory. They were married within a year and began raising their family in America. Was my grandfather the real reason she stayed in America? Was she just using the boat trip as an excuse?

Sitting on the attic’s wide board wooden floor, I sifted through the old brown and cream-colored pictures. I came across a large oval shaped picture of a man and young woman. I immediately recognized the women as my grandmother with her sky blue eyes and long blond hair. The curly topped man was definitely not my bald headed grandfather. The picture had somehow been torn between the two people sitting next to each other. Had my grandmother torn the picture? Or did I tear it in a rage of jealousy?

This must have been the young man that I would hear my grandmother and her sister whispering about when they didn’t think anyone was listening. I had heard that she was engaged to him when she left for America. From what I could gather, this man had traveled all over the world bringing back gems and semi-precious stones for her. Tucked in the box with the picture were postcards of Sri Lanka, China, and Hong Kong. He had been a jewelry salesman and would travel to far off places to collect gemstones. On her right hand, she always wore a large amethyst ring. The ring must have been a gift from this young man. How did she explain this ring to my grandfather? Did she say it was a gift from her family?

Grandma probably packed this picture to show to her relatives in America. We never saw any pictures of this young man when we would visit our grandparents’ house. I would just my grandmother and my great-aunt quietly whispering about him. My
father or aunts never talked about him.

Staring at this young couple, I wonder if this young man ever tried to contact my grandmother. Did he ever come to America to try to get her to return to Sweden? Looking at the postcards, I began checking the address and dates. I found one card sent to my grandmother at sister’s house. It was written in Swedish and I couldn’t figure out what it said. Perhaps, he was asking her to return to Sweden. Sitting alone up in the attic, I lost track of time, imaging what their life might have been like, when they would greet each other after he had been away on one of his trips. He giving her the little trinkets and gems he brought back for her. Would my grandmother sit up in the attic and reminisce about her life in Sweden with this young man? Did she sit here in the same spot that I was in and wonder what her life would have been like if she had never come to America?

Placing the picture between two pieces of cardboard I carefully put it into an old Jordan Marsh shirt box. I decided to take it home and tuck it away upstairs in a closet for safe keeping until I had the chance to talk with my aunt.

Now on Christmas morning, I paused think of a response for my perplexed husband. Should I lie? He was so excited about this gift that I hated to hurt his feelings. He probably thought this would be a wonderful and unexpected surprise. After a few moments, I finally said, “It’s a lovely frame and the restoration of the picture is great, but the man in the picture is not my grandfather. I found this picture hidden in my Grandmother’s steamer trunk.”

The day after Christmas, I went down into our basement to the storage room. Reaching behind some boxes, I found my Mexican shoebox and sifted through some pictures of San Miguel, Cuernavaca, Guadalajara, and Puerto Vallarta. I stared at a picture for a few moments before safely tucking the box away. Someday, just as I found my Grandmother’s hidden life, perhaps my grandchildren will come across mementos from my past that have been kept silent. Hidden in my basement in the Mexican shoebox with pictures of my time spent in Mexico. A time before I met their grandfather.
My Father Spanked Me
Alison Charbeneau

My father spanked me.
He said:
Do not jump out of the window.
Do not paint the carpet with nail polish.
Do not hide Happy Meals in your closet.
And don’t leave school during recess you are only five years old for heaven’s sake.

My father spanked me because he loved me.

When my father spanked me
He struck
With hands of wind
Gentle breeze, at most
I never knew if he had begun
unless I looked behind me.

After my father spanked me
He spoke
With trembling voice
He said he was done
He said “Sit there.” “Think about it.”
“Don’t do it again.”

Later

He came back
Sat next to me on my race car bedspread
Stared at my butterfly curtains
Patted my koala bear
Wrapped me in his arms
Said it hurt him more than it hurt me

Maybe

But when his eyes grew wet
And his hands lay motionless
My little heart
Expanded, then
Shattered
Under the weight of his tears
The Adoption Process
for Classroom Pets
Alison Charbeneau

This past April, I substitute taught in a fifth grade classroom. The assignment lasted for the remainder of the school year. The class had a reputation for poor behavior and academic skills, but I took on the assignment with great determination. I believed that no challenge was insurmountable.

“We are going to have class pets!” I announced at the beginning of my first week.

“Rats?”

“Hamsters?”

“A dog?”

“FISH!” I exclaimed.

“When will we get them?”

“Next week. As soon as we set up the tank properly we will get the fish.” The kids clapped their hands. They wrote lists of names on scraps of paper and placed them on my desk. Together we waited for the water to reach room temperature.

Two weeks passed. I tried to locate a pet store. Teachers scribbled directions to the Laconia pet store, but I always ended up in Weirs Beach or Meredith or Canterbury. My determination would not fade. “Tomorrow,” I proclaimed, “I will not come to school without fish.”

The next morning my students raced to the top of the stairs. “Today’s the day! She’s bringing the fish! We’re getting fish today!” I heard them say. I watched as they peered into the tank. “What? It’s empty? Where are they?”

“I got lost.” I sighed. “Again.”

The next morning, one student, Bobby, approached me with a puffed up Ziploc bag. “Here, Ms. Charbeneau! My mom said that I could bring my pets to school!”

“At last,” I muttered, “The struggle is over.”

The three fish came to us named Dot, Stripe and Plaid. Bobby eagerly displayed the fish. We spent a good forty five minutes watching them swim and discussing their character traits.
By 10:30 a.m., Dot lay limp at the bottom of the tank. The class sat in silence, save a few gulps of air from Bobby. I quickly wrote a eulogy, found a poem about fish and lead the class outside for a small ceremony. Dot was buried in an empty paper clip box with a small rock as a headstone.

The next morning, Bobby greeted me at the classroom door. His gaze fell to the floor. “Plaid is dead, Ms. Charbeneau.”

“Can we flush this one?” Immediately I wished that I could rein those words back into wherever they came from. “But it’s raining outside,” I pleaded. Bobby stared at me, his eyes brimming with tears. “Okay. At snack time we’ll bury Plaid.”

Plaid’s funeral took considerably less time than Dot’s. A few students ran through the rain to put his little soul to rest. We wrapped him in a paper towel and buried him beside Dot. I watched from the doorway and reviewed the statistics. Two out of the three fish were dead.

Still, I would not give up. I decided that it was time to find some more fish. I told the class that I would drive to Plymouth that evening, where I was certain of the location of a pet store. Their hope lit up again. Their faith was restored. They wrote thank you notes.

That night, I bought three fancy gold fish. As I marched out of the store, the faces of twenty happy fifth graders swam around in my head. When I got home I filled a heavy ceramic vase with water and put the fish in their temporary home. They seemed content.

Late in the afternoon one fish was already swimming sideways. Perhaps this is a new sort of gold fish, I considered. By evening, he was dead. Three out of six of our fish were dead.

The next morning I hesitated before peering into the vase. With half closed eyes I shot a quick glance at the fish. They were still alive. I named them Metaphor and Simile. They had survived longer than any of the other fish, and I was hopeful that I would establish a pet/owner relationship with these two.

The vase seemed sturdy. I thought it best to keep these two fish in the environment that had sustained their lives for twelve full hours. I put the vase on the floor on the passenger side of my car and began my commute to work.

Every few minutes I marveled at the steadiness of the vase. They were safe and happily swimming. I felt confident. I stopped to get coffee and a muffin for breakfast.

Ten minutes from the school, I bit into my muffin. Little crumbs fell to my lap, and I looked down to wipe them away. When I looked up again, I saw a sharp turn in the road clearly marked with arrows on large yellow road signs. I threw down the muffin, slammed on my brakes and listened to the gurgles of water flooding out of the vase.
I pulled into the first parking lot that I saw. I jumped flung open my door, and I started screaming: “What do I do now? What do I do now?” Cars slowed down and people stared as I frantically ran around to the passenger’s side of the car. I pulled out the vase. Not one drop of water remained. I looked on the floor and saw one fish, its beady eye staring at me. I thought it was dead, but then its tail moved, and I jumped back.

My ice scraper came into view. It seemed an ideal tool. I started scooping out everything that littered the carpet: the muffin wrapper, a tissue, and one half dead fish. Now it lay flopping on the pavement, and I could nearly hear it saying: “Why have you done this to me?”

My focus shifted back to the car because one fish was still missing. I kept scooping at the soggy carpet. Finally, in the far corner underneath another tissue I dislodged the other fish. It was undeniably lifeless. Like a hockey puck, I flipped the fish out of the car and onto the pavement, next to the other fish, its tail still sporadically moving. I tossed the entire scene into a paper bag and threw it away.

My students were already in their seats when I got to my classroom. Bobby pointed to Stripe, swimming alone. “Where are they?” he said, fighting tears. The rest of the students exploded with demands for an explanation.

“For some reason,” I paused, not knowing what might spill out of my mouth, “the adoption process for classrooms pets is long and complicated. We just have to keep trying. Stay hopeful. After all, Stripe is still alive!”

Perhaps the most exciting part of the school year ending was the chance to clean out the tank and dream of a fresh start in the fall. I found a new home for Stripe and sent him away in a thermos from the lost and found. As I watched him exit the room under the arm of his new owner, it occurred to me that real determination never dies.
A Traveler’s Morning
Matthew Cheney

While Jack was eating breakfast by himself, a man at one of the other tables whispered to the man he was eating with that the woman who ran the inn had been raped during the night.

How did he know? the other man asked.

He heard her come in. He heard her crying, then he heard her talking on the phone, because his room is just above the office and she called someone from the office.

The police, had she called the police?

No, he said, it sounded like a friend, someone she knew. And she said she wouldn’t call the police, it was none of their business.

The men fell silent, and Jack waited for them to say more. He glanced at them as they ate their identical waffles, and built backgrounds for them in his mind: they were here from a large corporation in a big city, they worked in nearby offices on the fiftieth floor of a skyscraper, they were both married and had children and lived in the suburbs, though at the moment, he guessed, they didn’t miss home. The man who’d told the story, he noticed, was balding.

A few minutes later, the woman who they said had been raped the night before came into the dining room and refilled their coffee cups. Jack looked at her closely; he didn’t stare, didn’t let her know he was looking at her, but he was trying to compare the woman he saw now to the memory he had of her when she had given him the keys to his room the day before. Did she seem, he wondered, more anxious now, more sullen, disturbed? What was the old word for it, the one Shakespeare always used ... ahh, yes: ravished. A softer word, yes, but also somehow more complex and vicious. Does she look, he asked himself, ravished?

He wasn’t sure. He didn’t know what a person who had been ravished would look like. She seemed a bit tired, yes, but running such a place as this (apparently all by herself) would certainly cause fatigue, and it was, after all, seven o’clock in the morning and anyone looking at him would probably say that he looked tired himself. Her face was doughy, the skin sagging, and her eyes made him think of fat raisins, but she’d looked more or less like that yesterday.

Jack decided the man was lying, telling a good story for fun — or not, exactly, fun, for such a story is not fun, but rather for his own amusement and titillation. He should ask the men why they were here, if they were on some sort of official trip, going to a conference or some such thing. Perhaps, Jack thought, he could then judge whether the man was tired of the same sort of stories he and his friend (or colleague, there may be no friendship involved at all, Jack told himself) usually tell each other, stories of the
office and the petty politics of the corporation and who was pregnant and who was having affairs, et cetera. What could he say to the man which would produce a revealing answer? Who are you? he wanted to ask. Who are you?

“Can I get you anything else?” the woman asked as she took Jack’s plate.

“Uh, no, uh, thank you. No. Just fine, thank you.”

She nodded. He thought about how she had said the words. No inflection. No emotion. A simple question, certainly not one which required fine elocution, but she seemed to say each word as if it were nothing more than a sound, or rather an echo of a sound, a sound with no meaning attached to it. Dead.

Perhaps there was something to this, Jack thought. Perhaps he shouldn’t be so hasty in dismissing the businessman’s claim, perhaps he really had heard her last night on the phone in the office beneath his room.

But why had she gone out last night? It must have been terribly late. And where had she gone that such a thing would happen to her? Was it someone she knew? That would certainly seem likely. After all, didn’t they say most people are raped by people they know? That would particularly seem to be the case here, in a nice rural town, the sort of place people label “picturesque” because of the nicely-painted old houses around Main Street and the blue mountains on the horizon. Not the sort of place with roving gangs of hooligans, or trenchcoat-clad stalkers waiting in dark alleys.

The woman approached his table. “Do you want me to put it on the room bill, or do you want to pay for it separately?”

“Oh, just put it on the bill. I need to go, anyway, so why don’t I just pay it all right now, if you’re ready.”

The woman nodded. “Come out to the office, then, please.”

He followed her out of the dining room and through a corridor with blue wallpaper and into a small room where a large antique desk stood against the back wall. On the top of the desk was a grey phone. Is that the phone she used? Jack wondered. There wasn’t any other phone, so of course it would have to be. It was probably only a few hours ago, certainly no more than six hours ago, that she had come into this room, tears streaming down her face, and picked up that phone in a shaking hand, dialed, woke someone up probably, someone who had been paralyzed with fear at receiving a phone call at such a time, and who answered warily, only to hear a sob from this woman, perhaps a gasp, and then — and then what words? How does one say such a thing? I have been ... and then what?

She punched some numbers into a calculator on the desk and wrote out a receipt. “It’s a hundred and two, but I think I’ll just make it a hundred so it’s nice and even, if that’s okay with you,” she said.
Jack chuckled nervously, smiled, and shrugged. “Fine by me,” he said, then decided he had said it too loudly. “Thank you.”

She didn’t say anything. His thoughts turned to Shakespeare — in fact, he’d been trying to think of some Shakespeare earlier, had been thinking of Shakespeare for most of the morning — his, what was it?, second or third year of teaching he had given his students Titus Andronicus to read, because he thought they would enjoy the blood and gore and barbarity of it. At least three parents complained and the principal threatened to fire him and make sure he never got another job in the state. It all settled down eventually, and it had been nearly twenty years ago, anyway. He barely remembered the play now, had taught so many books since then, but he couldn’t forget one of the stage directions. What was the wording, though? Something about Lavinia entering without — no, not “without”, but rather “sans” — ahh, yes, that was it, yes: “Enter Lavinia, sans hands, sans tongue. Ravished.” No no, that wasn’t it. He was confusing it with As You Like It, or All’s Well (he always confused them), and the end of the “All the world’s a stage” solilquy. There were no “sans” in the stage direction. “Enter Lavinia, ravished,” that was it. “Her hands cut off, her tongue cut out.” Something like that. He couldn’t really remember it very well.

“Cash, check, or credit?” the woman asked.

“Uh, check,” he said. He took his checkbook out of the pocket of his coat and she handed him a pen.

“Thank you,” she said as he handed the check to her. She gave him the receipt.

“Thank you,” he said. He knew he should turn around now, should walk out and get in his car and drive the five hours to his sister’s house, which he was cleaning out now, two months after the funeral, two months after she had run screaming out of the house in the middle of the night and thrown herself in front of a truck on its way to Vermont. He tried not to allow the image into his mind, not so much because of the horror of it, but because he still could not imagine it as anything more than a scene he might remember from a movie he’d seen years ago, until he could feel his way in and begin to inhabit the nightmare, he did not want to think about it.

She was staring at him. Well of course she was, she expected him to walk out of the office. She needed to go check on the other guests.

“I—” he began, but there weren’t any other words. What could he possibly say? Maybe he should tell her about his sister. He could smile, as if he had a wry and amusing tale to tell, and he could say, “You know, my sister threw herself in front of a truck at one o’clock in the morning.” He could say, “She probably knew that truck would drive past her house, she probably knew exactly when it drove by, exactly which days and what times. It would be just like her. She wouldn’t pick any truck. She would make sure of the routine, she would study it until she knew it all so well that it was a part of her, and her action could then be little more than reflex. I always hated my sister, and never more so than now.” He would say that, even though it wasn’t at all true, was so much more
complex and ambiguous than that, but that was the way he had told friends and even a few people he barely knew.

But he didn’t say anything.

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Was there something else?”

“I had a very nice time here,” he said. He smiled. “Thank you.”

The woman nodded.

After about an hour of driving, he realized that he should have asked her for a room later in the week when was returning home. He didn’t know when he’d be done at his sister’s house, though. Perhaps he would call her from there, once he was ready. It would be interesting to see how she was later, if she seemed different, if what had happened during the night had had some noticeable effect on her. She might be the kind of person who doesn’t let it affect her, he thought. She would bury it within herself, some dark and forgotten back room of her mind, an anomaly pushed out of the way by the tick-tock regularity of the schedule, the daily concerns and worries and joys. Were there joys? he wondered. She must find joy in the work somehow, or else why do it? But millions, perhaps billions, of people live lives they don’t enjoy, and never make much of an effort to change them. She didn’t seem to him that kind of woman, though. That’s what he should say to her on his return: “Tell me about your joys.”

It was a lovely thought, but he knew he wouldn’t do it. He knew that he would never return to that place, never see the woman again, no matter how curious he was, no matter that one moment he thought the businessman’s story to be absolutely true while a moment later he thought the man insane or worse. He would find another place to spend the night on his return. When he really thought about her, he realized the woman made him sick, the waste of her, the uselessness. Yes, he told himself, that was the truth of it, and he whispered it to himself over and over: her uselessness.

He pulled into a gas station and went to the payphone at the side of the building. He took the receipt the woman had given him out of his pocket and dialed the phone number on it. After a few rings, the woman answered, her voice as devoid of emotion as it had been before.

He lowered his voice, hoping she wouldn’t recognize it. “When I think of you, I can’t help but think that you are … ravishing!” He slammed the phone down onto the hook, then leaned back against the cold cement of the gas station’s wall, and laughed. He stared out at the sky, at the sun just now coming out from behind a couple of wispy clouds, and he stared into the sun for so long that it burned brighter and brighter across his eyes until all he could see was the flaming, blinding light, and though he tried with every bit of energy and strength he had, he couldn’t ever stop laughing.
Duty Night
Peter Durnan

Duty nights, the good ones, ended at midnight when he kicked the wedge out from the door and let it swing closed. The hallways were dark, the kids asleep. He popped a beer and sunk into his one good chair to watch Sportscenter. This hour of glowing half-oblivion before bed was a cheat: meaningless baseball highlights swam through the clinging awareness his responsibilities. Anxieties skittered and edged in the shadows of his relaxation. And so it was with rueful acceptance that Paul acknowledged the cackling voices in the bathroom, the hurried double flush of the toilet. He rose to inevitable confrontation.

As he pulled open his door he breathed the odor of smoke that seemed to drift and cling in the dorm hallway. It was from the orchards, he had been told, scrub brush trimmed from the lemon and avocado groves and burned off, but in his spine he suspected marijuana, as if the entire town were perpetually enveloped in a light lingering cloud of weed smoke. He glanced left and registered the cacklers shuffling down the hall together. Dave Flournoy and Blake O'Neill, dressed still in requisite saggy khakis and soft flannel shirts, slipping into Sammy Awad's room. The door shut behind them and Paul followed down the hall, taking time to inspect the bathroom. No haze, no stray seed or match; nothing unusual that he could place. An open window assured him that it would happen, though; in all likelihood right now. In two years of this he hadn't busted anyone for smoking. Aside from the night those freshmen girls had found their way into a bottle of tequila he hadn't run across anything at all, but he knew he would. And he wasn't ready.

“Fellas.” He had pulled open their door without a knock, a practice acceptable among their own, but a violation of teacher behavior.

“Mr. Hardiman. C'mon in.” Sammy Awad's face as always handsome, inviting, healthy. Paul had sat through the faculty meetings, heard teachers’ accusations of Sammy perpetual stonerdom, and others’ equally vehement rebuttals. The tilt of the head, the squint—earmarks of a doper or affectations of a surfer? Sammy hadn't so much as missed a study hall in his four years here.

“What are you guys doing?” Paul's voice scraped into the air with tinny thinness. He teetered on the threshold tentatively.

“Checking out Flournoy's art. He just finished some sweet new stuff. Come on, check this out.”

Sammy and Blake stepped back from the desk. The three of them were large young men, large enough to cramp the room. Blake pushed his foot out onto a balcony these seniors coveted so. Sammy’s room, spare and tidy, had nothing on the balcony but a telescope that he kept trained on the break at Rincon Beach. Paul entered the space they had created, approaching Sammy’s desk. Ten or twelve black and white photos were
spread there, indistinguishable at first. Some pale halo surrounding, what, a face? Paul
drew in, suddenly doubtful of his own artistic discernment. Seconds passed. He felt
Dave peering at him sideways from the bed where he remained, crossed-legged and mute.

“What do you think?” The irrepressible Sammy Awad was cheerful and expectant.

Even as a kind of panic rose in him, the context and content of the shots connected.
“Shit?”

“Well, yah, shit. Sure, shit. Don't you know about Dave's project?”

A glance at Dave revealed a muted smirk.

“No. No, this is my first exposure to Dave's project. Fill me in. Enlighten me.”

“Dave's doing a whole series of these. He started them last year. They're awesome.
Really, you gotta check out the stuff he's already got. Dave, tell him.”

Only a small theatrical hesitation before Dave began. “Yah, it kind of started out as a
joke, you know? I'm in Franz's photo class and he's talking about seeing the
extraordinary in our daily lives and I figure, you know, what the fuck. You know, Mr.
Hardiman. It's OK that I say that, right? I mean, you know, this is our home and all.
Anyway, I start taking these shots of peoples' shit. And it's amazing what you see in
there. Amazing shit, never the same. And I bring these shots in to Franz and he like
showers me with praise. Anyway, that's how it started.”

Two minutes had passed and Paul had utterly lost his footing. These boys were
stoned, had to be, and he found himself bent over fecal photography, half-ready to offer
praise. He drew back a step and tried to gather himself. Get control, he thought. Be an
adult. “Listen, you guys. It's late, you're in the bathroom. I hear the toilet flush a couple
times. I… listen, be honest with me. Are you… what are you guys up to?”

The giggle Sammy Awad was not able to suppress fanned the flames of Paul's
discomfort. Blake smiled widely and stepped further into the freshness of the balcony.
Only Dave caught and held Paul's gaze. “What do you think we were up to?”

“Alright. I guess I think you were smoking some dope.”

“You think we're high?”

“Listen, I don't know. I heard the bathroom. It's late.” The thinness returned quickly
to his voice. “Am I wrong?”

“Mr. Hardiman. I'm serious about what I'm doing. Anyone stupid enough to smoke
out in that bathroom at midnight—that would be stupid beyond me. Really. I'm not high.
We were in that bathroom to take pictures of this dump. This monstrous dump.” Here,
Awad abandoned himself to gleeful laughter. He muffled himself in flanneled arms, but
the effect was hardly muted. “Some guy in here is taking these enormous dumps.
Unflushable.”

“I didn't see any huge dump.” This forceful admission of his snooping pained Paul even as he heard himself speak. The quick glances he saw darting between the boys stung. All hopes of a swift, just, and morally clean bust were gone.

“No, we cleaned it up. You have to poke it with a broom handle to break it up and then it will go down.” This was the first Paul had heard from Blake since he entered. And he didn't sound very stoned.

“I'm not sure I'm going to use any of those shots, anyway, to tell you the truth. That dump was a sideshow freak and I'm really not trying for that. I'm trying to take pictures of normal dumps. What you'd see in the toilet every day if you took the time to stop and look. But this thing, these dumps. Seriously, Mr. Hardiman, it's like they're not even from a human. I mean, I had to take a few shots. And whoever's doing it just leaves them there.”

“Even after you poke it all up it takes a couple of flushes to get it down.” Again, in the logistics of the monster-dump flushing Blake had found his voice.

“You like art, Mr. Hardiman?”

“Yah, you know, I like art. I don't have a trained eye, or anything. But yah, I like art.”

“Because before this project I thought art was stupid. It just seemed so pointless. You know, you think about what's going on in the world. Palestinians dying. Children starving. Blacks in American prisons. And we like take a field day to go to the Getty Art Museum and look at paintings. It just seemed so fake to me. Like, such a disservice to what we're supposed to be learning. I mean, my sophomore year I was like, fuck Monet. Fucking water lilies, c'mon. You know what I mean?”

“Dave, I know I'm in your space. But you would be doing me a huge favor if you could limit your use of the word 'fuck.'”

“Of course. I'm sorry. But you see my point, right? I mean, what were these painters thinking? And modernists, forget it. Heads in the sand. Anyway, that's my thinking all along. That's why I end up in Franz's photo class because there at least I get to use a camera. Pointless, but developing photos is almost...you know, almost magical. So I get so I can use this camera my dad bought me and at the same time I start taking pictures of everybody's shit. First sort of as a joke, but then kind of seriously. It's like all of a sudden I can see the real function of art, what art can be all about.”

“Here, snag some Doritos. Cool Ranch.” Sammy passed the bag directly to Paul, who realized that he was, in fact, quite hungry. But he passed them on to Dave untouched. Clearly, he thought, I am not in control of this situation. Pondering the relative depths of Dave's irony, Paul cast about for something safe, some mooring to hold him steady.
“Dave. These are just pictures of crap. I mean, technically very good, I guess. But they aren't really…”

Sammy cut him off, apparently eager to validate Flournoy's work. “Dave, tell him about that guy your dad knows.”

“Yah. Well. Franz got my dad all fired up about these pictures and so he called one of his buddies in Palo Alto who runs this art gallery. He's setting up a show for me over New Year's and all. But that's not really the point. The point is art. Can you really look at this and say it's just crap? To me, this is the solution. This is art that doesn't draw lines. It's the whole point. I mean, when you look at these shots, what are you looking at? Is this male or female shit? Is this the work of a Jew? A freshman? Whose shit is this?”

“David. Seriously. I sincerely hope that I am looking at a shit taken in a boys' dorm.”

“Right, exactly. That's what you bring to the table. Prep school rules—nothing personal, you know—but you really don't know. I mean, this brings everyone to the same level. And seriously, some of this is beautiful. You have to check out some of these shots. Check this out. I call it 'Chrysanthemum.'”

Aghast at his own response, Paul marveled at the stunning image he found in his hands. Shit unfolding in concentric arcs, delicately feathered. “Yah. Um, yah. This. This. This isn’t really what you expect to see…”

Dave’s words were forceful now. “Or this. Check this out. This one is called 'Apocalypse.'”

This shot was truly a horror. It looked as if someone had thrown a small explosive into a toilet overloaded with hospital refuse. Could this be real?

“I call that 'The Day After Senior Party!'”

“Shut up, O'Neill. You wouldn't know art if it bit you in the ass. Sorry, Mr. Hardiman.”

Through the open door to Sammy's balcony Paul looked past Blake to the quad and the chapel beyond, and far off the edge of the mesa, the moonlight on the Pacific. He retreated a couple of steps away from the photographs and toward the hall. “Listen, fellas. I'm cooked. We should all go to bed. Could you just assure me. Could you just set my mind at ease?”

“Mr. Hardiman, c'mon. This is what I do, what you’re looking at. You think I can spend my time lighting up? You think that’s what we do?”

“Seriously, Mr. Hardiman.”

Was that humanity in Sammy’s eye or a smoky glaze? Much here was amiss or at
least askew and Paul harbored the fleeting notion that perhaps he was the imbalancing weight on the scale. There was in Dave’s earnestness, or rather Paul’s belief in its possibility, the momentum to drive him back to his apartment.

“OK. Enough. Do me a favor, go to bed. Stay out of the bathroom. Stay here and floss. Be good. I need sleep. And Dave. Thanks for showing me your photos.”

“You got it.”

Even as Paul pivoted to leave, even as he felt rising within him the hope he knew was the salvage and redemption of this messy, dorm-encaged life, he was sure that within the confines of the closet, tucked beneath the hanging shirts, he caught the green-plastic glisten of what would surely be the most enormous bong he’d ever laid eyes on. But as quickly as it flitted against his consciousness, Sammy had shouldered the door shut as he moved to offer Paul his hand. “Thanks for coming by. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Wordlessly Paul shook his hand and left the room, moving quietly down the hall as the door drew closed with a quiet click.
I hated having my desk in the front of the classroom. It meant that when Lauren, Sarah and Kim were laughing and whispering or whispering then laughing, I would have to turn around to see if their pointing fingers were aimed at me.

“What are you looking at Karen? Turn back around. We’re not talking to you.” I heard this a lot lately.

I was dying to know what was so funny. I wanted to know the secrets. But most of all, I was afraid of finding out that they were laughing and whispering about me. When fifth grade began I didn’t fit in anymore. Kids were changing and I didn’t seem to fit in with the changes. Fifth grade had gone from uncomfortable to unbearable and having my desk in front of the popular girls was just the beginning.

Mr. Durgan, our fifth grade teacher, walked to the front of the room when the bell rang to start the day.

“Who’s got news events for today?”

You could see arms shoot out of the air, fingers wiggling, like when you want to get the feeling back after sitting on them too long. My fingers were not up in the air with the rest. Every day, Mr. Durgan gave us time to discuss current events that were important to us. Boys typically brought in sports scores and girls brought in stories that had to do with the new heart-throbs: where the New Kids would be playing this weekend or who Mark Wahlberg was seen kissing last weekend.

I would read the paper the night before too, just in case I got called on. I even brought in clippings so I’d have something to read from. But lately I noticed that if I tried to share something with the class, the papers in my hands would start shaking. If there were one thing that could make me even nervous around my classmates, it would be shaking hands and papers.

In September, when I came home from school asking to see the newspaper, my mother, thinking she was doing to right thing, would direct me to the World and National sections. My Mom and Dad hadn’t gone to university and I think to make up for that, she worked hard at making sure I valued and understood my education. We would talk about Reagan’s administration, the Cold War or the troubles in the Middle East. So, those were the articles I would bring in. She didn’t get that understanding the girls in class was much more important. For a little while I did raise my hand to talk about them. Unfortunately, my teacher’s enthusiasm was not greater than the teasing from fifth grade girls.

Sarah and the others surrounded me at recess after my first share session. “Who cares about President Reagan? He’s so old.” They all had laughed and walked away.
leaving me under the big tree that stood in the middle of the playground where we had all shared fourth grade games and secrets.

Lauren went first today. She stood up behind her desk. I turned around to face her and I was instantly jealous. She was wearing her new B.U.M. Equipment technicolor t-shirt. They were really expensive. I knew that because my mother had put one on lay-away for me. She walked to the front of the room, holding her clipping confidently, brushing by my backpack resting on the floor. I jumped to push my pack further under my seat. I didn’t want anything to get in her way.

“Ricky Schroeder has a new girlfriend. I’m so upset.” All of the girls in class gasped. I heard her say the words, but I was closely watching her hands, they weren’t trembling. She walked back to her desk and on her way; she gave my backpack a little kick. I hadn’t gotten it out of her way fast enough after all.

Sarah went next, “Did everyone know that the fair is coming to town this weekend. Kim, Lauren and I are going.” She stared out into the audience as she spoke.

This was not an invitation. This was her way of letting anyone who cared, like me, know that I was not invited to join them. I wanted them to invite me so badly.

“Okay, I think that’s enough news for today.” That was Mr. Durgan’s way of letting us know that he was getting a little tired of the type of news the girls were bringing in.

I watched as Mr. Durgan gathered his papers and walked back to the front of the room. He began to pass out newly mimeographed direction sheets to the first person in every row. I took mine and passed the rest over my head, careful not to turn around in the process.

“You are going to write about an experience in your life that was sad. And to make this assignment a little more interesting, Mrs. Rosen, Mr. Banks and I are going to read all of them and select a first, second and third prize. The winners will get the opportunity to read their essays to the entire fifth grade class.”

The girls behind me began to whisper to each other before he even finished talking. I peered over my right shoulder.

“Did I tell you my Grandfather died last summer? He was seventy years old and I really miss him.” Lauren had begun to tell Kim and Sarah about her Grandpa John. She had their full attention. I heard her sniffling. Sometimes I wondered if she started to cry just to get our attention. I guess when you know no one will make fun of you, you can do that. Soon, she was up asking Mr. Durgan if Kim could take her to the bathroom to help her stop crying.

I admired that. Having a friend to comfort me when I was crying would have been nice, but I would never cry in school like that. If I cried in school, which I tried
very hard not to do, no one would offer to bring me to the bathroom to wash my face. I usually saved my crying for at home, a place where those girls couldn’t see me.

I peered over my left shoulder. Sarah was discussing how her dog had died last summer. She supposedly had had the dog for twelve years and it had been a very sad thing. She began to cry too. Now this was getting a little silly. As usual, no one was talking to me. Or, maybe it was just that the girls, whom I wanted so desperately to be friends with, weren’t talking to me.

Being eleven was proving to be very hard. I had had plenty of friends at eight, nine and ten, but as ten turned into eleven I seemed to be teased and tormented more and more by the girls that I wanted most to get along with.

One day, also in the late fall, during one of the last outdoor recesses, I was trying to show Lauren, Sarah and Kim my new jean purse that I had gotten at the mall. It had a thick light, blue strap and was a stonewashed jean with a faded red paisley print. I thought that they would really like it and that maybe they would forget to make fun of me.

I approached the girls under the tree, but I didn’t even have a chance to show it to them first.

“What is that thing over your arm?” Lauren was pointing at my prized pocket-book.

“It looks like something you’d get at K-mart.” Sarah was walking towards me and I wasn’t quite sure why.

She grabbed the purse right off my shoulder, opened the zipper and dumped my wallet, pocket diary and travel tissues onto the ground. I just stood there and watched it happen.

“Anyone up for a game of keep away?” Kim was in on it now too.

Trying to look as relaxed and cool as I could I said, “Come on guys, cut it out.” I’d heard them talk like that sometimes. It didn’t work.

I attempted to be the monkey in the middle for a while until I got tired. In the end, I knew they would leave it on the ground when the last recess bell rang. They wouldn’t continue this inside the school. I gave up, walked over to the cement steps that led into the school and sat down, wrapping my arms around my knees as I held them close to my chest. I sat there waiting for the end of recess. I pretended not to notice Lauren, Kim and Sarah continuing to throw my purse around, but I’m sure they saw me looking. The bell finally rung and they did just as I thought they would. They ran to get in line, leaving my purse and belongings on the ground. I ran in the opposite direction,
collected my pocket diary, wallet and travel tissues (all a little dusty) and got back in line just as the last few students were entering the building.

Sometimes when we had silent reading time during class, Lauren, Kim and Sarah would pass notes to each other or to the boys in front of me. They would ask me to pass the note along. For a second, I would almost think I was being included. But, when I would glance at the outside of the perfectly folded note, I would read phrases like, “not for Karen’s eyes” or “don’t let Karen read this”.

We did a lot of group work in fifth grade. This meant that we needed partners or friends. The girls would make sure they knew who their partners would be before class even started. I would be left with either Mr. Durgan as my partner or I would have to work in a group of three. Either way, I would stick out as not having someone to work with. I should have just offered to wear a sign that said, “I don’t have any friends.”

All of this didn’t end in school either. When birthdays or sleepovers were held, one of two things happened. I would either get invited because someone’s mom said that it would be rude not to invite every girl in the class or I wouldn’t be invited at all. Not being invited at all was actually less embarrassing.

One day at recess Lauren actually walked up to me, in front of a bunch of other girls and said, “You know, I didn’t want you at my house this weekend. My Mom made me invite you, so if you don’t want to come, it’s fine with me.” She turned back around and walked off laughing with her friends. I was stranded at the swings with a group of kids staring right at me. That Saturday, when my Mom walked into my room and told me it was time to go to Lauren’s birthday party, I pretended to be sick.

Now, once again, conversation was happening in class and I was not being asked to be a part of it. Nor would I even be able to. How was I going to write this sad story? I had not had any grandparents die. I had not even had a pet besides a goldfish, and they die so frequently I hated to even use the word “pet” with goldfish.

We were given time to brainstorm during class. I sat at my desk and played with my pencil, rolling it up and down the slanted top, listening to the tick of the pencil as it moved, while I heard the constant chatter of the girls behind me. I tried to think of sad stories that would interest my classmates. Maybe if I could get their attention with a really sad story, they would like me more. My teacher did always tell me I was pretty imaginative. Maybe I could create a false story about a pet dying, maybe that was my ticket in.

That day at lunch I took my usual seat at the very end of the table. The other girls were not there yet; they were in the lunch line. The cool thing to do was buy lunch. We were made to sit by class, which I guess was better than being told you could sit anywhere, but I still knew where I couldn’t sit. I took my brown paper lunch bag out of my knapsack. I peeked in: bologna sandwich, Mom-made peanut butter crackers, and an apple. I took the crackers out first. I would buy my milk after the line had gone down.
“Who brings lunch anymore? And if you bring lunch, you have to bring Handi- 

snacks, not homemade peanut butter crackers.” Kim sat down unusually close to me. I 
think it was because the other seats were taken already today. She grabbed my sandwich 

bag with the crackers in it.

Holding the plastic baggie up for the whole table to see, she said, “Who’s Mom 
does this anymore?” The table burst out laughing.

I didn’t even reach out to take them back. I let them take them, mash them and 
sprinkle them onto the floor. I just ate my sandwich, dry. I never got my milk.

That day, the day the sad essay was assigned, I didn’t even walk to the tree on the 

playground. I walked directly to the cement steps and sat there watching everyone 

playing. The cold steps were better than anything out on that playground.

The bus ride home that day felt hotter and stuffier than ever. I thought that my 

stop would never come. When I finally got to my stop, I ran off the bus, up the driveway, 

into my house, by my mother in the kitchen, right into my bedroom. I collapsed onto my 

bed and hid my head in the pillow. I was tired. Tired of it all.

My mother appeared at the door, “How was your day?” No matter what, she 

always asked me that. I was really beginning to hate the question.

I rolled over, looked my mother in the eyes, and cried. But, I didn’t tell her about 
lunch. I couldn’t do that; it would hurt her feelings. Just like I hadn’t told her about the 

notes in class or the recess problems. All I told her about was how I was so upset that I 
didn’t have anything to write about for the sad story assignment.

My Mom listened to every word I said and she said only one thing, “I think you 

have a very sad story to tell Karen.”

The next day at school, during workshop time, I began to write. I tried to hide my 

paper, by cupping my hands around it, from the kids around me. I wasn’t quite sure it 

was what Mr. Durgan wanted but it was all I had. It would have to be good enough.

That afternoon, when I got home, I read it to my mother. She cried. I told her I 

was worried about sounding like a baby. All she did was shake her head no and hug me 

for a really long time. I turned in the paper the next morning and forgot all about it.

Two weeks later our teachers assembled us in one classroom. There were fifty 

fifth graders all sitting in chairs in rows. Once again, I had to sit in the front with Lauren, 
Kim and Sarah behind me. I watched as girls waved to their friends as they entered the 

room. They had all saved seats. At least that’s what they told me when I went to sit 
down next to them.

After quieting us all down, Mr. Durgan announced our purpose for coming 
together. The first, second, and third place winners would read their pieces to the entire
class. All of the girls behind me squealed. I heard a chorus of, “I’m not reading about my grandfather, I’ll just start crying, and no one wants to see me cry.”

Third place was announced. It went to Steve Smith. He walked to front of the room and read his story. He had written about his father and mother getting divorced and how it had made him sad. At the end he said that he wasn’t as sad any more. Second place went to Keri Panes. She read her story. She wrote about the day she found out she was adopted. She too said that she had been very sad, but wasn’t anymore. Lauren, Kim and Sarah talked the whole time Keri and Steve were reading.

From behind me I heard, “His story really wasn’t that good” and “My story was much sadder than that.” It was while I was trying to listen to them making fun of third and second place that my name was announced as the first place winner.

“Karen will read her piece called “A Different Kind of Sad.”

As the students began clapping, I walked to the front of the room keeping my head facing forward. Mr. Durgan handed me my paper when I got to the front. He winked and smiled at me. I took a deep breath, looked down at the words and began reading, “I thought for a long time about what sad things have happened to me. I haven’t had anyone close to me die. I haven’t lost any pets. But I have still felt really sad. I feel sad when other girls at school don’t include me in their groups in class. I feel sad when I’m teased at recess and I feel sad when I go home after school and have to cry to my mother because if I cried at school I would be made fun of even more. . .” I read the entire piece without even thinking of who was in that audience. Even though I had made pretty specific references to incidents that had occurred I hadn’t used names. I didn’t stumble over any words. I didn’t even shake like I had begun to do during presentations in my class.

When I finished, I finally looked up and faced my audience. My eyes wandered around the audience until I came across Lauren, Kim and Sarah. I wondered if they had listened to my story. If they had, they would certainly know I was talking about them. But, up there, in front of all the kids, I wasn’t worried about it. They couldn’t hurt me from where I was standing. The fifth graders all clapped when I finished. Mr. Durgan handed me a blue ribbon and then dismissed us back to our rooms.

I was still standing up front when Lauren, Kim and Sarah approached me on their way out the door.

“We think we know who you were talking about,” Lauren spoke first.

For a mili-second I thought that they were going to apologize.

“It was Julie wasn’t it. She can be so mean,” Kim didn’t like her either.

“Ugh, we hate her. She can be so awful. You can eat lunch with us from now on. She won’t bother you then,” Sarah was actually smiling at me.
The conversation continued like this, them trying to guess whom the story was really about and acting nice to me, until we made it back to our classroom.

They entered Mr. Durgan’s classroom first.

“Hey, why don’t you sit back here with us?” Kim questioned.

I had to pinch myself; they were definitely talking to me. I looked around the room. I saw the rest of my class watching what I would do.

“No thanks, I’m going to stay up front.”

Fifth grade got a little easier after that. ☀️
Rebekka
Sheila Korol

Rebekka’s one of those students who makes me want to be a better teacher. I met Rebekka my first year as a teacher of ninth grade English Literature in Chiang Mai International School, Thailand. The class was small, only about fifteen students, an ethnic mix of local and expatriate kids. Rebekka’s parents were from Switzerland where she’d been born. Her parents were separated and she’d moved to Thailand eight years before with her mother and two older sisters.

Rebekka was a popular kid. She was trendy, smart, and liked to push the boundaries just enough to be cool. Her modus operandi was wearing tight-fitting, cropped spaghetti strap tank tops. They just revealed her bellybutton and just broke the school dress code. She was thoughtful, insightful, an A student. She aspired to be an actress, and had the outgoing personality to match. She was always active in class discussions. I liked Rebekka instinctively and considered her to be a positive, gracious person.

One afternoon, our ninth grade English class was discussing Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Cask of Amontillado.” The students were appropriately appalled at the morbid actions of the narrator. They’d read Poe before, though, and weren’t completely shocked at his style. Some of them relished the dark, dramatic details; the dank, musty catacombs; and the fiendish finale as the narrator bricked up his acquaintance, alive, inside the wall of the underground tomb. We spent some time in class discussing the psychology behind the story. What would make a person ever think to act that way? How did the class think the antagonist felt as he reeled out of his drunken stupour and realized the fate befalling him? We didn’t spend too much time discussing the more gruesome aspects of the story as I didn’t want to dwell on the grisly.

Throughout all of our discussion, I’d noticed that Rebekka was unusually silent. Normally, she dived into the discussions, was the first one to put her hand up with a ready and insightful observation. I didn’t think anything further of it, though, until after class.

Everyone else had filed out, and I thought I was alone.

“Ms. Korol, can I talk to you for a minute?”

I looked up surprised, but in a pleasant way, to see Rebekka still there. I was still a new teacher, getting to know the students, and we hadn’t progressed to the stage yet where the kids felt like sticking around after class to chat. There was a troubled, anxious look in her soft brown eyes; her freckles contrasted sharply with her normally pale skin, now blanched whiter than usual.

Out of nowhere, she just began.
“Ms. Korol, I wanted to tell you that I felt uncomfortable discussing the story in class.”

It was clear she had more to tell me, even though she looked distinctly uncomfortable now, almost like she’d rather not be there at all.

“You see,” she continued, “last year, my older sister died, and I just can’t talk about anybody dying yet. My sister’s passing away is still too fresh in my mind.”

I didn’t know what to say. Now I was definitely surprised. Here was a student whom I’d grown to like and respect, but still from a distance, telling me her most intimate, painful secret when she really didn’t need to. I’d noticed that Rebekka hadn’t participated in class that day, of course, but it wasn’t something I felt she owed me an explanation for. Everyone has a bad day once in a while. But here she was telling me something that was still very painful for her, because the story we’d discussed in class that day reminded her of her sister who had passed away.

Part of me felt like holding her. She’d begun to cry a little, her long brown hair falling forward, shielding her lowered face, her shoulders curved forward and slack; but there didn’t seem any words good enough to console her. At the same time, another part of me felt deeply honoured and moved that she would share this personal story with me. And somewhere at the back of my mind I knew that I was finally being initiated into my role as a teacher.

But I didn’t know if I was saying the right things. I said I was sorry for her loss, asked if she was all right, and thanked her for telling me. We chatted a few minutes more, and Rebekka seemed better when she left. I lingered in my room, reflecting on the privilege that I, as a teacher, had in the lives of my students. Even now I still ponder over that privilege and marvel at the unique vulnerability shared, cultivated, in our circles of learning.

Rebekka was in my English class again in grade ten. She was the same smart, insightful, conversant student that she’d been the year before, still wore the same cutting edge tank tops. She was always very pleasant, had a good sense of humour, and kept her temper on an even keel. She was busier than ever, having gotten involved with basketball, forensics, and the writing club. I’d come to know Rebekka much better over the past year, and admired not only her intelligence in and out of the classroom, but her wisdom and empathy.

During the second half of grade ten, Rebekka stayed to talk to me again one day after class. This time it was about her poetry. She’d submitted a poem to an online contest and it had made it to the semi finals and was going to be published in a student anthology. She was more excited, though, about the effect this event was having on her mother.

“When my mother was a young girl,” Rebekka explained, “she used to write poetry all the time. She kept a journal with poems and drawings. One day her mother found it and got mad. My grandmother told my mom that she was wasting her time doing
that stuff and told her to stop doing it, because she had more important things to learn and spend her time on. To this day, my mother still doesn’t write anything, although she said she might try again now that I’m getting published."

I was thrilled for Rebekka, and for her mother. I was fascinated with the concept of a middle-aged, independent mother of two vicariously regaining, through her teenage daughter, a passion that the mother had once held herself. Rebekka’s mother took in and nurtured stray dogs. When I’d ask Rebekka how her mother had come to have over twenty dogs at their home, Rebekka would casually respond, “Oh, it’s just something she does.” I could distinctively envision Rebekka’s mother re-embracing and coddling her lost penchant for poetry.

Rebekka had her winning poem with her and let me read it. She liked to write long poems in rhyming couplets, poems that struck deep chords about life and the human condition. This poem was about her sister who had passed away. Once again, this beautiful, talented wise young teenager was honouring me with an intimate glimpse into her personal life. As I listened to her explain the details of the poetry contest, she made me feel not like her teacher, but like her friend.

After that there were days in English class when Rebekka would be silent again, noticeably absent during our class discussions. I’d see her sitting at the back of the class, thinking intently and writing in her personal journal, the one she kept all her poems and drawings in. The journal had a classic look; it was made from mulberry paper, the roughly textured cover hiding smooth, cream-coloured pages inside, pages covered with Rebekka’s steady, clean handwriting. It had a bamboo spine and a ribbon that she used for keeping it firmly shut when she wasn’t writing in it. On the days when she was quiet, I’d see her sitting at the back of the class, withdrawn into herself, concentrating on the lines and meters in her head, too absorbed in her dreams and memories to bother with our class. Other students who drifted away from us I would bring back to our collective attention, redirect them to our discussions. Rebekka, though, I would let be, and sometimes, if I were lucky, she would share those poems with me.

It’s now been over a year since I’ve seen Rebekka, but we still keep in touch. Her other sister is attending university in Chicago, and just this summer Rebekka sent me an email with an attached picture of herself standing in front of a pond at the Lincoln Park Zoo. This fall, Rebekka and her mother are moving to Toronto where Rebekka will finish her senior year. After that she hopes to get into the same university where her sister is studying in Chicago; she still hopes to pursue theater.

In the picture, Rebekka doesn’t look at the camera. As she leans casually on the steel fence behind her, she looks somewhere ahead, into the near distance. She wears tight-fitting, low-slung jeans, and a tube top patterned in soothing shades of dark blue, a flattering contrast against her translucent skin. A battered purse is slung over one shoulder, a camera is held in one casually dangling hand, her hair is pinned up, unruly bits sticking out in the back. It’s a beautiful summer day and the water and rocks in the pond behind her glow in the sun’s diffusive light. She’s caught in mid-expression, between a look of pensiveness and an easy smile. She appears tough, but friendly, with a
sort of worldly-wise slouch in her laid back shoulders. I wonder if it’s her mother or sister who’s taking the picture. I wonder what the three of them talk about when they get together.

I don’t know how long Rebekka and I will stay in touch for, but I will always have the gifts she gave me when she was still my student, the personal glimpses of joy and pain she shared with me in those moments we, as teachers, cultivate and nurture, moments of mutual vulnerability. Rebekka has taught me to look for those moments; or, at the least, to be able to graciously receive the rare gift of those glimpses, in the same gracious way she was able to share her moments with me. ☼
Double Process
Kathy Loring

IT IS JULY 4TH WEEKEND and Joe and Shyla are heading north in their nearly black Buick to visit their baby boy. Joe is an Ear, Nose & Throat specialist and has been practicing for the last thirty years. Shyla, his wife for nearly all of those years, is seated next to him with unevenly pursed lips. The Buick is an older model, one with bench seats, in order to accommodate Joe and Shyla's overwhelming need for a personal space. Seated behind them is Joe’s mother. She is propped against the left rear passenger door so she can keep her face pressed flat against the window. Contorted by the plate glass anyone observing might see a striking resemblance to Edvard Munch’s rendering of “The Scream,” her flesh warped like silly putty, rather than crisply delineated by lines of ink. And when her son brakes for the first toll on the New England Thruway, Giovanna leans forward, extends her middle finger upward and out of Joe’s window, engaging the toll collector’s undivided attention.

* * *

Patiently attending to a blue hair comb out, Tony, the unsuspecting baby boy answers a phone call from his cleaning lady. Earlier when waxing lyrical to a client about Lupe’s immaculate abilities, Tony slips and calls her his maid. Without missing a single snip, however, Tony forgives himself this minor transgression. He is in a jubilant mood. After all, Lupe has just cleaned his house no charge, Senor Tony, just because. Tony attributes this kindness to the fact that he is a nice person. Tony’s greatest concern revolves around truth and beauty, but in fact he knows it’s the mileage that counts. Too much mileage and you need a newer model. Somewhere in his mid or possibly late thirties, Tony’s actual age is difficult to gauge due to a comprehensive visit to a plastic surgeon in Atlanta. Much is accomplished in seventy-two hours. Lids lift, crows no longer have feet, and careful surgical placement of botox injections render Tony’s kisser a clean slate. The doc, impressed by his own work, even throws in an ass lift, gratis. Upon returning to work, cosmetologist extraordinaire and co-worker, Corky O’Toole applies the finishing touches. Elliptically shaped and permanent no pluck brows, equally permanent mascara and eyeliner complete the package. Tony, now, reeks of beauty from every pore. Complete regimen the courtesy of good advice from an older woman. Despite neat tucks, Tony’s lover, Ronnie leaves.

* * *
Eyes lowered, Joe quickly passes the coins to the collector. He raises the electric window ever so swiftly, so neither he nor his mother face jurisprudence in the immediate future. Suffice to say Giovanna barely retracts her digit in time. But that doesn’t bother her or Joe. Joe knows enough not to ask any why or what questions. He accelerates leaving behind another memory to catalog. Shyla, silently dips into her Vuitton bag, locates the brown bottle, and pitches down a Prozac, swallowing it whole and dry.

* * *

Tony instructs his ten-thirty to change into an eggplant-colored smock and meet him in the color room. This one is quick to change. At full stretch with clogs on, Tony tops out at 5’2”. Bernie Robbins at full hunch is at least 5’10”. Note to self, Tony thinks, I’ll have to tell her not to cross her legs. It’s that chair height thing, a stylist’s nightmare. A doctor’s son, Tony knows proctology begins at the roots. Would you look at those hair shafts. Bernie looks at Tony. Tony looks at Bernie.

“Fix it!” she says.

“Too brassy.” Tony quips.

Now it is time for Tony to do what he does best: mix chemicals.

* * *

Shyla is Indian from India. That is where she met Joe. Joe believes he should share the benefits of his Ivy League education with those less fortunate. Each year for two weeks he gives his time freely to the indigent of the world. It is on one of these chivalrous retreats outside of Bombay that he meets Shyla. Long dark hairs, almond skin burnished with gold, surpassed only by her deep brown golden-flecked eyes lure and bewitch Joe. But there is more. Shyla is conservative, polite, and gentle. Which makes her all the things Giovanna isn’t. Shyla is short on self-esteem and big on acquiescence. Unaware of what lurks beyond the Brooklyn Bridge, a one-way ticket and Joe’s love, Shyla accepts Joe’s proposal and returns with him. Shyla thinks she has found the answer to her dreams.

* * *
Tony applies the base color to the root shafts and glazes the ends of Bernie’s bob. Bernie bites her fingers.

“Why do you do that?” Tony barks.

“Biting is a sensual experience.” Bernie explains.

Tony considers the possibilities and then he begins.

* * * 

On the Mass Pike, Shyla and Giovanna are deep in thought. Tony belongs to them both. Shyla reminisces about Tony age eleven or twelve firmly within her grip. She remembers the Mahabarata at Lincoln Center. How much she paid for the tickets, how long the line was, how quickly Tony fell asleep. Giovanna’s understanding is markedly different. She’s acknowledged Tony as a thirty-year-old sophisticate congenitally trapped by his own testicles. Tony’s pronouncement of his gayness came as a shock and a relief. Shyla cried with tears. Giovanna cried, “Thank God, I thought something was wrong with you!”

* * * 

Slow dissolve. Fade out Bernie. Flashback Tony. It was three months ago when Ronnie left. Tony cringes. Ronnie didn’t leave in the face of itinerant flesh. Ronnie had a full-blown throw you for a loop hizzy. A mid-lifer. It felt like a jail term. Ronnie didn’t want to share the world’s coattails anymore. Style was Tony. Style came and went. Ronnie didn’t believe in retro. It was about perception. It was about real. Ronnie, omigod, who he paid off, Tony would never know, was enrolled at Syracuse University. Engaged by the study of the effects of psychotropic diseases on the disenfranchised youth of America. God bless ‘em everyone. Now this was something he could sink his teeth into…_whitespace
Surrounded
Kathy Loring

Pungent odors of vinegar and bay leaves
fill the air as the sauerbraten simmers
slowly, endlessly, eventually dissolving into
dry threads strewn haphazardly upon the plates
awaiting our inelegant palates

Hard shiny cabinets of red faux wood Formica
so easy to clean, so easy to bump into
bruise my fleshy thighs and bony knees
as my sister and I scrape against them
in our futile efforts to escape.

Slight of build and bald peaked,
he crawls on all fours toward us.
growling and snarling he bares false uppers,
as he backs us even further under the kitchen table
until we are pinioned against the broken radiator
that offers no cover.

The 6:10 from Jamaica screeches relentlessly
just outside the window and scarred pavement
competing against his lion-like roars
and escalating our terror.

What we think we hear him say,
perhaps is most frightening of all.
There is no need to hurry children.
Your meat is already well-cooked.

Upon your ninth seizure
you are brought to the hospital.
Your mother writhing in the throes of guilt
delivers you, desperate for answers,
to your would be fixers.
Her lover, your father, her husband
forgoes the unconditional rather than
give up a gig to play tonight. His
love supplanted by the dollar and the crowd.

Your fixers wear white like ghosts
and it takes the sum of their strength,
all four, to still your movement
in order to mend you.

Apocalyptic and unholy
they do not scare you,
not even when they measure
the density of blood
the heft of bone
the purity of urine.

Instead you cry fire red tears of rage
in their granite grown empty faces
until you are wrung dry and empty.
Only your red hot resolve can command
the power to release you and your mother,
A brief caesura gifted by the unsanctified,
their temporal consideration pending further tests.

Unlit candles await your whispering breath--
one, two three for you to blow out.
Each a virgin flame. And then extinguished.
This time, mother and father, side by side,
until your cake has been eaten.

But broken you remain
and a sterile world summons you back
still Seeking the quantitative
still Seeking the qualitative
demanding answers that are not yours
While what you want is
absolution for your mother’s tears,
And the reason why your father still
sings “My Brown Eyed Girl” to strangers.
Untitled (two fragments)
Kathy Loring

i.

She fidgets on the edge of a twin bed in what was once our parent’s room. Opposite her on the other twin I am holding a phone to my ear. I am reporting in breathless syllables life as I now know it. This information I transmit to those in a home I’ve created away from this one. Despite her feigned awareness, her pretense at half-listening, she observes me. Her eyes are keen and purposeful. Not discreet by nature she weighs and calculates her pending interruption. Her left hand reaches deep within the strappy leather bag next to her. She is determined that I notice. I don’t. I am in a state of elsewhere. Words seep from my lips, disconnected phrases and tributes. I am not listening to myself. Instead, details, all like little dust particles, rearrange themselves one by one inside my head. My attention is consumed by tomorrow’s wake and the emotions it will carry. And then my reverie halts upon a glistening chrome barrel pointing its open-mouthed cold stare at me. I watch while my youngest sister tickles the trigger.

ii.

There was an uneasy comfort in driving south on Route 1 again. I knew I would be safe as long as I was in the car. Thankfully for once, my four month old was sleeping. The colic that kept me rocking him 24/7 seemed to dissipate once we were on the road. Why was I here, again? What possessed me to come back here? Why did I feel so damned naked and exposed? What did he need to know for? The truth. Thank you Catholic upbringing. Why did the prospect of seeing him again make me feel so weak? Pierre was my first husband and I had something I desperately needed to tell him.

From my point of view our relationship was built on undying passion, albeit all mine. Who ever really knew what his point of view was. Pierre was Swiss. He’d jokingly refer to himself as a peasant. He was proud of the fact that the Swiss have no royal blood. Yet those who knew him and worked for him saw him much differently. To them he was “le grande fromage.” In part this was due to Pierre’s fleeting proximity with humility. The other part was simply the fact that he was filthy rich. His father was the man responsible for building the Swiss railroad system. His mother was the heiress to a skiing fortune. Pierre grew up with maids to do his bidding. He slept with half of them; his first coital experience occurred somewhere in the vicinity of age twelve. He was kicked out of Eton and Harrow as well as several lesser-known public schools. He avoided serving the mandatory four years in the Swiss military by fleeing to America and becoming an American citizen. But for once Henri, his father, put his foot down. With
his far-reaching connections, Henri “arranged” for Pierre to fulfill his obligations by writing and traveling as a journalist for the US Army’s rag “The Stars and Stripes.” Whatever it was Henri had hoped to accomplish backfired. In possession of the above-mentioned as well as many other life experiences, Pierre became an adept raconteur. One more skill to cultivate his popularity among the ladies. When he returned to America, he got a job with Time magazine in New York. But his affinity for fast cars and fast women drew him down yet another path. A friend, Ray Walley, needed some cash fast in order to start up a car dealership in New Jersey. He went to Pierre for the loan. In return for the cash, Pierre became the sole beneficiary of Ray’s will. And then the unthinkable happened. Ray’s convertible Triumph collided with a tractor-trailer truck. That one dire event made Pierre a car dealer and an unemployed journalist. And several years later, I became his next appurtenance. I should have listened to my good friend, Mickey, at the time. I had introduced her to Pierre one night, and later asked her what her opinion was about him. She cautioned, “Well, he’s charming, he’s handsome, and he’s extremely dangerous.” I really should have listened.

Instead I am driving to my old home, the house I shared with Pierre to tell him I have his child. There is a place beyond nervous. Where mental and physical anxiety converge. Where you lose control. Where you need a drink. So I stopped at a liquor store and bought a bottle of Moet. What was I thinking? This wasn’t going to be a celebration. I guess I am not really big on prayer in a situation like this, so the alcohol will have to do. I decide when I leave the liquor store that I will leave my son at a neighbor’s and spring this on good old Pete alone. Part of me dreads his reaction. I know why. I feel like I have told a big whopping lie and now I will have to pay for it. There aren’t enough Hail Mary’s or Our Father’s for whatever level of sin it is I have committed. But my son won’t have to be party to it.

I pull up next door and leave him with a friend who asks for no explanation. As usual, when I pull in the driveway it is apparent I will be there first. I still have a key, so I open the door, sit at the kitchen table and sweat out the inevitable.

An hour later, he walks in, does the two-cheek kiss-kiss thing and suggests we have a glass of wine. Subconsciously, I knew he would do that, i.e., the champagne. With Pierre pleasantries always come first. However no degree of charm or finesse is going to make me relax. Somehow, and I can’t really say for sure anymore, I manage to blurt it out. And I guess the word that would best describe his reaction would be nonplussed. Buffaloed by my revelation it seemed he was struck dumb. So I speculate. Maybe it is because he is so much older than me. Maybe it is the kind of thing he would expect from me. Or just possibly he looks nonplussed because I really did shock him. Whatever it was, it wasn’t what I expected. I was thinking something along the lines of a full-blown rant. Perhaps a little bit or so on just how incompetent a woman I am. Or possibly an invective or two. Perhaps what surprised me most was his request. He actually wanted to see him. Because from the very beginning of my undying passion it had been made crystal clear to me he didn’t want, he didn’t like, omigod, there was no way he would be cramped with children.
In the midst of exploring my emotional gamut I walked next door and brought my son back to see his father. I could even say they actually kind of, sort of played a little. As much as a four month old can with a guy like Pierre. And then he asked me or us to stay. And I knew I couldn’t and I wouldn’t. Underlying all that had happened there was no going back. It wasn’t about him or me anymore. Most of all I wouldn’t raise a child with a man who gave with one hand while simultaneously taking with the other. My decision wasn’t about forgiving or accepting. At this point most of the adrenaline had worn off, and some of the bubbles had worked their magic so that I could think through all the white noise. It was time to go. We parted amicably and agreed to stay in touch. For a long while he did so more than I. From what I could tell very little in his life had changed. And according to the rules as I had first heard them, this supposedly what he wanted. But not really. Almost three years later I decided to get remarried. Pierre knew David. He liked him, respected him and enjoyed his company. However, he didn’t want me to marry him. An hour prior to my vows, Pierre made a last ditch effort asking me to rethink his offer. My answer was the same. I often wonder if I have any regrets, and I admit there are times when I relish the idea of driving a Ferrari again. Those moments are isolated and only come infrequently like one of his unannounced visits. Regardless of whether or not there is a woman in his life, he always comes alone. I think about that, too. And I don’t have to wonder any more. ☺
A Family Recipe

Tammy MacQueen

She takes a deep breath, consciously inhaling every scent from the kitchen. The aroma of the steaming garlic and tomatoes makes her think of him; the way he made her laugh when she was younger, his funny antics, especially the times he drove her around town on the old yellow backhoe. “I hope I added enough spearmint,” she states out loud as she slowly slurps the sauce from the wooden spoon. “Gramps would be disappointed if I didn’t follow the recipe exactly.”

“Who are you talking to?” her husband asks.

“Oh, nobody,” she states in an embarrassed voice.

She always knew when her grandfather was cooking just by the scents emanating from his screen house. It was almost always spaghetti sauce with succulent slices of chicken and extra large meatballs. He would often begin the preparations the night before, chopping garlic and molding the hamburger just right. Early the next morning he would begin simmering the sauce, browning the meatballs and adding the correct amount of ingredients—ingredients that he grew himself. He was good at that—he had a knack for blending everything perfectly right. “Get away from the sauce,” he would tell her when she was younger. “God Damn it! You’ll never make it right if you don’t leave it alone. Stop stirring it!” he would shout. All afternoon he would tell her what she was doing wrong, not once keeping his criticisms silent. Finally when the sauce was ready, they would sit down to a delicious Italian dinner. “Straight from the garden,” Gramps would say. She remembers that his cooking always seemed to make things better.

These are the images she tries to remember most about her grandfather. She knows that he was a good man and that she came from good, solid soil—a working class soil that seemed easy to till on the surface, yet became much more complicated when sifted through. Her grandparents were happy, or so it seemed for most of their lives. Stories of hardships were told, but for the most part they deeply loved one another. They had met by accident, when he had almost hit her with his car. He hadn’t done it on purpose, he just wasn’t paying attention when he drove by her. Their next meeting was much more cordial—a big band concert at McGregor Park. Soon after their first date, they married and later had two sons. Her grandfather was then sent to war. The woman sometimes wonders if it was the war that had made him so cold and bad-tempered? During World War II he had been a Seabee, building and maintaining roads for the soldiers. This is where he had learned his construction trade. When he returned to the States, he began his own paving business. “The war definitely affected him,” her grandmother would later explain. She thinks seriously about her grandmother’s words… “it affected him”. Could this be why he drank so much?

She remembers that her Grandfather had a temper, nothing out of the ordinary for a tough, Italian man though. He was also a heavy drinker. Another characteristic of
Italians, she ponders. She suddenly realizes there were many days when she felt hatred and resentment toward her grandfather. The days that her grandmother would sit home crying because he had yelled at her or even hit her. Or the days that she herself would have to drive down to the Halcyon Club to pick him up because he couldn’t even find his way to his truck. Why did he drink like that? Was he using alcohol to mask something deeper?

There were terrible times that she is sure he tried to escape from. In later years her grandparents would have two more sons. He would watch his third boy solemnly go off to fight. This young man too would be affected dramatically by the war. Waking his niece up in the middle of the night, he would run to the corners of the room as if he was still fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. And then there was her father. When he was diagnosed with cancer, dying only eight months later, her grandfather was devastated. She knew he had never gotten over the loss.

Even through the toughest times her grandfather labored on. Unwilling to let the soil dry up, he continued to nourish and grow his vegetables while his family went untended. She remembers the last time they cooked sauce together before his death. It was the youngest Uncle’s wedding and her grandfather had decided not to attend the ceremony or reception—in his older years, acting stubborn had become his way. He did decide to make and send his meatballs though. How could he not? Everybody would be expecting them.

With his arthritic hands and loud voice he shouted orders to his granddaughter from his screen-house cot. “Don’t make the meatballs too big. Everybody is going to want a few. We have to have enough for everyone,” he grumbled. Together the young woman and her grandfather made more than one hundred meatballs and enough sauce for the entire neighborhood. As the woman reflects, she realizes that this time, on this day, they had actually gotten everything right. There was no fighting, no criticisms, no drinking. For the first time they had created something special—they had finally found the family recipe.

“How does the sauce taste?” her husband asks startling her from her own thoughts.

“Perfect,” she replies, “Just perfect.”
Humble Pie
Paula Mercier

Preparation Time:
2-3 years to gather ingredients, 1-2 years to bake.

This pie will keep indefinitely if stored properly. It is best when served with laughter and honesty.

Note: Feel free to vary ingredients of the filling whenever necessary. This is a very versatile dish.

CRUST: 1 1/4 cups integrity
1/4 cup kindness
1/4 cup humor
1/4 cup flexibility

FILLING: 1 cup of risk
1 cup of hope
1/2 cup of humility
1/2 cup of a cooperative learning book (green and brown)
1/2 cup of Nancy Atwell
1/2 cup of Meg Petersen
1/2 cup of Linda Rief

1) Preheat classroom to 98.6

2) Combine crust ingredients in a medium-sized childhood and mix well into adulthood. Transfer to a 20-30 year teaching career; be sure to pierce crust to allow for venting.

3) Combine all ingredients in a life-long career. Blend with trial and error for at least 4-5 years, with mixer on medium speed. Higher speeds may damage mixer. Scrape the bowl well, do not leave anything out.

4) Pour the batter into the crust lined pan. Bake in classroom for 10 months.

5) Remove the pie from the classroom each June. Sprinkle summer learning over the top and serve each September.

Paula Mercier
Happy Endings
Brian McNabb

The three little pigs
scavenge through
my trash cans.

Bite marks
through the dark plastic bags.
I imagine that it has not been easy.
Homes wrecked and such.

Hey, the swines had fame,
lived high off the hog
until royalties ran out.
The tale got old.
Brick house, now crack house.

The wolf drops them off
picks them up
drives a clunker.

Yea, the same wolf with the once upon a time
powerful pipes.
Not anymore.
He’s got the big “C”
Smokes and Miller Lites.
did a stint of time,
some mandated counseling
now wants to make things right.

I wonder what’s his cut.

He used to be somebody.
Stuck in the Middle
Amanda Milligan

**I AM SITTING IN THE MIDDLE**, the exact middle, I believe. I am in the middle and surrounded by faces and lives, many, I discover, known to me for some time. Looking around, I see several handfuls of them—two rows down, five rows up in the bleachers, one sitting right next to me.

The sister of my most difficult AP student, Patrick, arrives late, sitting directly in front of me. I recall her features, minus the seven years since our sticky, parting embrace on the football field, blinding in its shimmer of my girls in white gowns. Sue threads her way through the knees and elbows and programs, fanning flushed faces. She enters the main aisle, Minolta in hand. I fear the perfect picture eludes her. And then, that music begins; we all stand, awaiting the march, awaiting her brother Pat and the others.

I no longer focus on the speeches, the trite metaphors, the class gift. It is all about the kids. I’m studying features, projecting them into their futures, wondering whose name I’ll forget when running into them at Dyvelder’s Market in a year or two. I then ponder other certainties: which one of their children will enter my room some day, rolling their eyes and dreading Milligan? What odd circumstances will ultimately bring us together? Would my once sophomore English class clown caution me to SLOW at the annoying construction site by the courthouse? Not another funeral held too, much too, early. I cross my fingers under the wrinkled moisture of my skirt.

In the middle of the valedictorian’s speech, I think of Jake. Jake the Snake. I rarely remember scenes of my past any more. Yet, my memories of him are like crystal. As I began my second year at Kingswood, I was introduced to Jake, a young man of guile and graft who harbored a genuine disdain for school and women, I was pretty sure. As a senior, this was it for him; he had to pass my spring semester senior English class. Yet, he was in a hurry to get to that real world of beer and landscaping and Saturday night races at Canaan.

Jake was the first to make me cry. I would never forget him. Animosity is a strong thing. He had pushed and I pushed back, demanding compliance, fearing losing control, anticipating daily disasters. A second year teacher needs the reassurance: *I am in control*. For me, that element of control translated to respect. If I maintained control then they would give me respect, I reasoned. I had learned early that my classroom, the students’ ownership of that classroom, revolved strictly around the 3 Rs—Reliability, Responsibility, Respect. They were of utmost importance. Jake didn’t see things that way. He made sure all were aware who held the real power.
The last weeks of that semester yielded to the momentum of graduation activities. Amid the measurements for caps and gowns, the prom, the class trip, the banquet, Jake’s grade reminded me of the sporadic EKG of a terminal patient. He never hit that solid line but many jerks up, then descents down filled those final class periods. He blamed the descents on me, “that bitch”; I pointed to his arrogance. This was plain, mutual animosity, familiar to most, colleagues and students alike.

One of my wise colleagues recently said, “no one wins in a power struggle.” She was right. One day he and his buddy, impatient for the bell, and standing at the door like brazen bulls, began rough housing. The rough housing turned to jabbing and the jabbing culminated in, horrifyingly, a pornographic imitation of two boys engaged in oral sex. The bell rang. The weeks to follow were agonizing; he counted on his male intimidation that would keep me from sharing the incident, filing the harassment papers, regaining my self. The power struggle was over and with it the respect and its element of control. That spring, so long ago, I stopped talking about the 3Rs.

In the middle of the beloved math teacher’s commencement address—something about “When will I ever use quadratic equations?”—I leave Jake behind, watch the newly christened adults toss their hats, hug the few I could find in the swirl and swelter of too many bodies jammed into the gym, and make my way through a downpour to my car. Upon making an appearance at the first of four parties I had promised to attend, I saw him, or rather heard my newly-graduated nephew, Timmy, holler that name: “Hey, Jake.” I panicked.

It was an awkward reunion, but the years and a little of Uncle Boo’s homebrew muted that episode, for us both. The stiff beginning turned to a surreal, convivial reminiscing.

We recalled his fellow classmates, inquired as to the health of the other, even laughed about his brother, James, not to be confused with Jake. A shadow still. We watched the gusts of wind spin the hanging geranium on the porch. Red and green streaks, dizzying.

Yes, I admitted his brother was the only kid that ever angered me enough that I threw my podium across the room, breaking it in half. James, he agreed, could do that to a person. Again, we watched the geranium spin in its mad circles.

He revealed a connection I was unaware of, said he hung out with Scottie, my brother-in-law. Discovered that I wasn’t such a “bitch”. He’d heard the story of how I’d gotten stuck in the bathroom of Scottie’s camper at the Pocono race, 97, he thought.

“Laughed yourself silly, Scottie said. That’s cool,” he needed to tell me.

Someone was shooting darts nearby, 99s. We watched Boo turning his famous ribs; he was soaked by diagonal sheets of rain. We chuckled to watch him.
With a certainty, it was time to embark: three gatherings to go and it was already after three.

“Gotta go.”

“Hah, getting to be that time.”

He turned toward me, eyes glistening as I remembered them, and, with a serious face, eyes now focused on the warped floorboards of my brother-in-law’s barn, he spoke.

“You know how when you’re driving down the road between places with nothing else to do but think. Well, I got thinking about . . . that.”

It hung between us, hovered briefly over the gulf we had managed to shorten.

“We were horrible to you.”

He scratched his crew cut, eyes darting. I guess what I’m saying is . . . you know . . . I apologize for being such an asshole.”

That middle place, in between, isn’t so bad.☺️
Pink and Say
Barbara O’Brien

The look on their faces when Pinkie died, the quiet of the classroom when they realized that not all books ended happily ever after.

“But, Mrs. O’Brien, that wasn’t fair,” said Chris, dirty, disheveled, and often smelly. Chris is a thinker, not a writer or a reader. Chris’ thoughts opened a torrent of voices, all spilling out of students who had something to share about this unlikely friendship between a white boy and a black boy during the Civil War. Elsa, my natural leader, demanding to be heard first, jumped up to stand on the classroom futon, “I think that Pink had to die to show us how bad hate can be.”

The discussion that ensued: skin color, racism, hatred, and death, were miles beyond their age. Their quiet bodies, their eyes watching with compassion as their friends shared their thoughts, their legs continuing to sit ‘criss cross applesauce’ for 45 more minutes, through listening time and then through most of math time filled me with awe. I watched as 23 second graders who shared a classroom, but differed by skin color, home life, economics, and even language proceeded to break down all those barriers and share their feelings and beliefs with each other.

This is my class that clamors for more Patricia Polacco books, who understand why her grandfather dripped honey on her book, but who still wash or at least eye check their own hands before touching the good books in our classroom bins.

This is my class who support their non-reading peers by sitting with them and being active listeners to No, David, No! over and over and then applauds that same child who reads that same book at Spotlight Readers during our classroom’s Morning Meeting.

I had set aside two of Polacco’s books; Pink and Say and The Butterfly as books to share with teaching peers not my second graders. But Alex, tall, beautiful, and very curious, spotted Pink and Say at my desk while she was typing up a final draft of one of her stories. The next day at our Morning Meeting, Alex decided to share a conflict that someone (no names are allowed during conflicts) who had, but who didn’t share a Patricia Polacco book with the class. Wasn’t I surprised when I realized that not only was I the someone in Alex’s conflict, but that she was now sharing the beginning of the storyline with the rest of the class. Usually conflict time is used to just voice the problem or injustice, and there is no discussion or finger pointing. But on this day, I broke the rules and admitted to being Alex’s someone. After explaining that not all picture books are written for young children, that this book was beautifully written, but its subject matter might just be too difficult to listen to, the my class just sat and looked back at me.

“But, Mrs. O’Brien… “(Once again Chris was the spokesperson.) “We can handle it. Aren’t we suppose to be learning the hard stuff?”
After more discussion that included the themes of the many other books and authors that we had read together: C.S. Lewis, Robert Munsch, JK Rowling, and of course the beloved Patricia Polacco, I agreed or I acquiesced, that we would read it at listening time.

Before reading the book, we did an informal discussion on schema for Polacco books: true stories, stories of her childhood or ancestors, great detail and description that take you on a mind journey. I then gave some background information on the time period, and Cameron, a rough tough athlete who hides his tears after reading sad books, shared his amazing knowledge of the Civil War.

And then I read the book, not as a think aloud, but as a non-interrupted shared piece of literature. In my classroom, the children often break into spontaneous applause after a new book, but today there was just silence, and that look on their faces.
Relic
Meg Petersen

“In the event of an attack, the lives of those families which are not hit in a nuclear blast and fire can still be saved if they can be warned to take shelter and if that shelter is available.”

--President John F. Kennedy, July 25th, 1961

Bob and Merna Potts took up the government’s call to build the family fallout shelter. Within days of Kennedy’s speech, they were in touch with Peace O’ Mind Shelter Co. out of Stephenville, Texas. Fully guaranteed—course who’d be around to complain if it didn’t work, Merna pointed out, but Bob told her to hush up and start digging…. Construction took most of the fall. Opened in December; cost close to 2,000 dollars even back then. Wall Street said shelter trade could top twenty billion for the coming year, (that is, if there was a coming year….) Thing had to be wrapped in heavy plastic to keep out Oregon’s infamous damp, but it was a beauty. Steel-reinforced concrete walls, Ceiling and floor eight inches thick. It’d reduce gamma rays by a factor of ½ to the 10th power.

Bathroom facilities, of course, were a bit more primitive consisting of a pail and a supply of plastic bags; construction was supposed to lie flush with the lawn, but created a noticeable mound. “It certainly is a challenge to landscape around it,” said Merna. But Bob reminded her about not asking what her country could do for her, and how a little sacrifice on behalf of one’s family could firm up our national nuclear resolve. With their shelter in, they took the Cuban Missile Crisis, and those Soviet tanks at the Berlin wall, in stride. More and more of their neighbors were digging their lawns up in the night, though, installing ‘wine cellars’, ‘game rooms’ or “additions.” The Potts weren’t fooled. They saw the blankets, water jugs, cans and often shotguns, going down into those holes.

Yet, fear and high alert can only hold the national attention for so long. Mere security loses its glamour. Eventually, even Bob got tired of all that duck and cover. Bombs, nuclear winter, détente and even first strike capacity on the other side lost their power to terrify. Folks just began to trust that our planes could stop their planes, and that no one would really push that button, pick up that hot red phone. Of course, the Potts’ teenage son Greg put the place to good use. They got to calling it ‘Greg’s room’ after he ran an extension cord down there and moved in his blow up chair, boom box, lava lamp, and tape collection. He said it kept a good temperature on hot summer nights, but he had to keep the hatch open, cause of ventilation problems.
The shelter’s just some strange fossil now, after a brief revival at Y2K, a mere relic of cold war suburban life. Some of the original foodstuffs are still down there, but Merna says she wouldn’t trust that can of egg solids. And Bob, at 82, doesn’t visit his underground bunker much now. The boom in the shelter market with another president talking up vigilance against a new generation of evil-doers hatching schemes of terror doesn’t comfort him. Bob used to believe he had a way around it all, and no one had to die. But now, he knows better, himself unsheltered from the increasing tempo of his body’s own fallout, he moves in the world with greater care, as he charts the half-lives of his own failing organs. And, somehow, he isn’t afraid anymore. Some evenings he and Merna just sit on the porch and marvel at that mound, at their own belief they could hedge their bets against the inevitable, cheat death. He barely remembers now when his fears ran deeper than his concrete hideout, but still he wonders how he’d have lived down there, how he’d have known when it was safe to emerge, and he no longer prays for a world without end. ☼
Converge
Vivian Price

The silver bus rolls across flat black highway
its passengers going places.
Away from places.
Gazing through glass streaked
with grime and fingerprints
of others who rode the Grayhound.
Watching the bend of the road stretching
as far as the eye can see.

A girl sits edge-of-seat anxious.
Going places
Her hair loose and long
as her future.
As open as the road.
She explores pages of the Traveler’s Guide to the City
like she does her new beginnings.
Eyes fixed on the road curving before her.

A woman, slouched against hard-seat vinyl,
going away,
lets old memories trail behind.
Wispy tracks sticking to the asphalt.
Her thinning hair tucked under a scarf
Held tight to her scalp,
like the fragmented bits of hope in
the pages of, “How to be a survivor.”
A pamphlet, thin like the doctor’s reassurance.
A child sleeps draped across her shoulder
while another tugs at her dress.
The road weaving and twisted as the past
stretching like her patience.

The bus comes to a stop.
People in and people out.
The driver does not look at the faces.
The girl, backpack slung on shoulder stops and waits.
The woman takes small hands.
Gathers scattered belongings before stepping into line.
Moving in front of the girl who shifts her feet, ready to go.
The woman walks slowly off the bus, stops amid the station’s clutter and clamor.
Eyes darting through the exhaust smoke and the people searching for her mother entangled in the crowd waiting for her—to help her.
The girl sprints to the cab line
Hand shoots up in the air, her voice absolute “Taxi.”
skippers
Mark Roberts

on the gravelly shore
in the glasseous light
of the flashwater bright

a voice rejoiceful exclamors:

no clunkers now kids
end for godsakes no plunkers

just smart hoppin’ skimmers

end fine all night trimmers

( no dead in betweeners!)
sleek skimmable ones
pure unswimmable ones

go end skip em
end rip em

with shoulders all fire
depth skimmish desires
down tic-tocless hours

go end skip em
end zip em end flip em

those splashalots
them fabulush

skippy-skip

skippers
Night Poem
Heather [Maya] Scott

for my daughter

There is a dark space
on this road
in these woods
where the moose
child nibbles its dinner.
(I have seen her now, four times).
The first time it was late, later than eleven,
and I wondered
where is her mother?
I thought: is she behind her?
Close, but not too close;
making sure she’s within
some sort of boundary
they’ve arranged?
I wondered
how far, how long
can a child be without its
mother?
(I worry for her
like I worry for my own
daughter.
When she, the moose,
ambled close to my car
the third time,
she flicked her ears
in the glare
of my headlights, turned away.
I thought: she is elegant.
I noticed the length of her legs.
She seemed young,
too young.
My mother said
she must be a yearling,
I thought
she is younger,
I wondered
if moose travel
alone).

I confess, I know nothing
about her. But every time I turn
that corner (on the dirt road  
my tires always kicking up small rocks)  
I want to see her, that moose child.  
I turn off my radio  
make sure my brights are on, slow the car.

I was looking for her  
Wednesday night  
but I didn’t see her,  
instead, a doe.  
She was beautiful.  
When I approached,  
she scrambled to get footing  
on the fresh pavement,  
didn’t show fear, her body  
slender, agile  
she leaped  
back  
into the dark  
of the woods  
her territory.

On these back roads  
I wish I could hear what they hear  
see what they see  
I am blind here, even scared sometimes  
(I quickly  
lock my doors,  
blast talk radio  
even though I catch myself drifting)  
back to the animals,  
back to you,  
daughter,  
wondering how you are  
miles away from me  
in California.  
I wonder what you’re saying  
if your father ever got those tangles out  
of the back of your hair,  
if you’ve outgrown that dress  
or are wearing those bracelets  
I sent you,  
if we’re still going to have lemon cake for your  
birthday  
(with two kinds of sorbet  
and the 5 candle)
if you are waiting
waiting for me
like I am waiting for you
like the moose child knows its mother is there
breathing near (close by)
watching.
The Paper Cheetah
Heidi Stevens

“Our new Author of the Month is Ezra Jack Keats. I’d like to read you one of his stories called Dreams.” Ms. Stevens is reading a story about a mouse or something. I wish it was about ships, planes, boats or at least more exciting animals like cheetahs, mountain lions or wolves.

“Hey, Peter, did you know that cheetahs are the fastest animals in the world?” Why won’t he listen to me? I know, I’ll make a farting noise on my arm. “Pbbrrt.”

“I can do that, too. Pbbrrt.”

“Karel, Peter, please stop and listen to the story.”

Is the story over yet? No, now Ms. Stevens has to read about the author. I hope we do something fun soon.

“I’d like all of us to make a paper animal just like the paper mouse in the story.” This sounds fun. I love making things, especially things out of paper. Soon my cheetah will be running wild through the classroom.

Wait, how do I start? “Anna, what are we supposed to do?”

“She just told us Karel. Fold the paper like this and then cut the legs out here.”

Hmm, yellow paper for the body and black for the spots. How should I make the spots if I can only use paper and not markers? Maybe there’s something over on the art shelf. Hmm, scissors and tape. Wait, now the scissors are attacking the tape, now the tape is fighting back and wrapping around the scissors …

“Karel, do you need help getting started?”

“No.”

Oh yeah, cheetah spots. Aha, the hole puncher. Back at my desk I punch out the holes. I punch and punch and punch until the paper hole punch jams and I try to punch some more. I’ve got a huge pile of black dots on my desk.

Now that I’m gluing spots on my cheetah I can see him leaping onto my desk and blowing all of my dots onto the floor. And then running to Emma and yanking with his teeth on her red hair. She tells me to make my cheetah STOP IT but I tell her I don’t know how, he’s wild.

Okay, my cheetah has just the right number of spots. I walk around the room trying to give them away. “Spots for sale, black cheetah spots for sale!” No one wants my
spots. “Last chance for cheetah spots. I just threw one away. Now I’ve thrown two away.”

It takes a long time to throw that many spots away. Now all I need is a tail and some whiskers.

My cheetah is done and I help him run around the room and leap from one desk to the next. Peter’s dog and my cheetah play chase until Ms. Stevens makes us clean up. We put all of our animals on the shelf near the window. I put mine next to William T.’s lion and William L.’s tiger because we are all in the cat family.

“After recess we will write stories about our paper animals.”

Writing stories, I knew she’d find a way to ruin my fun.

“Go get your paper animals, put them on your desk and write a story about your animal. We’ll do fifteen minutes of quiet so you can think and write without distractions.”

I set my paper cheetah on my desk, get a piece of paper and a pencil. My pencil isn’t sharp enough so I break off the tip on the edge of my desk and go to the pencil sharpener. I sharpen my pencil to a sharp point, test it on the counter, break it again and have to sharpen it again.

“Karel, hurry up, I need to sharpen my pencil too,” Emma shouts in my ear.

I sit back down and write, “The pappre Cheeda” at the top of my paper. My “r” in paper isn’t right so I look around inside my desk for an eraser. The last time I used my eraser I was working on carving a design into the top side. I work some more on this design.

“Karel, do you need some help with your writing?”

“No, I’m just thinking.”

What should I write about? I look at my cheetah. I need a boy in the story, but who? I look around the room and my eyes stop at the beanstalk. Jack, from Jack and the beanstalk, good name. I walk over to the beans and see a huge bean at the bottom. “Hey Peter, look at this bean!”

“Karel, Peter, please get back to your writing. We can talk about your bean observations after writing.”

I go back to my desk. A story about Jack and his paper cheetah that is alive. “One day Jack went home and had a pappre cheeda. And as the niyte grew the cheeda came alive and went it the kicin and ate aol the fod and went in the bedroom and ate the bed.”

“Ms. Stevens, can I read my beginning to you?”
“Sure Karel.”

I am excited about my story so far and Ms. Stevens is too. I share it with Peter and Steven and then go back to my desk. I can’t think of what to write next so I work on my eraser some more. “Then Jack kam and sau the chetae he screamde for Mom! Cam heyre my pappre chetae is eating my bed.” I like how this is going. The cheetah is acting just as wild as I thought he’d be if he were alive.

“The next day…” My pencil breaks, I look inside my desk for another one, find one and draw on my eraser some more. “he was sad but was icsitid because it was the pappre parade. But the pappre cetae was there! And he ate up the flote! And the next day he was still mad abawt his bed. Now he’s mad abawt the parade.”

“Writing time is almost over, see if you can finish the last sentence you are working on and we’ll do more tomorrow.”

How to end my story? Ah, “But, it snowed.”
Running Time
Patricia Thibeault

When our firstborn son was 18 months old my husband and I put him down on rock hard sand at a deserted beach and let him walk away.

We were an urban 60’s couple, back then, raising this child in the heart of Washington DC, a block from the riot corridor. He never got much chance to experience nature. He spent his baby days toddling around our extremely small apartment unable to walk further then 10 steps without encountering an obstacle or changing direction.

In our tiny park there was danger and dog poo that worried us. Matt walked there while we hovered behind him ready to scoop him up if he got too close to the street, climbed a tall bench, or bent to pick up something undesirable. It was a stilted, claustrophobic outdoor experience and we wished that he could run free.

Then on an endless 4-hour ride to North Carolina’s Outer Banks we hatched a plan. Part loving indulgence, part curiosity prompted us to think it would be fun to plunk him down and find out how he would react. How far off would he venture before he looked back or ran to us?

Well, he never stopped.

He never even looked back. We stood on that damp vast expanse of beach and gazed after him as he toddled further and further off. At about 75 feet my husband caved. “We better get him” he said. But I was the mother, and the one who knew, and I made the call: “NO”.

When he got to be so small in the distance that a toothpick held in the air would block his little form from our view we both dashed after him.

Where I am, is that same psychic space Matt ran through at the beach 30 years ago.

Just like 18-month-old Matt, I have learned a thing or two.
Matt had mastered walking and baby running. This skill elated him so thoroughly it lead him to believe he could go it alone, ditching his mom and pop. He had the hubris to stride the wide world like a tiny titan.

I’ve gotten married and stayed married, raised four sons, and had some jobs. These skills have set me up mentally with enough legitimacy to attend the average cocktail party and engage in small talk and the experience to know that I don’t like cocktail parties and small talk. I have just enough skill to meet the bar. The small confidence this gives me may be hubris on my part as well.

Just like my son was, I am ignorant of conventional wisdom.

Eighteen-month-old babies alone on a holiday at the shore could drown, get kidnapped or lost. Matt didn’t know those universal safety rules and hence was perfectly at ease.

As a young girl in a convent school rules were laid down for me in cement and I obeyed them. I harkened to the wisdom of my elders. I never doubted. I took authority at face value in school and later in the workplace. I believed what I read in books, saw on TV and counsel I received from all quarters.

Then I raised children.

Instead of becoming wiser I became puzzled. Pat answers evaporated, and reality grew subtle and shifting. The big questions changed. Life blossomed with paradox and enigma. I became aware that I was ignorant, and I like it. Having learned the universal truisms, I learned I can ignore them.

Just like my son barreling down the beach, I am traveling light, with no plan.

That day Matt just bolted. His hat fell and he dropped his sand pail but his legs just kept on pummeling, and his eyes were fixed on the horizon.

While Russ and I watched Matt scamper down the beach we stood next to the things we carried. Beach umbrella, playpen, pails and shovels, cooler, towels, SPFs 15, 30 and 45, books, lunch, radio, wallet, purse, diaper bag and car keys were all among the essentials we could never have gone to the beach without. We had planned our day at the beach around these things. We were glad we had them and we wished we had more, and better, stuff.
Now I have all the stuff I wanted back then, and more. And of course I like it, but my eyes are more often on the horizon, my life plan less choreographed then when I was 27. I have learned this from the toll that folding, washing, counting, dusting, vacuuming and protecting stuff takes on its caretaker. A trip to Europe is paid for 3x the touring time in packing, planning and cleanup hours. A walk downtown, an hour in the library, or a few minutes talking to a former student can be bliss unransomed. Joy is random, breathtaking and hard to plan or pack for.

Just like Matt 30 years ago, I am running for all I am worth.

My son knew we were going to run after him. He knew it was only a matter of time. How many strides he could squeeze in before we swooped down was all he had on his mind. Matt was, in his baby heart, full of adrenaline, racing the inevitable.

I feel that pull of the inevitable, and experience the tingling, wild anticipation of the end of play. I have buried many friends. I have seen sickness and death claim beautiful perfect children and zany amazing youth. My knees creak. I take in the horizon and it is wider and more stunning then it ever was before and I feel the bittersweet tug of desperation to run for it while there is still time.
The Whole World Resurrection Circus

Martin G. Wakeman

The Whole World Resurrection Circus is a whirlwind of the mind. It is a circus based on slight of hand. Slight of mind. It is spinning plates that crash and break. It’s a journey from then to now and back again. It’s my journey. My circus. My spinning plates. My state of mind.

The gypsy sits in her tent at the gate and says, “When you spin an LP backwards it makes a funny sound. It takes back everything it said.” At Billy Nicholson’s 14th birthday party we spun a Beatles LP backwards. It kept repeating, “number nine, number nine, number nine,” over and over again. It told us “Paul is dead.” Later that night, smoking stolen Old Gold cigarettes out behind the old oak tree, we had a serious discussion about how gruesome it is to fake your own death on the back of an album.

But that was then, and this is …

The gypsy rubs her crystal ball

A man on stilts stands ten feet tall. He wears a Lincoln style top hat. Red, white and blue. His patched pants hang limp from his dangling suspenders. He has a white goatee and holds a sign, Uncle Sam Wants Who?

“Friends, neighbors, fans,” he shouts through his vaudevillian cone, “the circus has come to town.” The clowns tumble and the organ pipes blow. “Welcome to the Whole World Resurrection Circus! We’ve come to claim you. So come on down to the outskirts of town, where the mid-way is open to view.”

Glover Vt. Circa about 1975. The Barton Chronicle headlines “The Bread and Puppet Theater moves to Glover.” When I come to visit Granddad he calls them “the hippies on the hill.” He doesn’t like hippies. He tells my mother through sips of Rhinegold beer that “guys with long hair are queer, and I don’ mean just odd.” He thought I was queer. He thought the whole free love generation of hippies was queer. It never occurred to him that he was a little odd himself.

But that was then, and this is…

The gypsy rubs her crystal ball
Glover VT Circa about 1992. Bugs and Worms. What the hell am I doing here? Granddad has been gone for years. Now we’re living in his house. His house is my house. This is the last place in the world I expected to land. How odd is that?

My daughter Chelsea’s six-year-old fingers carefully dig through the Styrofoam bait cup looking for worms. “Dorothy,” she says, “and the Tin Man.” We’re fishing at Run Away Pond. She’s naming the worms. “We won’t use Dorothy and the Tin Man for bait she says,” as she watches me poke a worm onto what is suppose to be her hook. We wait for the fish to bite. She continues to name the worms. “Scarecrow,” she says, “and the Cowardly Lion.” She draws the yellow brick road in the soft sand along the shoreline. “Follow this and you’ll get home safe,” she says.

‘If it were only that easy’ I think.

“Look.” I point to her red and white bobber as I hand her the fishing pole. “You got a fish! Pull that baby in!”

She reels her line in. Her skinny little arms frantically working the crank on her pole. She screams with delight as the perch dangles from her line. “Alice,” she says, “You have been a very bad girl.” After a couple of minutes of scolding “Alice” for taking bait from strangers and straying form her home she says, “Daddy, lets let Alice go home now.”

Alice goes home. We go the B & W restaurant out on route five for supper. I have fish and chips. She has a peanut butter sandwich.

“Daddy,” she says looking up from her sandwich, a peanut butter mustache spread across her upper lip, “did you see Alice’s eyes?”

It takes me a second to remember Alice. “No I didn’t,” I say.

“I don’t think I can eat things with eyes,” she says. She looks out the window at the restaurant sign. “Do you know what B & W means,” she asks, “bugs and worms,” she giggles without waiting for my answer. She slurps her soda through the straw.

But that was then, and this is…

The gypsy rubs her crystal ball

I’m back at the circus. I’m spinning plates. (remember the plates?) Years flick by in my head like bright flashes of broken film. At first I think I’m pretty good. It
seems I have all the plates spinning. Then I discover the trapeze line is frayed, and the elephant trunks have some kind of tree fungus.

I’m standing in the mud in the rain watching the resurrection circus perform. I don’t understand a word they’re saying, but I don’t care. I’m talking to a cyclone spinning in the crowd. I say anything that comes to mind, because I know how attention deficit these things can be. I immediately contradict everything I say. Like an LP spinning backward, at the end of the conversation I have said nothing. John and George are dead. Paul lives.

But that was then, and this is now.

The gypsy smiles, and rubs the crystal one more time.

Glover, VT, circa 2002: Come on and rescue me. Off in the distance I hear one of my plates crash, and the trapeze line snap. The rain feels warm and cleansing. The mud oozes into my leather sandals and squishes between my toes. It stains my cuffed blue jeans and travels up my pant leg. A search party snakes its way through the circus crowd. I think they are looking for me because I know that somewhere back stage there is a mess to clean up, and a plate to keep turning. All I need to do is find my way out of this crowd. I look down at the mud hoping to find the yellow brick road.

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Purge
Michelle Walter

My mother was a meticulous housekeeper. Every inch was wiped, disinfected, purged of grim, dust, or whatever my mother thought was there. I always managed to get sucked in to the vortex of the whirlwind cleaning expeditions. I’d vacuum, spray, dust, not in that particular order, because there is a proper order of doing things. Top down. You start at the top and work your way down.

Everything has its place, and all must be placed exactly so. The procedure for doing the dishes. Run hot water. Squeeze about two teaspoons of Dawn detergent, no more and no less, into the sink and let the container fill. Place silverware in first, rinse and place plates, then bowls, glasses on top. Glasses must be washed first. Insert the sponge, swirl and purge the grime. Place the glasses next to the basin in the sink. When there is no more room, turn on the water and rinse. Preserve water and empty one glass into the next until all are rinsed and placed into the strainer. Repeat until all the glasses, cups, and mugs are done. Wash only drinking objects. Proceed to the bowls and plates. Repeat washing and rinsing procedure. Wash silverware. Pots and pans can soak, but it is a sin if they soak overnight. While the pans are soaking the table must be wiped and the placemats returned. Placemats are always on the table, but cannot be eaten upon. You can use the folded napkins in the wooden holder, but one must remain at all times. If you take that last napkin, run to the storage facility, chock full of gadgets and gismos, thirty rolls of toilet paper, discontinued and discounted soaps, hair cleaners, polisher, shiners, everything and anything that was twenty-five cents or less at the discount store, and refill the dispenser. The pantry is the only place that has the visual semblance of normalcy. Since there is so much stuff, it is not all neat and orderly. That is why it is behind closed doors. As long as no one sees it, it can’t be a problem. If you pretend it doesn’t exist then it goes away.

It started when I was six. I lived with my father’s parents for a few months while my mother got it together in a hospital. I never visited her there, but she called me a few times.

After that episode the doctors drugged my mother. “Go take a tranq,” she would say to me. She took lots of pills. “If you can’t wake Mommy up in an hour call the ambulance, okay Honey?” She ended up in de-tox for the addiction to the prescription pills. She would always come back looking good and acting normal.

The lectures could be over the spot on the chrome in the bathroom. I began wiping chrome with my shirt. It had to shine at all times. I paced while brushing my teeth. If a tiny white spot appeared on the mirror the lecture series would begin. I avoided any situation that would result in an insult or a demand. “I thought you vacuumed, why is there lint on the carpet? What are you blind?” she’d say. I’d run the vacuum, pick up the one lint ball and wait a few minutes. I’d yell that I was done. She gave her inspection and all was balanced.
“We’re too old to deal with this again,” my Grandfather says to me. She hasn’t been taking her medication and is hallucinating again. She says the cops are chasing her, but she can’t walk because they broke her leg. She calls me Satan and throws all the forks into the lake. I think I’m too young to have to deal with a psychotic mother, besides I have no legal say in what goes on. Even though I am her adult child, her parents must make the legal decisions. I try to tell her we need to go to the hospital. She pulls the Mommy card. “I’m your mother, young lady.”

Part of me still wants to respond. I’m Pavlovian at times. I resist the urge, “No, we’re going. Now Mother,” I say.

By the time we get to the hospital she has turned violent and the orderlies have to restrain her. They shoot her up with mega doses of Calm. It is a happy place where my mother, glass-eyed, dry mouthed, just stares. She’s not a problem anymore. In fact, she’s nothing anymore, she’s no better than a vegetable, a zucchini. You know the type that gets out of hand and takes over before you notice it. One day it’s tiny and the next, bam. It is an all out monster. Is it cruel to compare your mother to a vegetable?

She’s transferred to a state facility, the type where they have to buzz you in and then someone has to open a second door to let you into the observatory. If the nurses had gun belts, you’d swear it was a mini Alcatraz. My mother shuffles along the hallway, her once beautiful face now drawn and pale. She has no make-up, she looks ill, wasted, pathetic. She is wearing the clothes from the bin that they have at the hospital. The clothes hang off her thin frame and she looks twenty years older. She gives me a limp kiss and asks if I brought her cigarettes. I give her her precious cigs and try to have a conversation. She’s making no sense.

“They stole my jewelry,” she says. “and I can’t sleep because this wacko is stalking me. They won’t let me eat, they’re starving me. My roommate is psycho, so she can’t have a razor.”

She tells me the juice on everyone. They are all crazies there; she wants to know why she’s there. To get better, I try to explain, but the words just float in the air waiting to be breathed in. I know that she’ll never get better. She will be able to control her brain with drugs. But first, she’ll have to admit that she needs them.

After the visit I return to the house and begin to clean. I start at the top. I scrub, deodorize, polish and disinfect. I try to wash away all that remains of the imbalance of the scene, but I know that even after scrubbing it clean that the dust will resettle.

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