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Spring Cleaning

Gail Fitzpatrick

Personal Narrative: July 10, 2004

The cool air filters through the open window while I lazily watch the dawning of a new day. A day which invites me to its wonder. I quickly slip into my weekend garb and join the birds and buds and new spring growth which surround my life. I slowly inhale the fresh morning dew with my feet planted firmly on this new ground.

But I must venture back inside for other work, put off far too long.

Donned with my dust rag I approach a neglected corner and get distracted by what I see. A shadowed, forgotten part of my life sits. It quietly captures every speck of spreading dust which dulls its slender leaves. I lightly blow and gaze at the floating flecks left in the wake, back dropped by the faint light peeking through the adjoining room. Despite being confined to the dark side of the house, it leans toward the light, persistent. Miraculously it continues to grow, despite intermittent care. It, too, patiently sits there waiting, not willing to let go. Waiting to be fed, it pushes out runners, reaching for the premier spot to bud its new growth.

This hungry plant could be replaced with another more showy variety; perhaps with shinier leaves, an occasional flower, or at least more colorful foliage. I lift the pot for closer inspection. Some leaves are spotted, shriveled and brown around the tips. A history of its life. The center reveals a firm green stem budding a shy little blossom. I turn the pot slowly in my hand and discover the plant¹s asymmetrical shape. Being in one spot too long has forced one side to reach out. Recognizing that it is unbalanced at the moment, I rotate it toward the nourishment of the rays and see its potential. Yes, let the shaded side grow.

I gently tip the pot, catching the overturned plant in my hand as dried crumbs of old soil drop. What I see surprises me. No soil left, just a cluster of pure white roots entangled in themselves. They peek out through the drain holes, eagerly searching for something to grab on to. More room is needed for these roots to spread. Root bound plants will slowly suffocate and cease to grow. I know. These roots need feeding. Space and time to soak up nourishment, find new ground, take root. Anchor a new life.

I place it in a larger pot lined with rich, moist soil and sprinkle water on the leaves and soil below. It eagerly sucks up as much as it can hold while the excess spills out. I take a closer look and wonder. Will it ever shine or be showy? The leaves could be clipped or colored to hide the imperfections.

I laugh to myself as I carry this plant out into the fresh spring air, and set it on solid ground. The leaves of that old plant capture the rays of the afternoon sun, while that new sturdy blossom lifts herself up. ☺
Lester Fisher got me to think about not being agreeable. I took a class with him on American literature. We read James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Kate Chopin, many of which I consider now to be my favorites. We read one novel each week. He warned us the first day that if we weren’t willing to work, then he didn’t want us. After taking one class with him, I knew that I had to have another.

In a class full of women he said, “I’ve seen you all do it. You step off of the sidewalk. You let the posse push you aside. Have you ever tried not moving out of the way? You have every right to walk on the sidewalk and not get hit by a car as they do. What would happen if you kept walking?”

Fisher was the only Black professor on campus. In fact, he was probably one of five Black people that I had ever seen at UNH. New Hampshire is not wealthy with diversity. But Fisher brought diversity into our lives through literature. He made it clear to us that he needed to be assertive to survive and make a difference in New Hampshire – so did we.

Fisher brought a new world to me; I no longer wanted to be passive. He told me not to step off the sidewalk: I stayed on the sidewalk and liked it. I liked not being pushed aside on the street and in my life. His message stuck with me.

Before I put Fisher’s lesson into effect, I was known as Lizzy, sometimes even Dizzy Lizzy.

Waiting tables allowed me to pay for my bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I was a waitress at the Village Kitchen for five years. Despite me faithfulness to the profession and her restaurant, Sammy Jones, owner of The Village Kitchen, Coe House and Red Hill Dari, never liked me. To tell you the truth, I don’t think she really likes anyone. On my birthday this past year, she told me that she hoped I would grow some brains. When I was first hired, she just thought of me as another dispensable waitress. I was nothing special, nothing good, nothing bad: not yet.

Dizzy Lizzy. I hated it. I knew it wasn’t going to kill me to hear about how dumb Sammy thought I was and how ditzy my manager, Brenda, thought I was. I was just some stupid kid that they could not imagine teaching and would not want teaching their grandkids. And all because I didn’t circle “No cheese” when taking an order from a customer or didn’t know what tripe was.
A sign crookedly dangles on a cracked nail next to the office door. It says, “Do you want to talk to the man in charge or the woman who knows what’s going on?” I remember many days the sign jolted from its level position when she slammed the door in my face.

I always knocked on the door ever so softly fearing that Sammy’s fangs would emerge. She spoke slowly as her teeth clenched and she smacked the door shut. My eyes blinked as I listened to the metal sign clank against the wall over and over again. Her reaction, once again, did not surprise me.

I put up with it. Then, I quit. There were always problems with working there. But my tolerance began to wane the day that Brenda glared at me and said, “Now, you’re not eating.”

I had arrived at the restaurant at 6:00 that morning to work. It was nearing the end of the shift. I had not eaten all day. Another cook on the line had offered to make me something to eat. It would be nice to ease my lightheadedness, I thought. Brenda responded with that remark as she bit into some sausage behind the cook’s line.
The rule was, as she eloquently put it: On Sundays, waitresses get what is left over. Translation: rock-hard home fries, reheated chewy bacon. All other employees placed an order to eat, sat down and enjoyed their meals. But not us. We came in before those other employees and left after them, but they fed us the scraps. I looked at Brenda as she gnawed on her piece of sausage with her fat mouth wide open.

“Why can you shove your face all day, but I can’t eat a thing?” my face heated as I spoke.

“Those are the rules. Now, you’re not eating.”

I was pissed. I thought all about the laws that Sammy was breaking in her restaurant. Sammy could be fined for each time and for each person that she has not given a scheduled break to over the years. I have never had a scheduled break.

When I showed up at work the following weekend, the night manager, Tommy, told me that we could no longer eat dinner at night. Our shift began at 3:30. If we wanted to eat, we had to come in at 3:00. I proceeded to explain to him the danger of being fined by the Labor Board. He didn’t believe me; angrily, I told him to go and look it up.

At 6:00 on Sunday morning, I walked into work. I had just poured myself some coffee when Sammy called all of the waitresses to the window that looked into the dining room from the kitchen. She held a black book in her left hand: the Rulebook.

“You all need to read this and take it home to study, starting with you!” she hissed as she threw the book at me and I batted it with my right hand. That was it.

That was the moment that I decided that this “stupid little girl” was not going to sit back. I called my husband and told him what happened. We decided that I would quit, but I didn’t walk out.
At the end of the shift, I was called into the office. Sammy didn’t face me when I walked in. Her husband, Bob, explained to me the rules and how he thought he was a generous employer to all of his employees. He gave me excuse, after excuse, after excuse for why he was breaking the law. I listened.

Then, I spoke. Sammy said nothing.

As I walked out of the office that day, I felt empowered. I was not about to let that woman think she has gotten away with it. I will not let her continue to treat the other waitresses, my friends, the way she has treated me for the past five years. She made a mistake.

The other waitresses maybe won’t, and maybe can’t in some cases, speak up and out, but I can. Fisher taught me that.

I will share this story over, and over, and over again with each student, each colleague, each waitress, each friend, each person that I know. And of course, I will share this with the Labor Board.

This little, ignorant, dumb, ditzy, stupid, idiot, Dizzy Lizzy will call the Labor Board and prove to Sammy Jones that I may be dispensable as a waitress but dangerous as an educated woman.
Stone Echoes
Laura Kavanaugh

My life is immersed in other people’s words.
I envy their letter-by-letter brilliance,
the depth of their pain and love,
their colors and vibrancies,
their echoes of humanity’s very soul.
I envy their grace on the page and their power
to transcend paper and ink like a smooth stone skipped
across a shimmering sea, splashing and
rippling the water’s willing surface as it finally

drifts down into the depths, leaving behind
undulating, radiating rings.
My pen never feels so adequate and agile,
never feels so immense, weighted and purposed.
My words’ echoes never seem
to make it past the ripple-kissed shoreline of the page.

But maybe my stone is not my pen;
Maybe my stone is my attempt to pull,
even push my students
into this sea with me to splash in the ripples of language,
to immerse their own souls in the warm waters of words,
their words, my words, others’ words

— undulating waves and wakes—
briding their souls with the other swimmers in this sea. ☀
It had been a great adventure on the stone wall. I'd even spied a snake, all curled up and lazy, sunning itself on one of the flat rocks. It was a beauty, but definitely too big to keep. I just HAD to pick it up and check under the belly to see if I had identified it correctly. Yup, it was definitely a milk snake. OH! I couldn't wait to send shivers down my mother's spine with the news of a snake sighting. Mother was worse about snakes than our neighbor, Mrs. Pendergast...and if old lady Pendergast heard that there was a snake in her own backyard, why she'd probably move away. After setting the muscular wonder back on its rock, I started the very short walk back home through my neighbors' yards, all the while having fun imagining what my mother would say about my snake news. Maybe I would even tell her it was poisonous....

After I was back in my yard, I unlatched the gate and realized how very thirsty I was. Then I spied the uncoiled hose. It was out of its usual tidy spot, and, as luck would have it, the connecting end was attached to the spiggot - a feat too tough for my six year old hands to have accomplished by themselves. Letting the gate swing open again, I staggered toward that hose nozzle much like the desperate cowboys in the old fake TV desert scenes.

The delay between turning the spiggot handle and the actual spluttering out of water was nearly intolerable, so great was my thirst. I put the whole end of the hose in my mouth. The first gulp was too warm, so I forced myself to wait, then gulped and grabbed at the cool refreshment with my eager dry lips sucking on that hose.

Suddenly, the screen door spring recoiled and I simultaneously heard her gasp -

"Gretchen! I've told you NEVER,...Oh, dear! ... Put that down, put it ... Mr. Hogan was just here this very morning! OH! What am I going to do?"

I looked blankly at my anxiety-ridden mother, her wiry 105 pounds framed in the doorway and her balled fists hitting the sides of her apron. I slowly set the hose down and let it pump water on my red PF Flyers. Before I could ask what was wrong, she erupted again.

"Mr. Hogan sprayed the trees today. He used pesticide! He used the hose! It's poisonous! Poison that can KILL you!"

With that she disappeared, the screen door slamming on her heels, and I just stood there waiting. Eventually, I moved enough to shut off the water, wondering if the poison could seep up through my sneakers and into my brain. I stepped away from the flooded earth, and, as if in slow motion, sat down on the step by the door.

I sat.
I waited...waited to feel death.

At first I think I also waited for my more familiar, composed mother to come back and hold me, rock me and cry for me as I died. But she didn't and I began to realize that she was much too mad at me for that to happen. I would die alone... and deservedly so. I had disobeyed one of her big rules: Don't drink out of the hose. It is dirty and probably has bugs living in it.

As I shut my eyes to concentrate on the death unquestionably invading my body, I imagined antique, bow-legged Mr. Hogan when he heard the news. I pictured him in his overalls and weathered hat, sitting at my funeral, wiping his bulbous nose with his old well-used but seldom washed hanky and I felt sorry for his guilt at being a participant in my demise.

More time passed, and I started feeling very ill, hot, dizzy, sick to my stomach, and empty. Is this death, I wondered?

In all, about an hour passed, I am told, and then my brother eleven years my senior opened the screen door enough to hit me in the back and said matter-of-factly,

"C'mon in for dinner, Little Uggah. If you were gonna die, it would have already happened. Mom called Mr. Hogan.... He used his own hose." ☉
A “froglet”
lives in my daughter’s classroom.
A tadpole yesterday,
it sprouted legs
overnight,
as if to awe the children.

“Oh wow!”
Mrs. Boynton! Miss Dodge! Come quick!”
Jenny’s arm is waving wildly from the back of the room,
vying for the teacher’s attention.
Sam and Harry jump up from their table,
dash across the room to the terrarium tank,
eyes wide in anticipation.
Trevor and Sara are there too
peering eagerly around others’ heads.
“What Jenny? What?”
“Oh, I see!”
“Look at that!”
A flurry of questions
and knowing replies spill from their lips.

Grown-ups linger at the perimeter,
must let the children discover.
A faint sense of déjà vu
leaves a trace of grief and even envy
behind their satisfied smiles.☆
I am from the farm

Lee A. Brazell

I am from the farm
on Craney Hill
old red barn
running horse
weather vane.

I am from 5 o’clock milkings
“Here Bossy, Bossy, Bossy”
one cheek pressed against warm flank
fingers freezing
milk steaming into tin pails
hooves shifting
cows lowing.

I am from ancient trees
knarled and gray
wild apples riddled with worm holes.

I am from stone walls
lichen covered
that criss cross the pasture
quilting the land.

I am from the farmhouse
white clapboard
black shuttered
attic filled with heat
wooden barrels of dried beans
and soda crackers.

I am from the kitchen
warmed year round
by the old wood stove
where Alice and Grace served up
home cured bacon, boiled potatoes and scrambled eggs
so the men and girls could
follow the wagon
and toss the hay high
arms aching
bits of straw sticking to hot sweaty skin
gnats swarming
dreaming of that moment
when they return to the cool barn
and fill the loft with fresh mown hay.

I am from that land
rocky and poor
that my ancestors tamed
and called home.☀️
Lost Year
Robin Perskie

Mrs. X said, “Wipe it off.”

I looked down at her navy blue leather pump and saw a waffled smudge of dust on the toe where I had accidentally stepped on her foot.

“Did you hear me? Go over to my desk and get a Kleenex and wipe…it…off.”

I looked around, wondering if anyone else was watching me be picked on by Mrs. X. I was the one who had received six Mary Janes for reading with expression and was often called on to read those longer passages that others mangled. Mrs. X actually seemed to like me, as much as she could like any child. But nobody was paying attention to us. Even Pete Gilligan, the one she proclaimed to be the worst behaved of our third grade class, was looking elsewhere. My anecdote would go unwitnessed.

I walked over to her desk, with its cup of pencils standing at attention, the calendar the size of a placemat sitting in front of her chair, and the box of Kleenex with a tissue in stiff folds sprouting out the top. I pulled it out slowly, making sure the next tissue wouldn’t wilt or come all the way out.

She hadn’t moved from where I left her. The offended shoe slid forward and tapped its urgency for my ministration. “Well?” she asked and pointed to her foot.

I knelt down and noticed tiny leg hairs poking through her white stockings. Her navy shoe was the exact, absolutely the same, color as her skirt and jacket. Her white stockings matched the white collar of her shirt. Mrs. X’s hair even gathered to perfect points on each side of her cheeks.

Until I felt my weight on my knees, I had almost enjoyed getting the Kleenex, having a close look at the things on Mrs. X’s desk, and the fact that my reputation would be tarnished by an incident without a phone call home. But now, leaning forward, much like Cinderella or Snow White, laboring for humiliation’s sake, I started to cry. I rubbed the Kleenex twice over the dirt and it was gone. All of this ceremony for two swipes. I almost wanted to stay down longer just to give an adequate time span to the depth of my indignation.

“Okay,” she said with a slight smile that was supposed to let me know I had been forgiven.

For years, other teachers would tell us sympathetically, “We know you lost a year in third grade.” How they came to know I am not sure. We never told our families about the knighthings, when Mrs. X would bestow upon us positions or titles with her yardstick. “You have good fairy dust” she would say as she walked down the rows and tap the
person once lightly on the shoulder with the tip of the yardstick, or “You have bad fairy
dust,” in a huskier voice, and she would whack them on the shoulder. We all tensed
before she got to Pete Gilligan.

We all enjoyed her digressions from math and reading when she would tell us gothic tales
of children in castles and their painful punishments. We watched in wonder as her own
daughters would sometimes appear in the doorway, shy, but apparently receiving decent
food and sunshine. Did she beat them every night with one of her trim belts or did she
cuddle with them and read them stories with expression? All we knew by the beginning
of fourth grade was that she was gone; her two daughters were gone. They had left town
or she had been put somewhere. On the last day of school, we had spilled it all, some at
home and some in the principal’s office. Her last ambush on Pete Gilligan was evil and
we knew it. It was so clear nobody had to doubt whether it need be told. She asked four
other boys to hold Pete down while she pinched him on the cheeks and on the arms. He
wiggled and screamed desperately, sobbing in front of us in gulps. He was the youngest
of nine brothers and accustomed to loving abuse. His energetic being was unstoppable
and loud, and his role in his family was to provoke. All eight of those brothers and his
mother, who let us run through her house also, must have finally come to his defense.

So that was one year lost. I only lost a few hours, maybe minutes, in fourth grade when
Mrs. Hanson glanced dismissively at my drawing, outlined in ink and filled in with
crayon, of an oriental woman reclining on sofa. “Oh, your sister was a wonderful artist,”
she said reaching seven years back into her mind to ponder the marvels of my sister’s
hand. She told me to stand by her desk as she went to her art closet and looked for a
poster my sister had done. Mrs. Hanson had apparently guarded it in her shrine of quality
work. “Oh, it’s not there anymore!” she said after searching and I nodded and went back
to my seat, holding my drawing at my side. I actually gained back an hour or two in fifth
grade with square dancing. Swing your partner round and round. Even when the boy was
not my first choice, it was just wonderful to swing around and around.

There were a few losses after that. Mr. Alden in 8th grade cornered red-haired, chubby,
Buddy Porter and put a stranglehold on him in the bathroom of the Franklin Institute in
Philadelphia. Mr. Porter thought Buddy was making fun of him or not following his
instructions, or just he needed to feel Buddy squirming, his warm boyish blood pounding
under the rule of his bony hands. We never knew. Buddy wasn’t our best friend but he
did sliding, strutting Mick Jagger imitations at our dances. His mother still sent in the
best homemade chocolate chip cookies for our Christmas celebrations. Buddy would
hand them out as delicately as communion wafers. My friend Rita cried for Buddy,
bursting with an empathy that frightened me in its intensity, on our solemn journey back
to New Jersey. Even the other boys whispered quietly throughout the bus ride. Mr. Porter
sat hunched and vigilant at the front. But Mr. Porter was not as threatening to me because
I had permission to diminish him. He was the only teacher my mother ever met and said,
“Be careful of that man.” Somehow that warning made him shrink for me. He was just an
ordinary lunatic.
For those years of my life, it was the universe of Mrs. X, whose name I have truly forgotten, the universe of Mrs. Hanson, and the universe of Mr. Porter. We tried to inhabit these cosmos and abide by their laws and discover through the portal they opened. I had always proclaimed that I would be a true explorer. I would never become a teacher and inhabit such a small world, one governed by the balance of taking away as much as you give.

So as I sit among them in that gallery of teachers, I look down the row. There’s Mr. Porter with his high blood pressure filling his face with red, like juice pouring into a glass. Later all that rage drains away and leaves him pallid and haunted. Mrs. Hanson smiles at me and pats my knees and asks if I have forgotten about the artwork incident. I nod. I have. Mrs. X looks at me frantically. Her precision haircut, streaked with grey, swings from side to side, as she studies me and cranes her neck to get a better look at the grown up me. I take a travel packet of Kleenex out of my pocket and whisper to the others to pass it down to her. No, I don’t want her to clean my shoes. I figure we can all use one when we think about the lost time. I have my own teaching world now, one with more suns glowing in the firmament, but oh, those black holes, that absorb those lost minutes and remain invisible to us, especially to us, for more than our lifetime. ☼
Ricardo Montalban was so smooth and suave. He crooned, “Volare! Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.” Then the commercial cut to him sitting behind the wheel, caressing the seats saying, “Fine Corinthian leather.” Even brand spanking new my Volare was a poor second cousin to the plush, powerful, luxury model on the TV.

It was my first car. Price not luxury was the deciding factor. I was going to be sensible. Price and cloth seats. This was back in the 70s when all the low-end models had vinyl seats. Vinyl that was sticky and hot in the summer and cold in the winter. My one luxury was going to be cloth seats. I wasn’t going to put my foot down about color or make or model but cloth seats it would be even if we had to drive all the way to Manchester to find them, which we did. I’m not a car person and even today, 4 or 5 cars later, I still purchase cars based on how it feels to sit in the car. I like space around me; elbow room, and because I’m tall, plenty of head room. (I don’t have to be concerned about the vinyl seat thing any more because they are now extinct.)

I stood in the lot listening to the salesman try to sell me more car than I could afford. I was fiscally conservative back then and knew that $3,700 was as much as I could afford to spend and still eat. The sun must have glinted off the windows and blinded me on that June day as we finally made our way to a bottom of the line model with the plainest light grey exterior imaginable and a sailor blue interior with cloth seats. Four doors, a three speed on the floor, and a slant six engine. I never actually knew what that meant, but as years went by, mechanics that repaired our aging car remarked with appreciation, “Yup, can’t beat those old slant sixes.” This car had no sex appeal; the stick shift was the only feature that whispered, “Drive me.” I didn’t test drive any other cars. This one met my criteria, so off I drove.

I married, and the Volare became our car. We got a dog and then had two kids, and the Volare became a family car. When we moved back to NH, it became a moving van and a truck.

The slant six ran and ran, just as the mechanics had predicted. As the years went by, sun faded the seats and weakened the fabric. Our dog’s toenails and the girls’ probing little fingers found the weak spots and small tears began to appear which became larger and longer. Eventually the foam was exposed. Fine Corinthian leather, my eye. Where was Ricardo Montalban now? Playing Mr. Roarke on Fantasy Island. Meanwhile back in my reality the car was falling apart. It still ran, and we hadn’t had a car payment in years. I was a stay at home mom so we lived on just my husband’s income. I had stopped thinking of myself as fiscally conservative; we were just poor. The practical side of me won out again. Now was not the time to take on another payment.
Volaries gained a reputation for rusting out, and ours was no exception. My husband patched the holes with Bondo, and it blended in with the paint, kind of. The car continued to pass inspections and it still ran. The signs of aging became visible on the exterior as well as the interior. This car screamed, “Junker,” every time we drove down the road. I wanted to shrink whenever we went anywhere. When the starter finally gave out, the car was so old parts weren’t available and my husband had to go to the junkyard to salvage one from an even older model. It was like robbing the dead. The front grill was just plastic and pieces of it began to break off. We couldn’t find a replacement grill at the dealership or at a junkyard. Our car was losing its teeth and dentures weren’t available. I had to put my foot down and not on the brake; I wanted this car out of my life. ☹
The Milkman

Kari Diederich

Mae lived alone or so everyone thought. She lived in a yellow house that had steps leading up to the front door, which no one ever used except the Jehovah's Witnesses who occasionally their way there. Her back door was the entrance to her home. This path was well worn from visits from her grandchildren and neighborhood updates from Penny who lived across the street.

Mae had problems keeping track of her belongings now that she had entered into those golden years. Nothing golden about it, she would mumble to herself as she tried to find her glasses which she lost almost every morning. She would wander around the one story Cape House, calling for them, the way one calls for a hiding pet. Mae didn’t mind though, it was one of her many little daily rituals. Just like her secret afternoon visits from the milkman. That’s what everyone called him, even though he hadn’t delivered the milk for thirty years.

Mae remembered when he used to bring the bottles filled to the brim to her doorstep. Oftentimes she had Charlie on one hip, Eddie at her feet and Leo pulling at her hand while she fumbled through her change purse looking for the right coins to give him. She never knew if her franticness or her longing for a different life ever showed through at those moments. Her three boys were all gone now. She had seen them start their own families and leave hers. She liked it better when the house used to shake with their voices. Her family had the need to yell to find one and other, even though the house was small. At night Mae would still wake up and listen for the breathing of her boys, but now the house was silent except for the shushing sound of her plaid slippers.

The sound of the automatic coffee pot turning on jolted Mae from her thoughts. Mae never drank coffee until she married Steven. Later on in life she switched to decaf because of the advice of her doctor. Now she indulged in French Vanilla, why shouldn’t I? She would ask herself. I have the right to enjoy some things. She would hide the bag though when her sons came to visit. She hid it next to the bottle of Kahlua that she liked to add to her coffee as a special nighttime treat. Her mother would have had another heart attack had she known. Her mother would have had a lot of heart attacks had she known about a lot of things in Mae’s life.

Mae sat down at her kitchen table with her cup of coffee filled mostly with cream. She bought the cream and poured it into the empty jug of skim milk she kept in her refrigerator, another thing she hid from her sons. The bottles of milk that they sell nowadays at the store are not the same as the glass jugs that used to be brought to her doorstep almost daily. Recently, when visiting her youngest in Northampton, Mae went to one of those tiny co-op stores where everything is organic and comes in special recycled packages. At the store they had some glass bottles filled with white milk; she almost bought one to bring back in order to show him. See she would say, see.
He visited her in the afternoon, usually when the hot summer sun had lessened in heat. By this point the morning joggers had retired inside, people had run their errands already and the afternoon soaps were in full tilt. Mae had asked him to park around back so that his old pickup truck could not be seen from the road. She wanted to maintain the appearance of being proper. He would bring her things, wildflowers, a jar of honey, sometimes a clipping from the newspaper he thought she would find interesting. Mae kept all of these things in a box under bed. Sometimes they would talk about things in the neighborhood or the things that used to be in the neighborhood. Sometimes they would just sit and look out into the backyard watching the bees lazily fly from the daylilies to the marigolds. Her favorite times was when he would bring her a book and they would spend the afternoon under the white sheets that had become soft from years of washing, reading to her about places she had never been to, but she could see them through his low voice.

Mae knew that if people knew about the milkman, they would talk and laugh and think things that no people should ever think. So she hid him, much like the way she hid most of the pleasurable things in her life. Mae glanced up at the clock; her coffee had since grown cold and speckled. It was almost noon. She would have to wait only two more hours until she felt as though she were finally home. ☾
Dusty Beginnings
Shannon Grey

Teacher Lore: July 2004

The dusty remnants of the chalk stifled the air in the basement. I sneezed as I placed the eraser on the chalk-filled tray. The floor was cold and my feet felt like icicles. I was able to disregard that feeling though because I was as happy as could be. My sister was sitting tall amongst my dolls as I taught her some basic math, imitating Mrs. Small, my third grade teacher.

“What is two plus two,” I quizzed my students as I wrote the problem on the board, preparing them for their mad minute facts quiz. I acknowledged the raised hand, “Yes, Kimberly?”

“Four,” she proudly answered. She was just learning addition in her first grade classroom and was more than willing to show off her knowledge.

“Good job!” I congratulated her in the overly friendly voice that I had heard my teacher use many times when a student got a question right. I rubbed my eyes as I set down the chalk and handed my sister a math paper that I had created. “You have one minute to complete these problems,” I stated in my most teacher-like voice. “On your mark, get set…”

“Wait!” I heard my sister call out.

“What, Kimberly?” I answered in a voice full of annoyance.

“I need to sharpen my pencil,” she replied in a bratty voice as she headed toward dad’s workbench, on which was planted a shiny pencil sharpener which she often used as a distraction.

I impatiently crossed my arms and tapped my foot as she slowly made her way back to her seat. “Begin,” I said as soon as my sister sat down. I watched my little sister, our dolls and stuffed animals crowded around her, as she frantically wrote answers on the paper. I imagined the dolls scribbling down answers, too. “No cheating, Emilia!” I raised my voice to my cabbage patch doll who was sneaking a peek at Kimberly’s paper.

“Put your pencil down!” I announced after a minute had passed.

* * * * * * * * *

My parents were both teachers and I had the strong influence from them to follow in their footsteps. I always said that second grade was when I made my lifelong “career decision”. Not only did I have my parents to look up to, but I had my very talented
primary teachers as role models. They caused me to be a motivated student and I wanted to be just like them when I grew up.

It was all fun and games in the cellar with my sister and our many dolls. We never had to deal with the students that, although they handled them with ease, seemed to magically age my teachers from the beginning of the day to dismissal. What my sister and I played was the sugar-coated version of school. We didn’t have Johnny present, trying to get the teacher’s attention by jumping up and down in his seat, calling out the teacher’s name. We didn’t have Bobby, who would be constantly moving, tapping his pencil, tipping in his chair, and getting out of his seat occasionally in attempts to try to pay attention to the lesson being taught. Suzie, wasn’t present in our basement classroom either. She was the student who always had to argue with what the teacher said. The only way to have a pleasant day was to let Suzie have things her way.

Silence was all that I got in return when I asked the hooded student to kindly apologize to her classmate for an accident that happened during recess involving the kickball and a hurt finger. Suzie was a constant struggle in my classroom that year. She shut down whenever she didn’t want to admit that she did something wrong or when she didn’t do well on a test or paper. She was a constant test of my patience.

“I am simply asking you to tell Melissa that you are sorry. Then you may go to your locker,” I stated firmly after my composure started to weaken.

Silence.

“Okay. If you feel that you have nothing to apologize for then I would like you to tell me what happened,” I had already previously made an attempt to hear her side of the story.

Silence…which, in her case, usually was an obvious sign of guilt.

“Choice number one, you tell Melissa that you are sorry. Even if you didn’t mean to hit her with the ball, you really should apologize for accidentally hitting her when you kicked it.” I had to take a deep breath to support the calmness in my voice. “Choice number two is lunch and recess with the principal. You have the choice, Suzie.”

Silence still. Yet, Suzie did decide to get up from her chair and visit her locker to prevent herself from getting in further trouble because she was unprepared for math class. I wanted to call after her that she still hadn’t answered me, but I decided to mute that argument.

It wasn’t until lunchtime, after I kindly reminded Suzie that she would be eating in the office, that I heard a mumble of an apology under her breath. Who the apology was intended for…I could only guess because of the events that had happened earlier.
“Suzie, if you are going to apologize, you need to do it right please. Tell it to Melissa, not the floor,” luckily my patience had had time to recharge during the math lesson.

Silence yet again.

“Ms. Slayton is expecting you in her office,” I stated when I heard no reply.

I was answered with tears and a stream of excuses as a refusal to accept the consequences. “But, I said sorry! This isn’t fair! You hate me and I wish that I could move to another school!” It wasn’t the first time that I had heard these negative accusations. Suzie was actually brave enough to tell her mother of the many times that I was “unfair” to her. Of course, her mother had thought that her daughter couldn’t do anything wrong and was quick to blame me and my lack of patience for the reason that Suzie and I had a “personality conflict”.

* * * * * * * * * *

I made an honest effort to enjoy Suzie’s presence in my classroom that year although I was subconsciously counting down the days. Maybe she and I did have a personality conflict. It was extremely difficult to handle the situations that she handed me daily with tolerance and fairness, but I always dealt with her professionally and equitably. My patience was surely put to the test and I am sure that it will be many more times in my teaching career. I would have never known, in the basement classroom that my sister and I joyfully played in, that I would be faced with the challenges that I, as a professional, encounter each and every day. I will just keep getting up and dusting myself off as I continue to struggle as well as learn from the everyday challenges of teaching.”
The Undertow

Meg Petersen

I am always losing him. The summer when he was three years old, I lost him on Wallis Sands Beach. It didn’t take but an instant of inattention and suddenly he was gone. I looked around to the spot of sand where he had been playing, rolling himself in the sandy mud of water trapped by the receding tide, but only the tide pool and the imprint of his form remained.

I have a picture from that summer. Marc is lying sprawled in the mud, smiling. I have pointed the camera down at him and caught his whole body in the frame. The sand gleams with cloudy sparkles all around him. Tiny hands have scraped in the mud above his head. He is wearing the purple bathing suit. When he disappeared, I gathered his younger brother onto my hip and explained to the lifeguard that the one I had lost looked a lot like the one I was holding, only bigger, and with a purple bathing suit.

I took one side of the beach and the lifeguard took the other. As I walked in the wet sand of the shoreline, I scanned the breaking surf and envisioned his lifeless body being tossed in the tides. I would think of the undertow and how I had been caught in it one summer when I was seven. I still remember that awful churning horror of being carried away. The only way to survive is to give in. Neither of us have ever been good at that.

The lifeguard found him at the far end of the beach hunched over a crab in the rocky pools, unaware of the panic he had caused. I lost him three more times that summer, until I was almost embarrassed to approach the lifeguard’s chair. Three times and the panic never subsided. Each time I scanned the surf and thought of the undertow.

When he is lost he can be hard to see. I lost him at Bush Gardens that Christmas vacation we spent down there. I was waiting for him to emerge from a roller coaster ride. He had said he just wanted one more ride. Max and I were waiting by the fence. Dusk was falling and it was getting harder to distinguish the faces of the children. Once I thought I saw him speed by in the car, but when the child turned to look in our direction as he stepped out, I realized it wasn’t Marc at all. I began to watch every car expectantly, the way a lover will scan the highway for a certain make or model in hopes of catching a glimpse of her beloved, who might, who must, just happen to be wherever she is looking. I finally went into the long enclosed entry area to the ride. The crowd was starting to thin and the line was getting shorter. I searched each face, but none were his.

Usually, here in New Hampshire, I only have to scan a crowd of children looking for the darkest ones, but here there were many dark children, and hundreds and hundreds of strangers making their way around the park. I knew I had lost him again, and suddenly every stranger’s face was full of menace, and I thought of the terrible stories of what people do to children who wander alone in amusement parks. I pulled Max along with me, back to the park entrance and yet again found myself telling some person in a uniform, this time through panicked tears, that I had lost my child and that he looked
“just like this one, only bigger.”

My friend finally found him, calmly waiting in line for the sky ride that would carry him over the park. By then night had fallen in earnest, and I can picture him sailing over the park on a ride, watching the winking strings of lights below. He had walked off the other end of the ride and just kept walking, hoping he would see me, too unsure to ask anyone for help. Later, he confided to me, on the condition that I not tell his brothers, that he had been scared. He is often scared. He is scared of so many things, the dark, walking to the bathroom alone, using an outhouse… being left behind…

I lose him all the time, and he also loses himself, in books, in play, in a world of sheer imagination. I remember when he was a toddler. I would bring him home from day care and drop my scarf carelessly on a chair. Marc would be lost for hours. The scarf would become a tail, a blindfold, a whip, a lasso, a skirt… I would hear him making the appropriate sound effects as he assumed each character. On stage, he loses himself so completely that I can’t see him at all, only the character he is portraying. Today he is wearing some gold chains he has gathered from around the house, and a sun visor turned backwards in his version of urban hip.

I want his life to be easier. His eleven years are almost too heavy for him to bear. I want others to see him. Sometimes at night when I am tucking him in, he tells me things. He tells me how he remembers when his friend left him and wouldn’t sit next to him in morning session, how he isn’t as good at sports as the other boys, how one of the kids in his class tells racist jokes when he is right there, and how his friends all laugh at them and he doesn’t know what to do, where to go. He tells me how sad it makes him when the teachers talk about Martin Luther King and the way black people, who he considers to be his people, were treated. He tells me how some books are so sad he can’t bear to keep reading them… Every sorrow is magnified in his eyes as is every fault he finds in himself. But this is not what his teachers see.

They see his constant questions, the way he challenges every rule. They see the noises he makes when he gets bored. They attribute sinister motives. They see him as tough and hardened, not knowing this is only another role he plays.

At eleven, there are so many ways to be lost. I see him posturing before the neighbor’s child who has rejected his attempts at friendship so many times. This child who cannot walk alone down a darkened hallway puts a swagger in his stride and tries to make his voice sound callous, like some teenage gansta hero, as if he could slip into the shadows he fears.

I know this territory well because I too have lived it. Once a friend of mine, a singer, asked me how our parents could have missed the fact that they were raising kids like us. “How could they take care of us,” she asked. “And not see who we were? How could they not understand?” Maybe our parents didn’t see what they were dealing with. How could they have known that we took everything in with an artist’s sensibility? That there
was nothing simple about our worlds? But what if they had? What could they do? What could they have done?

Sometimes I think it would be easier if I could scan the horizon without knowing about the feel of the undertow, without knowing what the world can do to you if you care too much, if you keep on feeling it, if you try to deaden those feelings. Sometimes I wish I could help him to be less of what he is, because I know how hard his way will be. But mostly I just try to keep seeing him, keep finding him, and holding his hand through the dark. ☽
He had the table set for two. He used her favorite placemats; made sure to have a glass of skim milk with one ice cube in there just for her. He put the green beans in a serving dish; there was more than enough for them both. She scurried in, ignoring the project at hand. Making a beeline to the cabinet, she hastily filled a cereal bowl with Frosted Flakes. She eyed the glass of milk on the table, scooped out the ice cube and dumped the milk into her bowl. “I’m not really hungry tonight,” she explained. He sat down to the dinner for two alone. She ate her meal in front of the TV, laughing mechanically at Bill Cosby’s perfect family life.

After dinner he went for a stroll, walking always cleared his mind. He wasn’t far from home when he found a perfectly rectangular brick, lying in the middle of the road. Intrigued, he picked it up and carried it home. He laid it in the front yard, stood back to relish it. He found comfort and strength. He returned to the tension inside of his home.

It was a Tuesday night and they hadn’t made love for over 4 weeks now. She came out of the bedroom and shut off the TV he was watching. He sat on the couch, she sat on the floor in front of him. He watched her toes grab at the carpet. He knew it was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier. He asked questions, did not hear answers. She cried, blonde hair slicked back from tears. But still her things were packed by morning. She left him the furniture, some pictures, took the dishes her parents had given them as a wedding gift, and kissed him good bye. On her way out, she didn’t notice the line of bricks laying adjacently in the front yard.

The brick from the road wasn’t the first brick he had encountered. He had found one in his bed the time her rested body turned away from him when he crawled in beside her. A brick appeared on the table, each time he sat without her. He acquired a small stack of bricks when she had told him she didn’t love him anymore. They were appearing everywhere, and he carried them home with him.

Besides the occasional game of golf or a Guinness with the guys, he didn’t have much left. He needed a hobby, a mindless one. It became monotonous, so easy to get lost in. He laid each one so methodically, it was difficult for one to decipher a beginning and an end. He liked this. It matched his drive for consistency and perfection, the drive that had steered him into a career as an architect. Lifting each brick he subconsciously socked a memory of them into each one, then bound them together.

His best friend had been acting strange; he could tell there was something distant, that there was some holding him back. He didn’t understand, maybe didn’t want to. The phone rang, and the familiar voice on the other end gave directions to meet him for a Guinness. The heavy liquid felt forced down his throat. He noticed how his friend had
worked his coaster into a disheveled mess. He could tell what was coming. “I saw her out
last night. She wasn’t alone, you need to know. You know who it is, and I’m sorry. It’s
not the first time they’ve been together.”

The drive home was long. He doesn’t remember how his trunk filled with bricks by the
time he got home. He only knew what he needed to do. He shut his mind off, turned it on
only to exchange a memory, a feeling, a piece of trust into each one of the bricks he laid
on the flawless stack. He stopped only to retrieve the rusted ladder from the back shed.
Though he climbed high, it did not deter him from building. One brick at a time.

Bill Cosby’s show was off the air now, and dinner was being set for one. He bought new
dishes, was happy to see those ugly placemats gone. He found out about her new
marriage by accident. It was through a friend of a cousin, they had run into each other
while ordering sausage subs at the local grinder shop. He noticed how the guy’s hands
intertwined, would clap together and ring without reason. The conversation was forced
and awkward. He didn’t know what else to say, the guy had latched on to the only thing
the two really had in common. That’s how he found out about his replacement. That the
excuse she gave him for wanting the divorce, something about needing independence and
not being ready for marriage was just a bunch of bullshit. He never saw it coming.

The wall in front of his home filtered in little light. He liked it that way. It felt good to
seek nothing but himself inside of a safe haven. He had slacked off in his hobby of brick
laying. It was just too overwhelming, and he had had enough. If he wasn’t working extra
hours in the office, he was inside his home, watching reruns of old TV series. He rarely
left his home, at the chance of corroding the assembly of bricks he had to climb over each
time he ventured out into the world. It was much easier to stay behind them. There was a
degree of safety behind the wall. Plus the idea of wearing down his tower frightened him;
he had put so much of himself into building it.

He didn’t mean to meet her, wasn’t wearing any cologne and certainly hadn’t refreshed
from an overextended stay at the office. She approached him, twisting brunette hair
between her fingers. He found the conversation easy, enjoyable even. Though the thought
of getting back to his safe haven tugged at his conscious, he found himself buying 2
drinks instead of 1. She gave him her phone number, and told him to call. In the essence
of show, he punched the numbers into his cell phone, and asked for the correct spelling of
her name. He never intended to call.

His best friend was over the next night with a pack of Guinness hanging from one hand,
and a pocket full of cash. The cards littered the table late into the night. He shared with
this friend the description of the girl, talked of her often. He wasn’t going to call her, but
she’d been cute as hell. He walked his friend out, giving him shit for taking all of his
money. They stumbled outside together, as the friend gave him a hard time for being a
pussy and not calling the girl. It was the horsing around that caused the accident. He had
been too busy listening to what the friend was saying, he was so careless. He blamed
nobody but himself for the brick that came crashing down, exploding into dust as it hit
the ground.
He couldn’t remember the last time he had done this. He laughed at himself as he hung up, dialed, then hung up again. He remembered doing that same thing in Junior High School. They made a date for the next night, a dinner date. She seemed happy that he had called, and he found himself looking forward to the evening. This time he sprayed himself with masculinity and stared at the reflection of the cleanly shaven face. In the mirror he could see a shadow cast upon his floor. He had left the front door open, and the monument sitting outside of his home loomed in the background. It took him so long to scale the wall, that he was almost late for his date. She got there first, and he knew upon approaching the welcoming smile that he was glad he had made it. She insisted on coming home with him, that the night was young. 2 sets of headlights meandered up his driveway.:}
"Nothing to do, no place to go.  
I'm bored," stated Matt with certain woe.  
"All by myself with no one to play.  
How can I make the most of this day?"

Matt who is shy and talks little in class,  
Offered his friends a subway pass.  
Copley, Kenmore, Sullivan Square,  
Actually they could go anywhere.

Tall, lanky Mitch with the lopsided smile,  
Hopped on and stood alone in the aisle.  
Last call. All aboard!  
Metal screeched. The engine roared.

Josh ran so fast; he gasped for air.  
He climbed on with barely a second to spare.  
He wiggled his body into a spot,  
As Matt got ready to move the lot.

Matt pushed his glasses up to the top of his nose.  
As the chips underneath, scattered under his toes.  
Three minds were all filled with the journey ahead.  
As darkness surrounded the tracks as they sped.

Do you think we could go to Kalamazoo?  
And maybe even to Timbuktu?  
How about if we go to Rutland, Vermont?  
I can suggest a great restaurant.

The meal was the best they'd ever had,  
From San Francisco to Trinidad.  
The problem was not one of them paid,  
And now the train has been delayed.

Finally the huge wheels began to turn,  
As the boys looked out with grave concern.
Did they have time for the journey ahead,
Or would they be serving time instead?

The bells chimed out as the train came to a stop.
Uh Oh! Is the person in blue a local town cop?
They heard a whistle blow loud and shrill.
Each one of them felt a tiny bit ill.

"Line up sixth grade," the teacher did yell.
"Didn't any one of you hear the bell?"
The boys disembarked - the playground behind.
Back to school from their journey of mind. ☺
When Rock Was Young

Dan Kenney

July 22, 2004

There was a time when I thought I’d be a rock and roll star. The urge started in 1957 when all I wanted in the world was a copy of “Come Go With Me” by the Dell Vikings. It was hard to find because my plastic record player only played 78’s. In 1959, I turned ten and became the proud owner of a genuine stereo record player with detachable speakers. I’d stick my head between them and listen to everything from the Everly Brothers to the “Sounds of The Drags.” I always got a charge out of the engines going from the left speaker to the right and fading out in the distance.

“He’s going to be just like his mother,” my paternal grandparents used to say. I didn’t think that they were right but it was a scary thought. She’d been in Medfield State Hospital for years, convinced that the Duke of Windsor was going to get her out. By the age of fifteen, I’d had enough of my “all-boys-lights-out-at-9:30-you-are-going-to-Harvard-aren’t-you” Massachusetts boarding school. I was told that my father had remarried and was living in New York. Without waiting for an invitation, I announced that I was moving there. My younger brother went, too.

Life on Long Island was a lot different than the suburbs of Boston. I had never even been to a church dance and here I was going to church dances, school dances and even pizza parlors. In 1964, live music was in garages everywhere, with every band trying to sound like The Beatles, or those local boys, The Young Rascals. Their drummer, Dino Danelli, particularly impressed me.

Being the wallflower of all time, it was not lost on me that the school’s rock and roll musicians got lots of attention and didn’t have to dance. They hung around on their breaks between sets talking to girls. Big “greaser” guys came up to request songs and even hoped to sit in on a tune. Most of them thought they were drummers. I began to think that I could be one, too. All I needed was a drum set, which meant a job.

You had to wash a lot of dishes to save up two hundred dollars back when the minimum wage was a dollar twenty-five an hour. It took me a year of Saturday nights, with dishes piled high long after the bus boys had split their tips and gone home. Sometimes, I’d get a ride with a waitress who was the mother of one of my brother’s friends. She was chummy with the Mafioso owner of the restaurant and was always the last one out.

My champagne sparkle (just like Dino’s) drum set was waiting for me like a puppy in the window of Gracin’s Music Store. Even though I was seventeen, I didn’t have a driver’s license, so I had to make the forty-mile trip by bus. It stopped right at the door of
Gracin’s but nowhere near my house. Balding Bernie Gracin smiled benignly as I described how I was going to get my drum set home, piece by piece.

“It’d be a lot easier if you got somebody to drive you, wouldn’t it?” he mused. I started to answer but stopped. My folks were not thrilled about this whole endeavor. In their minds, all I had to do was go to school. I hated school. I didn’t care much for my folks, either. No need to tell Bernie about it.

I left Gracin’s with a tom-tom that stands on the floor. At about twenty inches square in the carton, it was the biggest part of the set that I could carry on the bus.

The drum bobbed in the seat next to me while I dreamed drummer’s dreams, unconcerned about the one-mile walk that lay ahead of me at the end of the line. As the bus and I parted ways, I felt confident. I was already on stage at school. I was Ringo. No, better yet, I was Dino. I began to think that I even looked like him. This carton held my life.

The carton held a monster, an evil genie that would not come out of his bottle. The drum went from thirty pounds to a million. I Stopped. I started. I carried it in both hands, and in alternate hands. I put it behind my head to get it up on my shoulders, which was worse. I thought of the film “It’s a Wonderful Life.” I was Jimmy Stewart staggering toward the bridge after too many drinks at Martini’s but, unlike Jimmy, no guardian angel there to save me. How was I going to get home with the bass drum, snare and cymbals? As I pushed, pulled, and dragged that floor tom to my house, I hit upon a plan. I might have a guardian angel after all.

My brother’s friend, Danny, had just gotten his driver’s license. He had even managed to buy a car. After Ralph Nader’s book, “Unsafe at Any Speed”, a used Corvair could be had very cheaply. Danny’s was very used. He had never been more than five miles from home in this car. He wasn’t very adept at standard shift, either. But he was an aspiring guitar player and a prankster at heart. I knew that he could not refuse such an offer.

A few days later, after the appropriate parental lies, Danny swung around to pick me up exactly on time, which was his nature. With the Corvair’s heater on high, emitting all of the exhaust fumes that it possibly could, and The Young Rascals’ “Good Lovin’” blaring from the 8-track tape deck dangling below the dash, we slowly rolled far beyond the limits of our town. Danny, short for his age, nervously sitting on two pillows, and me, lost in a Dino Danelli dream. ☝️
I am who I am

*Adam Judkins*

*July 29, 2004*

I am who I am

I am from the mountains, hills, and valleys, from upper to lower falls.
I am from the sand that covers the riverbed.
I am from the water from Grampy’s fishing pond, filled with tiny wonders.
I am from the ginger bread house of old, created with love and patience.
I spoke with the Wise Owl and he met me Midway.
I am from the school of the Flying Diaper and a Bean in a small town.
I am from the Hills that are Red and the pies that scream whoopee!
I am from cheeseburgers and beer mixed with some cheer.
I am from those who work all day in tired old shoes caked with time and life.
I am from the shells of the beach collected with a keen eye.
I am from the hands, which bake apple pie.
I am from the earth that we tread.
I am from the philosophy of “if you are going to do something you might as well do it well.”
I am from a bond formed and strengthened.
I am from the womb of a beautiful and caring mother.
I am from love and time cherished.
I have been guided through life.
I am what I am. I am me.
Epiphany
Melissa St. Pierre

I had an epiphany in the shower this morning
An idea for writing
The perfect lead
The just-right words
Pelting me from the shower head
I have a sense of urgency to write them down
Before the words slide down the drain

Some of my best thinking occurs in the shower
Water must be my element
(The word water triggered another idea for writing.)
How can I keep track of my profound shower-thoughts?
Should I write them on my body with permanent marker?

Why is it that epiphanies happen at the most inopportune times?
In the morning in that state between sleep and consciousness
When bits of a bizarre dream have not yet vaporized
When I'm driving

Words are slippery, elusive
If I don't commit them to paper
I just might lose them

I understand the line from Jesse's poem
Words driving him to distraction
A love/hate relationship with words

Words can be your best friend
Flowing creatively like honey
One layer upon another, weaving back and forth
The intricate details
Developing into a complete picture

Words can be your worst enemy
Refusing to flow
A traffic jam of thought
Stuck in the middle of a writing journey
Or rushing tempestuously
Like the opening of a dam
Jumbled
Crashing, swirling,
Mixing together
Impossible to sort out
Lights
Susan Gazda

Personal Narrative: June 29, 2004

My eyes flew open. Lights invaded cracks alongside the dark green shades of my room. Shadows, large and jerky, danced across the ceiling and walls depicting stilted characters moving furtively about. Unfamiliar sounds filtered from the hall outside my bedroom. Rustling sounds, shushing sounds. Straining to hear, listening for a known voice or a recognizable word, I sat straight up in bed, eyes shut tightly, jaw clenched. Slowly, silently I lifted the weighty covers from the bed and slid my feet to the chilly floor. Shrinking into the shadows of my bedroom trying to remain invisible, I inched closer to the open bedroom door. Leaning against the door and standing eye level with the doorknob, I peered down the long, dimly lit hallway.

Rubbing sleep from my eyes I pushed through my fears and moved into the hall where I saw two figures standing at the top of the stairway by the window. Highway lights darted by. Ceiling lights emitted fragmented dust bits floating in the yellow light above the heads of the characters communicating in pantomime.

He, tall and gaunt, extended his tortoise like head and neck over my mother’s head hanging in despair. He whispered to her hair; she nodded in reply. Occasionally, soft whimpers came from behind the dark hair loose from its comb.

I watched frozen in the darkness and my fears leaped to terror. Who was this man? What was he saying to my mother? Where was my father? Why did she look so broken, so lost? He grabbed for her hands and spoke again. Words didn’t soothe her. Her body stiffened, straightened somehow determined, her head lifted and she brought her hands to her chin in prayer. But then her shoulders fell and her head bobbed on her chest. Her hands and arms fell to her sides and wooden like she moved into the small bedroom off the right just out of reach of the hall light.

He stood by the table snuggled close to the wall at the top of the stairs and reached for black telephone. Grabbing the receiver into his hands he whispered, “Dedham 3-2638 M.” My phone number. I stood, amazed. I stared at him from the darkened shadows of my room. He looked up at the painting hanging over the table. I knew that painting well. The Light of the world. The baby Jesus looked soulfully out at all of us with a halo surrounding his innocent face. My father had given that painting to my mother and she blessed herself each time she walked by. He cupped his hands over his mouth so his speech was muffled. I strained to hear. He lifted his head and closed his eyes, “Ok, 273 Washington Street. The front light is on. The door is open. “Yes, Tom Lilly.”

I inched unseen into the hall toward the small bedroom and melted along the wall in the room. A yellow bulb tunneled artificial stripes of light onto the bed where my father lay emphasizing the angular shape of the narrow oblong bedroom. A narrow brass bed board
with parallel spokes gleaned in the light. Streetlights bore in through the long window throwing fat broad shadows on the wall.

Dr. Holland’s bag sat open on then straight back cane chair stuck next to the bed. The stethoscope draped over the leather handles. My father prone in this tiny bed seemed small and frail—a different man than the one who carried me on his shoulders up the stairs to his office. His rimless glasses perched on the bedside table below the lamp. Shadows hid his face and his head was pressed into the bed pillows.

Still, unnoticed. I looked at this man that I knew so well. His hair still parted in the middle topped a cherubic face now drawn and pained. Panic shot through me. The sharpness of the shapes and the lights in the room was such a contrast of the sense I had of my father. He was never angled or sharp. He was round and soft—his round face, his soft hands stretching across the ivory keys of his piano. The music he played filled every space in our home. And the sun melted through the broad living room windows to warm us. I yearned to hear his music in this dark and sad place and imagined his piano silent and lonely. The sheet music leaning limply waiting for his hands to turn the pages.

What was happening?

I gathered my courage. “What is going on in here?” I heard myself say in forced words. Three sets of eyes turned to me as I stood there in the tiny bedroom. Time stopped. A small shrunken man who looked like my father pushed himself up from the bed pillows and said, “Daddy doesn’t feel very well, Honey.” Then, exhausted, fell back on the bed.

Outside the house a sound grew. Red and yellow flashes attacked us through the shadows of the early morning. The siren wound down. A noise. Footsteps stomped up the stairs. I pressed my body into the wall next to the bed and I watched as my father was taken out of my life. ☯
Bullies
Sheila Proctor

July 5, 2004

The Zanga twins were two delinquents who terrorized the neighborhood kids. We never knew when they would strike. Most of the time it was when we were running errands and had money that they could take away from us. They patrolled the alley, which was our access to the store, as if they owned it. Sometimes we would walk all the way around the stores to avoid the alley, even though it would add at least twenty minutes to the trip.

I dreaded when my father would give me a quarter to run down town to get a quart of milk and add the word “hurry”. This meant that I had to use the alley to get back in time. It also meant that there was a good chance that I would meet up with the Zanga twins. I never did share my fear of the Zangas with my dad. I thought he might have been disappointed in me for not standing my ground. He seemed to hate weakness of any kind.

As it happened, one day I was sent down to the store to get several items, and so I had a couple of dollars in my pocket. My dad added the word “hurry”, and I knew I was doomed. After a block or so I crossed the parking lot and spotted the alley. The alley was fairly narrow but most people used it as a shortcut. It separated the bakery on the left and the laundry on the right. The deli where I was going was located a few doors down from the laundry. As I came closer to the alley, I looked behind me, to the left and then the right. The fear that I had was immeasurable because I knew the Zangas feared no one.

Before I entered the alley, I thought maybe I should wait and see if other people were approaching. Then I could just join them, you know, strength in numbers and all that. But I thought better of it and with my heart beating a mile a minute I began to run through the alley. I heard a clanking sound like a garbage can being knocked over and I picked up my pace, looking over my shoulder to see what was behind me. A kitten, just a little kitten; it had tipped over the lid of a can. In that split second I breathed a sigh of relief, turned my head around and hit a brick wall. That’s right, the Zangas had come from nowhere. Standing in front of me, hands in their pockets and feet apart, they made an impassable offense.

Without a second thought, I handed over all the money I had, my inner shame hidden way beneath my fear. The thing about bullies however, is that they’re never satisfied with intimidation alone. They need to degrade and belittle those who are weaker and more fragile. Each one took an arm and dragged me behind the laundry. I prayed for someone to come, but they didn’t. I had been spanked and slapped before but nothing like these fists pounding into my head and stomach. I started to kick and scream, pushing and pounding against them. The screaming seemed to slow down the beating, but before they left, one of them swung me around by my arm, and my ankle hit an oil pipe that was sticking out of the ground. I had never recalled such throbbling. As I lay there sobbing,
recoiling from the pain I looked at my ankle which was tripling in size. The only saving grace was that the Zangas had run off, leaving me alone.

My relief at the Zangas’ departure was soon overridden with the feeling of loneliness. The time rolled by, and soon I began to wonder what was to come of me. I couldn’t walk out of the alley, and I sure wasn’t about to crawl. My parents would wonder where I was, and come for me, or would they. I thought briefly about screaming, but that didn’t seem to help when the Zangas were beating on me. So, there I sat waiting until finally our neighbor Mr. Bronsvelt came by. He saw me lying on the ground, and between sobs I told him the whole story. He carried me home and met my dad at the door. He said, “Tom, this time those hooligans have gone too far!”

Without saying a word, my father walked right past the two of us and headed down toward the alley.

I spent the next few hours with my mother. She bandaged me up and iced my swollen ankle. It was then that my father returned. He asked how I was feeling and said something very strange: “If you don’t stand up to bullies, they become tyrants. They won’t bother you again.” He turned and walked up the stairs. We never spoke of it again.
Early in the morning, cold toes

*Barbara K. O'Brien*

Cold toes, cold toes, cold toes, I sing stepping gently over the pointy rocks of the dirt walk way that leads away from the summer cottage filled with sleeping parents and relatives. My cold toes cushion me from the small pebbles of the path and onto the sharp pick and prickle of the fallen pine needles. These are the pine needles that hold the memories of my many early morning walks as I have watched and waited for those tart purple not-so-ready berries to become blue, blue, blueberries. This early cold Maine morning was mine as the others stayed in their warm beds or were waking to sip hot milky coffee while wrapped in musty dusty quilts that had been buried deep in the old sea captain’s chest. Cold toes, cold toes, early in the morning cold toes.

Chick-a-dee-dee-dees flutter over my head as the ear-piercing cries and warnings of cat, cat, cat came from the blue jays. The distant sounds of cars and trucks filled with busy adults driving away from our lake are just a background melody to the lapping of the waves as they break over the rocks that are my mountains and my playground. My feet move faster as I follow the rough trail that will bring me to the huge rock that shelters my secret blueberry bed. This is my rock: I have tea parties for one on it, share my deepest secrets with it, and it hides me when I do not want to see my aunts and uncles who come to visit. Now my rock is the guardian of the blues that are growing beside it.

The forest seems to be waking as the bright pennies of early morning sunshine fall through the leaves of the trees. These splashes of sunshine became my rest areas to warm my toes and to watch the ferns as they began to unfold and stretch towards the sky. Through the canopy of pine trees mixing with oak, maple, and birch leaves I catch glimpses of blue sky and white puffy clouds that form moving pictures of stories waiting to be told. The recognizable path has almost ended, now the journey really begins. A fallen tree is my bridge to cross over not a talkative brook, but a lake of poison ivy. My cold toes squelch as I march through wet boggy soil, avoiding the stink of the skunk cabbage, looking for the opening between tall twin birch trees that are shedding long sheets of paper-like bark. They are the keepers of my rock. They not only guard, but also guide me to find the sleeping bed of blueberries.

These berries in their quiet bed beside the rock will soon become part of my family’s breakfast. The adults will wait in calm anticipation, breathing in the perfume of the blueberries baking inside golden muffins. I will have my blue, blue, blueberries covered with cold milk and sprinkled with sugar that glistens on top like fresh fallen snow and I will have warm toes, warm toes, covered in my quilt, warm toes.
Teacher Lore

*Tara Columb*

He was tiny and looked scared. Tin was a member of the organized ‘cluster group’ comprised of low ability students and ESOL students. All of them had below grade level reading scores and some of the ESOL students had only been in our country a short period of time. In my opinion, this became my most successful groups ever. Was it because the ESOL students were able to learn the language in a small, less threatening group or because the gigantic strides made by the ESOL students set the bar higher for struggling pupils? It most probably was both.

I had seen Tin many times the previous year at morning bus duty and noticed that he always stood alone and never talked to anyone. He is Vietnamese and didn’t know one word of English. In sixth grade he cried every day and when he was given a worksheet, he would draw an unhappy face on it and hand it back in.

So here I was, faced with a child that couldn’t communicate and obviously hated being here. I would soon learn his background as he joined my seventh grade class.

Tin came to the United States because his older parents wanted him to have a good education and opportunity. His father had been imprisoned in Vietnam for many years and they had worked hard on their small farm to earn the money to leave. The last joint of Tin’s small fingers were crooked from the laborious work of collecting the crops.

Neither of his parents spoke English and it seemed that he was not buying into the chance to learn the language at school. As he entered my classroom, I thought how cute he looked. Although his body frame was small, his face looked old. Tin was not a behavior problem, but I knew if I didn’t get to him, he would soon find trouble extinguishing the hopes that his parents held for his future. My plan was to treat him like the others and not leave him behind.

Each day Tin would be right at my elbow. He would point and grunt to express himself. Even though I usually knew what he was getting at I would say, “Sorry, I don’t understand. You have to talk to me.” Interestingly, he understood me and would awkwardly try using bits of English. This repeated scene played out daily.

After the class finished reading together on one particular day, a pre-writing assignment had been given to them and the expectation set that each person would be sharing their idea in front of the class the next time we met. The next day as students were entering the room, Tin immediately came over to me.

“Can’t talk,” he said.

I assured him everything would be fine and that everyone would be presenting.

“No, can’t talk,” he repeated.
I ignored him and continued with what I was doing. Finally, he sat down and we started class. I reminded students that each person would be talking in front of the class and with practice, talking to a group would get easier. As I called their name, each student individually addressed the class. When I called Tin’s name he gave a panicked look at me and shook his head no.

“I know you can do it,” I assured him and reminded him how others were also nervous.

It took a moment, but I didn’t give in and he quietly stood. He looked even smaller. With a slight struggle he said, “I not speak good English. Hope you understand.” There was effort, but everyone listened intently and at the end there was a roar of clapping, high fiving and whistling. This missmash group was congratulating their classmate with such genuine enthusiasm while he was standing at the front of the classroom with a huge grin on his face.

“Great job!” I called out. I couldn’t help but think back to the tearful boy standing alone in the parking lot.

At the end of class, Tin came up to me and exclaimed, “Tomorrow I talk again!”
Silly Little Goose

Kathleen A. Smith

Scene 1:
Standing at the end of the runway she trembles not with cold, but rage. The snow is coming down hard and the January night is still. Tears dribble down her face as she looks toward the heavens and screams her anguish at the top of her voice.

The snow mutes her scream and she numbly turns and goes back to the small terminal of Durango’s airport. She’d been there yesterday, arriving from Denver, disembarking the plane, with eyes red and her blouse soaked with the tears that flowed unceasingly.

She sits alone, curled up, in as close to a fetal position as she can get. The last 60 hours plays through her head, like a movie. Slowly she is coming to the reality that it is not a movie she can ever walk out of. It ironically had started right here at this airport.

Scene 2:
A Frontier Airlines stewardess shepherds a lithe little girl of seven off the plane and into the terminal. This little sprite breaks free and runs into her mother’s open waiting arms. The stewardess tells the mother that it has been a rough flight and the girl has gotten ill many times during the flight. Mother and stewardess joke about how flights into Durango; over the ever-changing air currents of the Rocky Mountains has caused this flight to be nicknamed the Vomit Comet.

Scene 3:
The 45-minute drive home from the airport is full with happy chatter from the child. She knows that there will be a Christmas tree where gifts wait patiently for her return. But every once in awhile the car pulls over and mother and daughter stand next to huge snow banks, while the child doubles over and wretches and dry heaves.

Scene 4:
Mother and daughter are curled up on the couch, cozy in the warmth of their home and the blanket of unconditional love. “I tricked Grammy, mommy! Everybody got the flu and so Grammy said if I didn’t stop throwing up I couldn’t come home today. So I snuck outside and threw up when I had to, I wanted to come home.” she reports. The mother coos to her clever child, and rises from the couch to bring her a gift from under the tree. She brings it to the child, but the child looks at the gift and says, “Can we open them later Mommy, I am so tired.” The mother sets the gift back under the tree and resumes her cuddling position on the couch. “I am sorry Mommy for being sick.” The child whispers in her mother’s ear. “Oh you silly little goose, I love you, I am not mad at you for being sick, let’s take a nap together and maybe you will feel better.” The mother reassures her child.
Scene 5:
Three AM the mother carries the swaddled child through the heavily falling snow into the brightly lit hospital emergency room. The child is lethargic, can’t keep liquids down, dehydrated, disoriented. The mother reports to the nurse that the child has been too ill even to keep the medicine the doctor ordered down. The nurse bustles around, a doctor comes in, they check the child gently. “Her vital signs are good, no fever, but she is severely dehydrated, we have an open room so you can stay with her,” the doctor reports, “We need to get some liquids into her.”

Scene 6:
“Look at the beautiful flowers Susie brought for you sweetheart”
“Mommy I can’t see them, I can’t see you, mommy what’s wrong with me?”
Two nurses answer the call, check the child, and call in the doctor. A nurse bundles the child into a wheel chair. “I want to do an EKG, I am concerned that something is pressing on her optic nerves, I’ve never seen anything like this before. Maybe the virus has inflamed the nerve, let’s have a look.” The child is a rag doll, unable to sit up, so they strap her tiny body into the chair. We walk too slowly to the room with the portable EKG machine that this small rural hospital has. The child is placed on a table, and the nurse starts hooking up wires to the child’s head.

Suddenly the child goes into a seizure like posture; the nurse puts heavy sandbags on the child’s arms and legs, calls for help. It takes five people to hold this 70-pound child down. The mother cradles the child’s head, cooing, “It’s ok honey, mommy is here, they will not hurt you.” The child bucks wildly screaming, “MAA”, over and over again. People run in and the screams echo down the halls.

She raises her head and bites a nurse’s shoulder, breaking the skin. A new doctor rushes in, takes one look at the child and barks “Get her to ICU STAT!” The nurse starts removing the wires hooked up to the child’s head, one by one. The doctor grabs all of the wires and yanks them all off the child’s head with one pull, yelling at the nurse, “I said STAT!” He scoops the child off the table, and over his shoulder tells the mother to come to the ICU in 20 minutes. They need time to get the child settled in. The mother sits numbly outside the ICU watching the slowest minutes of the world pass by.

Scene 7:
The mother tentatively opens the door of the ICU. Nurses and doctors surround the tiny patient. Her chest is cut open, and there is blood. A nurse looks over startled at the mother’s presence and says “Dr.?” and looks towards the mother. His eyes say it all, “Bad timing, I’ll be outside waiting” the mother says. The doctor nods and the door closes. Time passes, but how much the mother can’t tell, for her eyes are full of tears. In her lap she cradles the Raggedy Ann doll and waits, and waits.

Scene 8:
“I’m sorry, she had a heart attack, we had to do open heart massage, and she’s in critical condition. I have called Denver Children’s Hospital. They are sending a chopper down to get her, but it doesn’t look good,” reports the doctor. “You may not be allowed to fly out
with her, but I’ll try to get it cleared. If they take you along you will be put in restraints. The flight will have a couple of nurses and Doctors on it, you must not interfere with them during the flight, do you understand? No matter what happens on the flight, you must not interfere!” The mother nods numbly and walks out to make some calls.

**Scene 9:**
From chopper, to ambulance, to emergency room the mother listens to the machines that are breathing for her child. She listens to the hushed voices of the nurses and doctors, not knowing what they are saying, but knowing there is a tone of frustration and sadness in their voices. The gurney carrying the child and machines is wheeled in and whisked away. “I’ve already registered her,” the child’s father says. The mother lifts her head and fire fills her belly. “You stupid bastard! You put her on a plane when she was sick. You sent her to a tiny hospital and me. You were in Phoenix, why didn’t you get her help there? She’s dying!” the mother spat out.

A young doctor comes out and sits with the distraught parents. He senses the friction between the couple; he has heard the bitter exchange. He sits between them and starts, “We suspect that your daughter has Reyes Syndrome. This is a rare occurrence that usually happens after a child has had influenza or the chicken pox. It is no ones fault. It happens too quickly. The symptoms mimic the recurrence of the flu. We are not getting any response from your daughter. I need your permission to insert an inter-cranial pressure monitor. We fear that your daughter has suffered brain death.” The parents sign the papers, and wait. Holding each other, sobbing, the mother requests a priest.

**Scene 10:**
The mother lays awkwardly on the bed, looking at the beautiful child turned into a ghastly robot, wires, IV drips, a metal thing sticking out of her right temple. The tests confirm her child’s brain is dead. She will never wake, speak, smile, or open those presents under the tree. Her body is alive by the grace of a machine, but it cannot undo the damage that has ravaged the child. Not knowing if the child can feel her presence or hear her voice, she cradles the child and rocks her. She whispers words of love and sorrow. “Oh my silly little gooose, you are in my heart forever. Please be my guardian angel, I’ll need your help, little love.” The machine is turned off. The mother gives the child a final kiss. Her daughter dies peacefully in her arms.

**Scene 11:**
It’s snowing heavily, but the mother skirts past security and walks to the end of the runway. “You Bastard, can’t you let the ones who loved her come and say goodbye?” she rages at God. ☩
Surprise Encounter
Donna-Marie Gamlin

July 7, 2004

It was going to be a glorious day. The sun was bright, the sky was blue and Michael and I were still wrapped up in the business of falling in love. He had arrived last night with a dozen roses and once again we were spending the weekend together. The morning had been spent holding hands as we watched each of my son’s soccer games and tonight was the night that I would introduce him to my friends.

We had set aside the afternoon to relax at home. As we returned to the apartment, I noticed Michael’s laundry bag in the back of his red jeep. I was very pleased and proud to be the owner of a washer and dryer. I had spent most of my adult life trudging to the Laundromat. Usually Michael did his own laundry in between bike rides and visits to the park with the boys. But today in an effort to showcase my potential wifely skills I brought the laundry downstairs, sorted it carefully and tended it lovingly.

After lunch, I headed downstairs to flip the laundry. Little did I know that a crisis loomed ahead. The dark clothes were waiting for their turn to be washed when I opened the washer’s cover and lifted the first of the whites.

Well, they had been white when I put them in. There in my hands was a pair of socks and two pairs of underwear that were now the most exquisite shade of pink. “How could this have happened?” I asked myself as I frantically searched in the washer. That was when I pulled out one of the new maroon bath towel. Since the idea of telling Michael what I had done was out of the question, I told the first son I saw that he could rent a movie if he got into the car right away. With a quick excuse we drove off.

Bleach, I told myself. Bleach was my friend. It would save me. There was no need to panic. During the next two hours I sneaked down the stairs and ran the pinks through the wash cycle two more times. The first time I used a cup of bleach and the second time I used a cup and a half. I was beginning the preparations for the expected company and contemplating the use of the rest of the bottle if I failed again when Michael kindly asked, “Is something wrong?” I smiled nervously as I answered, “What could possibly be wrong on this fabulous Saturday?”

Nothing except the fact that if your underwear is still pink in thirty minutes, I’m going to have to tell you what I’ve done. Maybe this relationship idea wasn’t the best. After all when you’re alone you never have to tell someone when you mess up. I considered buying him new socks and underwear and substituting them for the old ones but it just wouldn’t work. The panic continued to grow.

Once again, with baited breath, I opened the traitorous washer cover. Perhaps this time they would be a murky, somewhat dirty, but close to white color. But there was no denying it, the pink was a shade lighter but it stubbornly remained pink. There would be no escape from what I had done. That was when I heard Michael coming down the stairs.
Quickly I slammed the lid and turned to face him. “What is going on with you today?” he asked. “I have to tell you something and I don’t think you’ll like it.” I answered quickly. His body tensed in response and he stared at me.

The pause between his stare and my words was long. Finally I took a deep breath and blurted out, ”Your underwear is pink and I can’t fix it!” He continued to stare intently without saying anything.

Okay, maybe honesty wasn’t the best policy but I hadn’t been able to find a dishonest way out of this either. “Aren’t you going to say anything?” I asked.

“Is it pale pink or is it girly pink because if it’s girly pink it’s over between us.” This was said with a grin as he went to examine his clothes. During the next hour, I apologized several times. Each time he told me to relax, it was nothing.

The next night when he was leaving he kissed me sweetly and then said, “My mom always told me to wear clean underwear in case I was in an accident. God, I hope I don’t get into an accident today!” ⊕
The Dash

Anne Moller

I’ve been considering the dash a lot lately.
I’ve made mad dashes to the woodshed in a storm,
Into the market for a gallon of milk, and
Around the house, tidying, before guests arrive.

My hopes have been dashed, though not often.
I’ve dashed off late night emails to the boys
Added an extra dash of cardamom to the Yulekaka.
I dash away, dash away, dash away all every Christmas Eve.

In school I teach the dash to show missing letters,
Warn students to use it with care,
Suggest it replace inappropriate words.
For homework I assign chapters 1-3, pages 1-24.

But, it’s not until I visit Gammie,
Look at her gravestone that I
Finally understand the dash.

One small shift in focus-
And I realize it’s what’s left out, what’s missing,
What happens between those years that’s important.

I wonder…
Will my legacy be a file with my years of service to the district, or
Will I have inspired someone to become a teacher, to touch another life?
Will my writing provide comfort? My photos truth? My knitting warmth?
Will my great grandchildren giggle when they ask for “a little pudding with a lot of sauce”?
Horsing Around

Jill Lawler

July 28, 2004

The summer before I started second grade, Terry moved into the neighborhood. Everyone wanted to be her friend because she was so cool. She had an unusual name, she was cute and funny and adventurous, and best of all, she had an exotic cast on her arm.

That cast was cool and the way she had acquired it was even cooler. She had broken her arm, not an uncommon occurrence among eight year olds, but what was special about her injury was that she had broken her arm falling off a horse on her grandfather’s farm.

We lived in Connecticut in a typical 1950’s subdivision, the kind that sprang up after the war to provide housing for all the veterans who were now starting families. The houses were close together and the yards were small, but that didn’t stop our eight-year-old imaginations from believing we were in the wide-open spaces. Everywhere we went, we galloped. When we stopped, we had to rear up and dismount before we could walk naturally. We were cowgirls.

Terry, unlike the rest of us, had actually ridden a horse and had the wound to prove it. She had the added distinction of having suffered a really bad break. It was close to her elbow and in order to help her arm heal properly, the cast made her arm stick out from her body at an awkward ninety degree angle.

And as if all of this weren’t enough, Terry earnestly confided to us that the doctor had warned her that if she broke that arm again, she would risk losing the use of it. Consequently, whenever she put herself in physical danger (which was often, a large part of her charm) we would outdo ourselves warning her about the possible consequences.

“Terry, remember your arm,” we would say, eager to be helpful and to win her much sought after approval. Apparently, I passed the test and we became friends. The fact that I had been chosen was one of the highlights of that summer, and when school started in the fall I could whisper knowingly to the other kids in the class, “You know, if Terry breaks that arm again, she could lose it.” By then, it wasn’t simply enough for her to lose the use of her limb; in our eight-year-old minds, another break and the arm would be gone.

That year, a brand new elementary school was built in our section of the city and, despite the fact that our houses were only a block apart, the dividing line determined that Terry would stay at Green School and I would be sent off to Buckley. Although we were separated during the school day, our friendship continued and as her notoriety had spread far and wide throughout the neighborhood, I must confess I relished the celebrity that I
could reap by being known as a friend of Terry, the girl who had been thrown from a horse.

When we would get together after school or on weekends we were still consumed by horses. On nice days we would gallop over a dirt hill on the empty building lot across from her house. We called it “the mountain” and when we were making our way up the well-worn paths we had carved by our repeated circuits, it seemed that we were far away from our housing development. On rainy days, we were forced inside, but our cowgirl fantasies found horses in the folded up roll away beds in the back room of her parents’ house. When a third friend joined us, that person had to settle for a saw horse.

I found new friends at my new school but Terry always held more mystery and intrigue for me than the others. She could talk me into doing things that my normally cautious self would never think of on my own. I looked up to her so much that it was hard for me to say no, even when my good sense and fairly well-developed conscience dictated prudence. Fortunately for both of us, the most dangerous thing she ever successfully talked to me into doing was stealing cigarettes from my parents and meeting her and some other Terry groupies in the culvert under the road to smoke them.

There was one time, however, when I let her talk me into something where my good sense should have won out and, ironically, it had to do with a horse. By this time, we had survived elementary school and had moved on to junior high. Sneaking cigarettes in the culvert had been replaced by sneaking out of a tent in my backyard at night to meet boys. But this incident really didn’t have anything to do with boys or cigarettes and it could have proved much more deadly than either of them.

We had gone with her family to her grandfather’s farm, which had become over the years a fairly routine occurrence. Thanks to these excursions I had tasted warm milk right from the cow, had walked in fields smelling of animals and their byproducts, had fed chickens, but for some reason I had never actually gotten onto a horse. On this particular day, Terry got permission for us to go for a ride. I would ride her cousin April’s horse, Buddy, and Terry would get on her grandfather’s horse Major. Major was an old circus horse, many years past his prime. Although he was much older, he was by far the more difficult horse to ride, high spirited and erratic. Buddy would be a good choice for me; he was placid and easygoing and didn’t need a lot of direction from his rider.

We saddled them up and headed down the road for a trail ride. Her grandparents’ farm was located across from the historic Lebanon green which was located on a relatively heavily traveled route in Connecticut leading from Hartford to Rhode Island and the shore.

Terry and I, astride our mounts, took a leisurely tour of some old pastures and wooded trails. Although now secure in our friendship, I still kept glancing over at her for pointers on how to look like a real rider. The ride was pleasant but uneventful until it was time to head back. No one had bothered to tell me, perhaps because no one thought of it,
that April always rode Buddy at full speed when they were on their way back to the barn. As soon as we came out on the road, Buddy took off. No amount of pulling on the reigns slowed him down, so I held on for dear life. Terry, on the older and less speedy Major, could do nothing to help.

We galloped down the middle of the fortuitously empty highway and when Buddy, as he was accustomed, turned left off the road to go to his stall, I kept going straight. Unable to hold on any longer, I was hurled to the ground.

Always one to take charge in a crisis situation, Terry jumped off of Major, checked on my condition, and grabbed Buddy’s bridle. It was at this point that I should have exercised my better judgment and not done what she urged next.

“If you don’t get back on the horse, Jill, you’ll never ride again.”

Considering that the total number of times I had ever ridden in my life could probably be counted on two hands, I should have said “so what?” But for some reason, with the fresh memory of the pleasant ride through the fields and woods in my head, that seemed like a totally unacceptable possibility.

I remounted the now docile Buddy and we headed further down the highway to the farmhouse. Since I was only slightly banged up from my untimely dismount, we related what had happened to her family. They all chuckled about how they should have remembered Buddy was used to being run on his way back to the barn, talked about how lucky we were that we hadn’t run into any traffic on the highway, and treated me like a seasoned rider. After a short visit, Terry and I turned around to take the horses back down the road to their stable.

What all of us had neglected to consider then happened. Because he was heading, again, back to his barn, Buddy took off in a full run. Again, I held on for dear life and once again by nothing more than incredible luck there was no traffic to add an even bigger threat to my physical well-being. This time when Buddy turned to the right to go to his barn, I flew headfirst straight off, slid through gravel until my head hit a fence post, bringing me a to stop.

Battered and bruised, I dragged myself to my feet. Small pebbles were ground into my forehead, grass stains covered my clothing, and I spit sand out of my mouth. Buddy stood meekly in the background, waiting for someone to take off his saddle and lead him into his stall.

Terry and I never rode together again. But her boldness and willingness to take risks rubbed off nonetheless. Thanks to her, I now have my own horse story to tell and still, years later, even when I’m banged up by life’s adventures, I’d like to think I always get back on the horse.
On a cool spring evening I am out to dinner with a nice young man who has caught my attention. It is my first date in nearly a year, and I’m unsure of how to act. We sit facing each other in a dimly lit Mexican restaurant in Manchester. Dipping tortilla chips into the spicy salsa, we eye each other and try to fill the vast silence.

“So, you grew up in Vermont?” he asks.

“Yes, that’s right. A great place to grow up. You?”

“New Hampshire.”

“Do you still have family here?” I ask, feeling my spine connect with the pew like booth. As I adjust my positioning, I bump the edge of the table. Everything on the surface slightly shifts.

“Yes, my grandmother lives nearby. I stop by all the time to see her. She always makes her famous chocolate cream pie for me. I can eat a whole pie in one sitting.”

“Wow, Chris, that’s really something.” I drown a chip in the salsa and lift it to my mouth. Crunch. Silence. Pause. What do I say?

“Oh, I like chocolate cream pie!” What a great connection, I’m thinking. Perhaps he’ll invite me to join him for a slice. Instead, he takes a long, slow sip of beer. His eyes focus on the kitchen door swinging back and forth as servers appear with arms full of plates. We have only just placed our order, but he seems hopeful.

“Really? What else do you like?” he finally asks.

“Um, any food, really. My brother-in-law says I eat like a horse.” Good one. Very impressive. Chris watches me wipe the excess salsa off of my cheek.

“Oh, well, do you play any sports?”

“Not really. I run. You?”

“Oh, everything. I’m on a volleyball team, a basketball team, you name it.” I notice the definition of muscles in Chris’ s arms as he clutches his beer bottle. He is rather built.
“So, you like, don’t coach anything at school?” he asks.

“Oh yes! I coach a Scrabble team!” Suddenly, confidence pumps through me. I can feel the enthusiasm sizzling under my skin. I look him straight in the eye and tell him the history of the game and our team. I tell him about the matching Scrabble mug and bowl set that I have at my house and how I always keep a Scrabble game and dictionary in the backseat of my car, just in case. Chris becomes flustered and knocks over his water glass. A slow waterfall drips off the table and into his lap.

“Did you say Scrabble? You coach Scrabble, did you say? The board game? How do you do that?” Chris dabs at his crotch with his napkin, and I hand him mine. His focus shifts between his lap and the servers coming through the kitchen door.

“Well, kids play in teams, for starters. So, you know, I help them to work on their strategy and to build their vocabulary and everything…” (He is still wiping his crotch.) “…So then, we discuss specifics like, is it better to put the Z on a triple word, or would it be better to find a triple letter that also hits a double word? And did you know that if you play all seven tiles on your rack it’s called a BINGO, and you automatically get 50 extra points?”

“No. I had no idea.”

“We have matching shirts and everything. We wore them when Channel 9 came to school to interview us; it was great! You now, what I’m really hoping is that someday I can create a human Scrabble game where students dress up as tiles and we decorate the gymnasium floor as a giant game board. Can you imagine?!”

“And kids actually join the team?” Chris has given up on his wet pants. He has not made eye contact with me for several minutes now.

“Well, yes, they join the team. I mean, it’s sort of a craze right now at the school. We play whenever we possibly can. We have lists of Cool Words to Know, and they know that the OSPD #3 is the only dictionary that is accepted by the National Scrabble Association. They learn all the rules, and they are good! They competed in the National Tournament this year and did pretty well. It was great fun to socialize with the word judges in between rounds.” The shadow of a server nudges at my peripheral vision.

“Food’s here!” Chris interrupts. “Look! Now you can eat like a horse!”

“BINGO!” I announce, tickled at my own Scrabble reference and ignoring his horse comment. He rolls his eyes and plunges into his enchiladas. I chatter about the list of “vowel dumps” in between spicy bites. I ask Chris if he knows any “Q without U” words off the top of his head. He doesn’t.
When the bill arrives, Chris grabs it out of the server’s hand. I’m busy calculating the point value of the word “enchilada” as he settles the bill. He is nearly out the front door before I can even squeeze my way out of the booth.

“I had fun,” he lies through his teeth.

“I did, too!” And I’m not lying. I feel like I’m standing in the center of a Scrabble board with the power to make my move wherever I want. For now, I’m throwing this blank tile back into the bag and reaching in for something with a higher point value. ☺
Good Morning

David Cormier

June 30, 2004

Cold… I wasn’t then, but soon I knew I would be. The heat would be drawn from my heavy Eddie Bauer down jacket, drawn from my German military wool pants, my heavy winter boots and then, finally, from my body. I had a long way to go and it was only going to get colder as I went… I always figured Hell was a cold place… This, however, wasn’t hell, it was perhaps one of the most beautiful large ponds in Northern New Hampshire. Its name was Greenough pond and it was over 110 feet deep. Over 110 feet of the coldest water can get without freezing.

It was 5:30am, January 2nd 2004. The temperature wobbled at around -15 degrees Fahrenheit. I was standing at the broken down boat landing looking out across the black and illuminated blue plane of nothingness that is the frozen pond. The bob house and Gregg were out on the pond somewhere, still fast asleep. No lights, no noise. Stars speckled the sky and the moon was new. No clouds. The wind swept the snow up into the air, held it, and then deposited it into deep drifts across the pond. Finding a drift made for a tiresome and arduous trek.

The tracks of the previous day had been mostly covered over, but an outline remained and I began the slow walk across the pond in someone else’s boot prints. Prints too small for my feet and a stride too narrow. The icy edges of the frozen boot mold slid my feet into awkward angles and I found it difficult to continue following in this unknown traveler’s path. I would need to make my own tracks regardless of the difficulties it posed. I stepped out and began making new prints. The going was difficult. The snow and heavy boots weighed each premeditated step.

Greenough Pond is notorious for its large pockets of slush. These pockets lie under thin sheets of snow and ice. Fragile layers of frozen water conceal inches of heavier, wetter snow; crystallizing snow. When one happens upon these pockets they have to decided whether or not to trudge through them or go around. Going around is safest. Often these pockets of slush conceal a more sinister trap; thin ice and the cold water beneath.

My walk continued for sometime, all the while my mind drifted like the snow from thoughts of the day’s fishing, to Christine, still home and in bed, to school and the difficulties the coming Spring semester posed. I dug my watch out from under my jacket, shirt and long underwear. It was 5:45am. I glanced behind me. The makeshift boat landing I began my trek from had disappeared into the shore line. I was surrounded by the blue plane and it’s black and green boarder. The tracks I started out following had completely disappeared or veered off into another direction. As I resumed trudging, I began to notice the snow increasing in depth and density. A drift. Another step. I moved my boot back and forth and, through the snow, as
through a gray sea, I saw the darker water of a slush pocket overcome the sole of my boot and then slowly creep over the toe and up to the laces.

“Well,” I thought, “this can’t be good…”

Greenough pond is a difficult and unrewarding place to fish. It’s only positives are its seclusion, it being several miles up a logging road and then down another mile of gated road, its fish, which are perhaps the most beautiful native brook and lake trout in the north country, and the atmosphere, which consists of rugged mountains displaying cliffs and thick uncut pine forest, pines to inaccessible for the skidders and logging trucks that harvest the available timber. Gregg and I have been fishing Greenough for several years now and have seen it in its extremes. Hot and calm as a desert in the summer and frigid and blustery as the poles in the winter. But, never had I seen the pond so bitter cold, so bitingly cold. The ice eerily creaked, cracked, and twisted as it froze. Small earthquakes thudded and pounded every so often as the expanding ice compressed, cracked and refroze.

The wind blew strong and hard against the exposed flesh of my nose and eyes. I inched my green wool neck warmer up to cover my nose and thought of my goggles tucked warmly away on the top shelf of my closet. Earlier this morning it wasn’t this cold, wasn’t this windy. It didn’t warrant the use of goggles then. There was still no sign of a rising sun, that wouldn’t happen for another thirty minutes. After some consideration and deliberation, I took another step forward. My foot rested on the top of the packed drift snow. Then, with little effort, broke through with a splash. Now the water worked its way up to the bottom of my wool and nylon gators. I attempted to orientate myself on the pond using the mountains and geography, but it was to no avail.

Deep lakes and ponds are the last to freeze. Water holds heat. The more water, the longer it takes to alter its temperature. Greenough pond is one of the last ponds in Coos county to freeze. The ice, although thick and solid by March, never seems safe. At times the ice is three feet thick, so thick we need to chip the last few inches of our ice fishing holes with an ice chisel. The auger blades are too short to penetrate the ice.

Yet, one never feels comfortable on that pond in the winter. I thought to myself, “The awful daring of a moments surrender…” and began to traverse the snow drift. I trudged and watched. I waited for the sinking feel that is the ice giving way under weight it can’t hold. Then, a crack, and the thudding of freezing ice pounding around the pond echoed through my feet and up my legs and spine. Falling through ice is not sudden, it doesn’t “snap,” but is a slow and careful lowering of what might seem like a crane depositing precious, delicate cargo onto an uncertain structure. Then there is a rush followed by a brief second of warmth. Then, utter terror and pain. Then unconsciousness and finally something else...

I glanced straight ahead expecting to see the outline of the dark green bob house stand out against the forest green boarder of the pond. Nothing. I continued placing one heavy, snow and slush laden foot in front of the other. Soon the sun would rise and I
would find my way out of the drift and into the bob house where breakfast and tea would be warming.

A crack. A sudden rush of fear swelled inside me. I paused, breathless. I placed another foot on the snow in front of me. I applied pressure and it crunched through the snow on top and, with a splash, parted the slush below. I shifted my weight forward. No crack. I continued. Moving faster now, but not too fast, not stomping. Then, to my right I saw the tell tale yellow flicker of ignition of a propane light. Gregg was up. I shifted my trajectory toward the new beacon and began moving methodically toward the safety of the bob house. I closed the distance and moved out of the drift about twenty five yards from the front door. The slush was gone and the snow shallow. The ice thickened under my feet. As I closed the distance, the sun broke over the mountains and lit up the pond.

There it was, the bob house, my security, my safe zone, my refuge from the menacing and haunting ice. Its four walls, roofs and floor were safe. It shut the world out. It was anchored. Anchored by ropes through four 10” carefully cut holes through the ice on each corner to the cracking, twisting and shifting now brilliantly white sheet. I will have tea and laugh and forget about the ice, the snow, cold, wind, slush and water, or whatever there may be out there under my feet.

Gregg swung the green wooden door open and greeted me with a hearty “Good morning.”

-END-