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Roots
Amanda Leslie

Driving into the farm, the mimosa greeted you.
Perhaps the grandest tree of all,
it stood just past the bank of pines that buffered the house from the road
and sat atop a small rise.
It was excellent for climbing, though you couldn’t really attain great heights.
My mother hid there once, playing hide-and-seek,
and giggled so hard she had to warn my aunt, who was beneath her in the tree,
that she might pee on her head.
I delighted in pulling its leaves from their stems;
they were arranged like rungs to a ladder and filled my hand like feathers.
I don’t remember why they cut it down, but I can recall my anger.
The stump that remained was wide and smooth.

In remembering the trees at the farm, I feel mostly sadness.
They set the tone of my childhood,
but I lost them,
like I lost him.

Woods surrounded the farm on all sides.
I didn’t know the names of the trees in those woods,
and I remember them in images.
One stretched a branch across as you passed the springhouse on the way to the creek.
I always skirted it,
afraid the ticks my mother always checked my head for lurked there,
ready to drop into my hair.
One stood just so at a turn in the trail, demanding you notice it.
There was always shade, and mushrooms grew at its base.
One sat just beside the path,
overlooking a swath of skunk cabbage my mother’s dog rolled in one summer,
and had initials carved deep in its bark.
Collectively, the woods’ trees sheltered me.
I played among them.
They were the land of my imagination.

The woods at the farm ran in my blood.
They were my father’s.
They were his mother’s
and her mother’s before her.

When I think of the farm, my father’s tree comes to mind first,
though it lived there with me the least and is no longer the tree I knew.
My father left one night,
to give a speech to the Rock Garden Society,
and came back in an urn,
which we emptied into the same hole in which we planted a weeping beech.
Though I no longer had a father, I had a tree.
It was appropriately mournful, with its down-stretched branches.
Instead of watching my father, I watched it.
But then my mother moved me,
and it was not in sight.

When I think of my father's tree,
I think of him.
Wishing I could see his tree,
I really wished for him.

Turning into my driveway, a small oak greets you.
A question mark of a tree,
it stretches out of its own stump.
Our neighbor, before she descended into senility, cut it down,
so the bulbs she sweetly planted in our roadside garden would get enough light.
This was before my time, but it drove my husband secretly wild.
He wanted the tree there,
and she hadn’t asked.
It lost years of its life but seems happy now.

The trees at my home please me.
They root me in the present,
and I can choose them,
like I chose him.

Woods surround my home on all sides.
I know the trees by name.
One—a yellow birch, a stranger visiting its white cousins—
I smiled to recognize and placed my hand upon when snowshoeing past.
One stands at the end of our disintegrating split-rail fence and invites you in.
Every spring, I have to rid it of caterpillars and their cocoons.
One hugs the old stonewall and spreads its branches wide.
I can imagine picnicking under it in summer.
Collectively, the woods’ trees ground me daily in season, in time and place.
They are only mine by law to the second stonewall,
but my husband carved our home within their clasp.
and the man who holds their deed cannot know them as I do.
I walk among them.

_The woods at my house were inevitable._
_They returned me to myself._
_They are the backdrop of the history I am creating
and provide my peace of mind._

Thinking of my home, my crabapple comes to mind first, though it has lived here least.
My then-soon-to-be husband brought it home one night, a gift on my twenty-fourth birthday.
I’d asked for it, coveting my neighbors blossoms in spring, and I was careful in contemplating its placement.
It is the first tree that has ever been entirely mine.
It is hopeful, with its up-reaching branches.
Instead of watching my father’s tree, I can watch my own.

_When I think of my tree,
I think of my husband._
_Wishing for my own tree,
I really wished to be rooted._

The last time I visited the farm, my father’s gardens crowded against one another, untended. His tree stood so tall I had to crane my neck, and, even as I snapped a picture, I knew it was not what I sought to capture. I came closer when I dug up bits of his astilbe, black mondo, gooseneck and brought them north with me.

_I wanted to bring part of my first home to the only home I’ve ever chosen for myself._

The first time my father’s sister visited my home, she admired my gardens. She stood on my porch and said, “You must feel like you’re in heaven when you wake up in the morning.” She meant it simply, and I do, but her words capture something deeper I brought north with me.

_I transplanted my roots._
Bell Jar of the Universe
Susan Michaelis Gunther

Into my whirring, voice-filled, now cloudless life
Once again full of anticipatory pins and needles
After the success of scaling a seemingly insurmountable cliff
Moves the wonder of what I might conquer next.

To peer down from that lofty vantage point
Through the vibrant rays of a glorious existence
Upon those not similarly favored to greet success
Fails to provoke a sense of the unremitting passage of time.

Into my whirring, voice-filled, now cloudless life
Under the false notion that soon
Many others will join me on that cliff’s edge
Slinks the unwelcome and unshakable agent of despair.
“Hey, Mare, this is Bruce Hubbard. How are you? Hey, I was talking to Sue and do you realize it’s coming up to ten years since Bob’s death?”

Just like that. A phone call from someone I hadn’t heard from in nearly ten years. Did I realize it? He was my husband—of course I realized it. And I was also aware that my third wedding anniversary with my husband now was coming up. But I waited to hear more before saying anything.

“So we were reminiscing and wanted to know if it would be OK with you if we have a sort of reunion of people that knew him? A party or celebration to commemorate the ten year anniversary of his death.”

Would I mind? It was nice that he was asking, I guess, but I’m not sure I had the right to veto a gathering of friends. I was just the widow, not some kind of gatekeeper to the spirit world.

“Sure,” I said. “Go ahead, that sounds nice.”

“Well, do you want to be part of the planning?”

No. That I didn’t want to do. I didn’t have the time and energy and it didn’t seem fair to Marshall to have what little free time I had being consumed by activity involving my former late husband.

“Sorry, Bruce. I’ll attend but I don’t want to plan. Let me know what’s arranged.”

Now, Bob was an advertising guru in the Boston area. He had a dedicated following, his “groupies” as I liked to call them. He was beyond doubt a creative genius and people liked to be around him. He had a way of energizing and inspiring the creative side of you.

He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer when he was 52. We subsequently moved up to the Lakes Region of New Hampshire four months before he died on the couch in the home I still live in now.

I didn’t hear from Bruce again until several months had passed but I was anxious over this “gathering.” I didn’t want to renew all these old acquaintances. I had made a new life for my son and myself here in New Hampshire, complete with a new career, new spouse, and new friends. No one here had even met Bob. I am Marshall’s wife, not Bob’s widow. I could finally check the married instead of the widowed box on forms--I didn’t want to revert to Bob’s widow again. I didn’t want to stir up all those haunting memories.
But my son had just started college. He was only eight years old when his father died and his memories of Bob had largely faded, so it would be good for him to meet his dad’s friends and colleagues. It would be good for him to see how his father had made such an impression on so many lives. The people that would be at the party all knew Jake when he was little. His father doted on him and brought him to work sometimes. Bob would gush over Jake’s every accomplishment, in detail, to anyone that would listen. He used him as a model in a TV commercial and magazine ad. Everyone would love to see him all grown up and would want to tell him their favorite Bob stories. I knew this and felt he was owed these stories.

And I had to admit that I wanted to see these people too. The cream of the creative community from Boston would be there as well as a few from California, New York, and elsewhere. They represented a world I was once a player in; I was an art director in Boston’s largest advertising firm. These were my colleagues as well as Bob’s.

But I was still in a tizzy. The plan was to have a weekend long retreat at a camp on the idyllic Newfound Lake, which was close by for me; I wouldn’t have to rent one of the cabins and I could leave whenever I wished. The meals were to be catered. There was to be live music, a campfire on the beach, sports activities, boating and photos. It would be quite the affair. I committed myself to just one afternoon and evening. Just Jake and I would attend; my husband didn’t want to or he felt I would be more at ease if I didn’t have to worry about him.

The apprehension about the big event mounted. I feared I would be the focus of much of the attention. The other guests idolized this man that I was married to for sixteen years. I understood what they admired about Bob but they didn’t see all his facets like I did. I loved him but I loved all of him, the good and the bad. And there was definitely some bad. He wasn’t always easy to live with; he suffered from manic-depression for years, his temper was such that it could make his fist go through a kitchen wall (he never physically harmed any person though, just objects). These were sides of him that his employees, clients, and colleagues never saw; they were the parts that were saved for the privacy of family and home.

So, it was with trepidation that I was going to “Yesiree Bob” as this reunion came to be known on the internet. How would I relate to these unabashed groupies? What was my role? Would I be expected to give some kind of speech? Would this be a Bob love-fest that I would find hard to take and leave prematurely in tears? How would Jake react?

How would I react to the woman I accused of having an affair with Bob? She had written a letter to my son after Bob’s death as several people had. I was to give it to him when he was older. I thought her description of Bob was a little too intimate sounding. I threw the letter out before Jake ever knew it was written. The woman later convinced me that nothing had gone on between them and my suspicions just made me feel petty. I was acutely embarrassed by my behavior. How was I going to face her?
Well, it didn’t matter. I was going to go through with this reunion. It would be good for Jake if nothing else.

Jake and I drove the half hour to the camp on a beautiful late-spring afternoon. I told him about some of the people that would be there. He remembered some of them. I warned him that people would want to take him aside and talk to him about his dad. He thought that was cool; he seemed to be ready for this.

We pulled into the parking area of the main lodge. Most of the guests were down on the beach; they had arrived the night before and seemed pretty settled in, drinking beer and talking in small groups. A musician was playing a guitar. I was afraid I wouldn’t recognize people. I was afraid I’d feel awkward. I was just afraid. But I forged ahead…

And lo and behold, all my fears were unfounded. Everyone was wonderful. It was so much fun to see these people again; people who knew me in my old life—people who knew me as a respected designer and painter instead of a school teacher. There were four college classmates of mine (Bob was a college professor for a while which was where I met him) and we talked about school days. And of course, we talked about Bob. But we also talked about our lives now and how our lives have changed. It was fun to get caught up. As I surmised, people did take Jake aside and tell him how much they admired his father and that was good—he enjoyed hearing about him. He liked the whole event. Bob’s old partner, Dan, a Woody Allen clone, flew in from California to be here and I truly took pleasure in kibitzing with him again.

Then it occurred to me as we were all conversing around the bonfire that I wasn’t in any special spotlight as the widow. And that really, this event wasn’t even about Bob. As the fire sparked and we roasted marshmallows the talk was free and joyful. This was a group of people brought together by a common love for a man but it was the camaraderie between these people that was the focus. Rekindling that camaraderie was the whole point of this reunion. The anniversary of Bob’s death was just an excuse for this group to gather after time had flung us all apart. It was the only connection that could pull us together now, these ex-employees, friends, clients and even Bob’s first wife. I was glad and even thankful that it did.

About a month after the reunion, I ran into Bob’s first wife. We talked about it and both agreed it was fun. She asked if I noticed one person that went on and on and on about how incredible Bob was as he talked to Jake. I knew immediately whom she was talking about, a copywriter that often worked with Bob on a freelance basis. I said, “Yeah, I know what you mean. Bob may have been great but he certainly wasn’t god.” We both laughed as we shared that understanding.

Last week, exactly one year after the reunion, I opened my email to find a message with “Yesiree Bob” in the subject line. Another reunion? I wondered. But no, it was a group photo of everyone at the gathering and someone Photoshopped Bob’s image smiling down on everyone from the sky above.

It was creepy… I wish they’d just leave what was a good thing alone.
Marriage
Arlene Taranow

My marriage is on the rocks
Not the rounded rocks
Smooth with age
From the pure rushing river
But the jagged blue rocks
Left over from our septic repair
That we placed on the path leading to the front door
To help keep the dirt and mud out

The jaggedness presses into our bare feet in the spring
As we gingerly step from the granite slab onto the path
And then the cool grass
By mid-summer our tender feet have toughened
And we barely notice the stones on our path
Friends who visit wonder how we navigate over the stone
Just gliding across with trays of food for the grill
They choose to keep their sandals on
Missing the feeling of the grass between their toes

Into fall our mocs and boots come out
And we imprison our feet again
Except between the flannel sheets
With just our wool socks on
In the spring, we make our way across the jaggedness
The leftovers from an impulsive idea
But the hurt doesn’t last long-
We just get used to it ●
The Tattoo
Arlene Taranow

He lifts his spoon
And his shaking hand
Trickles smooth white pudding
Creating a path
Across the gray speckled tray
And up his faded blue sweater
To his mouth
She must have been beautiful
Perched on his bicep
His only girl so far from home
During his tour in Korea
Only a shadow of her former self
Green and misshapen with age
Unable to dance ●

Needle
Arlene Taranow

Jimmy licked the tip of the needle
and shoved it into his vein
Mother-fucker
His voice was heard through the thinly plastered walls
He lifted himself up
Off of the stained burgundy couch
On his way to get more shit
His head spun
And the whirl of the floor fan sounded strange-
then far away
He reached out to grasp God’s hand
But it was too late ●
The wind howls and the windows rattle
I know it is coming
The long black Mag light
Barely fits into my back pocket
Get ready Babe, any minute
I say looking down the hall
At my son in his pajamas

The wind picks up-
Gusts cause the lights to flicker
Sudden darkness-
Then silence from within our horse-hair plaster walls
While the storm rages outside
No hum from the fridge
No ticking from the clock
Only the wind and rain
Beating against the worn clapboards

I wait-
Then reach back and switch on the bright beam
Our wide eyes adjust to its intensity
The line of light leads us to the couch
Where we huddle-
And listen
And wait •
Eve
David Cormier

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the Fruit, she pluck’d, she eat:
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost.

~John Milton, Paradise Lost, Book IX, 780-784

Eve, mother of man, whore
Didn’t lick the apple that day
The clouds thickened over paradise.

She bit.

Her teeth, fang-like needles
Pierced, ripped and cut
The flesh of the apple.

Earth trembled.

Blood pored from the wound
Running over her lips
Her neck, chin and down her throat.

She choked.

Adam, meanwhile, collected flowers for her
Until a breeze brought the “snap” of apple flesh.
The garland fell from his hand.

All lost… ●
Cowgirl
Mara Capsalis

I am crawling into a dark cave full of angry rattlesnakes. Their tickles of communication sound faint and far away, but their danger is real. I crawl quietly on my hands and knees. I hold my shiny chrome pistol in my right hand. With my left hand, I wave to my brother to be quiet.

His leatherette chaps swish against the floor of the cave. My knees are bare because I am wearing my tan corduroy cowgirl skirt with the gold fringe. Because I don’t have cowgirl boots, though I’ve begged for them for Christmas, I wear my sneakers which are so old they don’t even squeak. My vest has light and dark brown corduroy appliquéd in a star pattern. My flannel shirt has leatherette ties at the neck, and it is brown and gray plaid. My cowgirl hat is brown felt with white stitching around the rim.

The Indian bandits have holed up in this cave trying to evade our posse, but at last we have them cornered. Their only way out is past us and out the single entrance. I smile in the half light.

I notice that the soft rattling has stopped. I’m sure that it is a sign of danger. We may be too close to the snakes’ lair. I put my hand out and feel a rock formation dividing the passageway. I reach back and tap my brother’s shoulder. We listen. Faintly, from the left, we hear the rattle again, like dried beans in a tin can.

We go right.

The passage twists and turns, becoming danker and stuffier as we move further into the hillside. The walls feel soft and dry when my hand accidentally brushes them, as though they might crumble at any moment. The ceiling is low and we continue to crawl.

We hear a squeal and we freeze. I can hear my brother breathing. We stay still for at least a minute, but it doesn’t come again. I turn half way around, cup my hand to my mouth and whisper to my brother, “Bats.” We continue to crawl.

Then up ahead I hear a sound like someone dragging something heavy across the cave floor, but trying to be quiet about it. My brother hears it too. We crawl even more slowly than before until I sense that the walls have widened outward. I reach back and tap his left shoulder, the signal that he should move up beside me to my left.

When he’s level with me, we each move out and sideways, him to the left and me to the right. Up ahead I can see a faint light. We move forward slowly in tandem. I have my pistol in my hand, ready to shoot at the first sign of movement up ahead. The bandits won’t have a chance to draw their weapons. I know that my brother has his pistol in his hand too. Between the two of us, we can take at least three, if not four of them down.

We hear that sound, the sssshhh, of something being dragged again and we stop. There is a corner up ahead that I can now see because the faint light has become stronger. We know what to do. My brother and I have rehearsed this many times. I will take point and drive forward, while my brother swings in behind me and to the left.

Then there is the sound of a rattler right behind us. We both turn and search the darkness of the cave, hoping to catch a glimpse of something slithering towards us in the half light. Then I have a fiendish idea. We’ll catch the bandits alive and force them to lead us out of the cave. That way the rattlers will strike them before striking us.
I turn back to the light and nod my head my brother. I mouth, “One. . . two. . . three,” and I dart around the corner as fast as I can crawl on my knees and push the blanket flap aside.

“Stick ‘em up!”
“We got you cornered!” my brother yells as he raises his gun.

My little sister Liesel stares at us just as she’s about to put a dust bunny in her mouth.

“Stop her!” I yell to my brother. “She’s about to swallow poison. We have to take her alive.”

My brother reaches out and grabs the dust bunny from her wet fingers. She sticks out her tongue at him and it’s covered with lint. I reach out with my left hand to hold her chin as I drop the gun in my right hand. I clean her tongue with my right index finger.

“Got it all,” I say. “Thought you’d find the easy way out eh? Well, that ain’t goin’ to happen today. You’re comin’ with us to face the full force of the law. It’s jail for you Pocahontas.”

I push my little sister ahead of me, back into the cave of blankets under the dining room table. The end of my pistol is centered on her blue-striped back. The shirt becomes an Indian blanket she’s wrapped around herself to ward off the dampness of the cave.

She doesn’t fight or struggle. I turn back to my brother, “The others must be holed up somewhere else. They must’ve split up thinkin’ their chances of being caught wouldn’t be so good.”

He nods in agreement, “We can make her talk though,” and he points to Liesel.

“She’ll give up their hiding place.”

“Hey, Pocahontas,” I say, “get going.”

Liesel’s padded rear end moves ahead of me in a fast crawl around the table legs. Even though it’s dark, her diapered behind is like a lantern beam leading us through the murk.

Suddenly she stops short and sits. She scoots forward on her bum and makes the soft shushing noise against the floor. I tell my brother, “Must be the rattlers.” And sure enough, there’s the dreaded sound, my baby brother shaking his rattle.

“OK Pocahontas, now you move real slow.”

Liesel thinks about it for a minute, then shoots out through the entrance of the cave live a bullet.

“Shoot,” my brother says, “get her back in here. I didn’t have a chance to rattle-bite her.”

“She’s gone,” I say. “Escaped. We’ll have to go back and tell Sheriff Andy what happened.”

This is one of our favorite games, playing hide-out in a tent we make from old blankets, the dining room table and chairs. As soon as we get the tent put up and Darrel and I don our cowboy and cowgirl gear, the dining room becomes a stage. Sometimes we are in the Texas desert chasing Pancho Villa, or we’re at the Alamo fighting—I’m always Crockett and he’s always Bowie because he has the plastic knife. Sometimes we’re at the Little Bighorn fighting with Custer. For some reason it never occurs to either one of us that because I am a girl and wearing a skirt, I should not hold a gun or fight alongside my brother. In our games, I am never the girl waiting back at the covered wagon.
It is early in my kindergarten year. Jonna, Kathy, and I are playing princess. We are in the castle sewing. I am itchy as I sit trying to sew a piece of cloth. I want to be the princess wearing the tall pink pointed hat with the floaty veil, and go out and ride horses. But, Kathy is the princess. When I ask why we can’t all be princesses, Jonna says, “Because princesses are pretty. Kathy is pretty like the girls in the stories Mrs. Collins reads to us.” I must look like I don’t get it because Jonna continues, “She’s the one with the blond hair and blue eyes.”

I realize I can’t argue with her logic. All the princesses in the books Mrs. Collins reads to us do have blond hair and blue eyes. I know my dark blond hair is short and straight, not light and curly like Kathy’s, and certainly nothing like princess hair in the pictures I’ve seen. And I know that my eyes are dark brown, not light and blue like the bright blue eyes of the princesses in books. Jonna has hair even darker than mine, but at least her eyes are grass-green, much closer to blue than my own mud-colored eyes. I sense something dark about this realization, something that could swallow me whole.

“Then who are you?” I ask her.
“I’m the queen.”
“And who am I?”
“You’re the lady-in-waiting.”
“How come you get to be queen?” I want to know.
“Because Kathy wants me to be queen.”
I look at Kathy who nods, then says, “You can be queen in a little while.”
It is two against one, and if I want to play, I have to take the role they’ve assigned me.

“You do things for the princess. Here,” Jonna hands me a plastic teacup, “go get her tea.”

I go to the water fountain and pour water into the cup, then bring it back to Princess Kathy who sips out of it delicately.

“Now sew some more,” Jonna orders.
I obediently pick up the rag, but inside I’m lost. I don’t know what to do. I feel this is unfair, but I don’t know how to handle it, or what argument to make against it. I don’t have blond hair. I don’t have blue eyes. And I know that somehow that makes me not pretty, even ugly.

Then I think I may have a solution. “Let’s go riding horses,” I suggest. I know from the books that princesses ride horses. “Then we can all be a princess.” I’m so pleased with myself, and I think that Jonna and Kathy can’t help but agree.

But Jonna looks at me as if I really should know better. “We can’t go ride horses. The prince is coming to save the princess.”
Of course I know who the prince is. It’s Bruce Finer, the cutest boy in the class with blond hair and blue eyes. And Jonna doesn’t have to tell me that the prince always saves the most beautiful princess.

“Why does the princess need to be saved?” I think I have trapped her with the question.
But she has it all figured out, “Because the evil dragon is coming to get her.”
I can’t continue the conversation because Prince Bruce with Sir Warren and Sir Russell come galloping in on their wooden horses to save Princess Kathy. All during our
conversation, they have been galloping around the room. Prince Bruce fights the dragon killing it with a sword thrust to its soft underbelly, and enters the castle. He takes Princess Kathy by the arm, and leads her out.

“Now can we go ride horses?” I want to know.

“Let’s play again!” Bruce shouts.

Before Jonna can say anything, I come out of the castle under the stairs and stand with the boys, ready to ride my horse Silver. They start to gallop away and I gallop too. We are moving across the grassy plain fast. We need to find a place to camp before the sun sets. I watch the red crosses on the backs of my fellow knights as they bob up and down with the movement of their horses. We have a long way to go before we reach the Holy Land and truly begin our crusade. But the king has promised us that we will find treasure there—perhaps the most glorious treasure of all—the Holy Grail. I am the famous Sir Lancelot, King Arthur’s favorite knight, and I know that I will be the one to find the Grail.

“Stop!” Bruce puts up his hand. “What are you doing here?”

“Riding a horse too. I am Sir Lancelot and I will find the treasure,” I say.

He rolls his eyes and Sir Warren and Sir Russell snicker, “You can’t come with us. You’re a girl. You need to go back to the castle.”

I stand there with my horse’s reins still in my hand. Then it feels like the ground has shifted under my feet, as though there has been an earthquake tremor. I feel like I am falling. My heart beats fast and hard, and I know that I am scared to death. All I see is a dark canyon, and I know that I am about to fall into it and never crawl out. I have the urge to claw at something, anything to keep myself from falling into that canyon, but there is nothing to grab onto. There is no one to turn to. I want my mother, my father, and my brother, but I am alone.

And I begin to sense that from this time on I will be two different people. At home I will be free to be anything I dream of, but in the real world I will be what other people decide a girl should be. I begin to understand that for the rest of the world a real girl is blond and blue-eyed. A real girl sits in the castle sewing and drinking tea. But most of all, a real girl does not take charge, does not imagine another kind of existence. Only boys can do that.

There is nothing I can do but turn around and walk back to the castle. ●
Doubt
Jennifer Larochelle

Is doubt the mask of frustration turned inward?
That which permits us to hide from ourselves.
Is doubt the mechanism by which we retreat?
That which allows us to venture forth on our next quest.
Is doubt that gift we give others who are unsure?
That window by which we help them begin their journey.
Is doubt the escape by which we relieve ourselves of responsibility?
That which enables us to hide from society.
Is doubt that which opens us to new opportunities?
That door closed by certainty now open.
Is doubt present to offset arrogance?
That which so often leads to a fall.
Is doubt something we try on when we're afraid?
That which protects us from being found.
Or is doubt the secret of Kings and Presidents?
That which grounds them, but makes the rest of us unsure.
Lost Soul

Anonymous

The library was silent. The scratching of pens on paper and pages of magazines or newspapers was the only sound you could hear. I began to sit down at a table adjacent to my students preparing to take notes in my journal and daily grade book, when Kristy suddenly jerked back her chair and walked towards Cameron. Within seconds she smacked him upside the head and put him into a chock lock yelling "stop saying fire!" I jumped out of my seat and ran towards the desk. As I approached ready to yell, she let go, walked back to her seat and continued to write. I stood in awe. Cameron just looked at me with a smile on his face. I walked over to Kristy and asked her what had just happened.

"Cameron, would not stop saying fire, so I solved the problem." She said without emotion or looking up from her work.

"Kristy, what you did was inappropriate. You will have to go to the office."

In a rage of emotion she shouts "I can't. It's not my fault. I didn't do anything."

In a calm voice I say to her "you just almost chocked Cameron and hit him on the head. You will have to go to the office and take responsibility for your actions."

"Fine" she says back and waits for me to write the pass. She glares at me as she walks out of the library.

Silence is once again evident as the students turn towards their work, everyone that is except Cameron. I call him over towards me. "What happened?" I ask.

"I don't know she just attacked me." He says with a smile and almost a chuckle.

"Cameron, I know better, what did you say to provoke her?" I say sternly but calmly.

"Nothing, just fire that is all."

"Why fire?"

"She was reading an article about a guy who was lit on fire. I thought it was funny."

"I see. Thank you. You may have a seat for now."

Curious as to what article Kristy had been reading, I went over to the desk to read the newspaper she had been working on before the incident occurred. The title of the newspaper left me shocked and speechless, "Man set on Fire by Wife". As I read the first paragraph I fell even more into shock. The connection was there, it was Kristy's father who was set on fire by her step mother. As I read on, I learned she had been the anonymous teenager to make the 911 call. I looked at the date on the paper, it was in March, one month before.

When signing the contract to teach Language Arts in the eighth grade I never imagined I would be in this kind of situation. The town is small, things like this you only hear about on the news but never from a student. The amount of weight and baggage that comes with these students is incredible and we have to see beyond all of this and teach them to read and write. This incident gave me insight into what my students lives are like outside of school. Imagine trying to learn five subjects while your father is slowly dying
in a hospital miles away from burns inflicted on him by someone you are close to and
was living with. Some how in my mind I wondered how she did it. Every day since the
incident after my initial instruction for the day, she and I would have a five minute
conference prompted by her. These conversations would never be more than five minutes
but turned into Kristy talking and I listening and sometimes responding. For her these
five minutes gave her the opportunity to get out what was on her chest and then focus for
the rest of the class time. She completed every assignment on time the rest of the quarter.

It wasn't until the beginning of June she suddenly stopped coming to class. I soon
learned she had been spending a lot of time in the guidance office. While walking to class
one day, she approached me. Tears filled her eyes as she glanced up to me. "My father
passed away yesterday" she blurted out. I stopped dead in my tracks. "I'm sorry" was all I
could muster. " Is there anything I can do for you" I preceded to say. “Will you have
lunch with me so I can catch up on our five minute talks?” I smiled and said, “Certainly,
I will come and have lunch with you in the café.”

Kristy came to class for the rest of the year in spurts. Some days it was as if she
was the happiest girl in the world, conversing with friends and myself. Other days she
was quiet and alone. Her work was completed as she passed in her last big project to me
the day before grades closed. I told her I would see her that night at promotion.

Kristy was the first to find me before the promotion began. Smiling and wearing a
dress she was ready to move onto ninth grade. "Thank you" she said. I looked back at her
confused. "Thank you for believing in me. For listening to me when no one else would. “I
smiled back at her. “Your welcome. Anytime.” She gave me a huge hug and walked to
her seat in the gym. As I cheered her on during the promotion her smile said it all. For
that one moment all baggage had been checked at the door, this was her night and she
was glowing. At the end of the night I waved goodbye to Kristy in the parking lot.

Driving home that night I realized that teaching is not only about state tests,
standards and curriculums. It is about listening and being there for your students. I never
would have imagined that five minutes a day with this one student would impact my
teaching philosophies as well as teach me a valuable lesson.●
Guilty Pleasure
Eileen Young

Lakeside
Watching sailboats glide in the afternoon breeze
Blue sky
White billowing clouds
Lapping waves
Sand between my toes
Basking in the delights of summer

I didn’t fold the laundry
Cook the dinner
Or even call to find out the score of the game

Instead I lounge
Playfully toying with words on a page
Stopping only for moose tracks ice cream in a sugar cone •
Meeting
A reflection in four acts

Bonnie Robinson

Act III ~ May, 1990

The phone call was brief.
“I will meet you Friday at 1:00 on the bench outside Molly’s Restaurant in Hanover?” I ventured.
“Yes,” murmured the woman I did not know.
“I guess we will know each other.” It was more of a question than a statement.
“I have red hair,” she offered.
I gasped. “So does my daughter,” I said faintly.
Silence.

Act II ~ November, 1989

It was supposed to be a routine ultrasound. My second pregnancy seemed normal, and I was distracted by the presence of my first-born son, then one year old, on his feet, and full of trouble. I relished the opportunity to lie down, the swell of my belly arching upward even at three months, and didn’t flinch as the cool, sticky gel was applied generously.

Almost immediately, the technician quickened. “Just why was this ultrasound requested?” she asked. Was that excitement I heard in her voice? Panic?
“Just routine,” I responded, as her instrument performed figure eights. Moments later, a radiologist and two interns joined the circle. Was something wrong?
“We see two heads,” he said. My first vision was of a bizarre two-headed child.
“Do twins run in your family?” he inquired.
“I don’t know; I was adopted,” I said for the thousandth time.
What would it be like for these new twins of mine to have to answer that same question by saying, “We don’t know; our mother was adopted”?

Act I ~ September, 1964

Six-year-old Cindy would not back off. “Which of you stayed back?” she demanded of my sister and me. We gazed at each other. “Well, you’re not twins; you look nothing alike!” she continued. “So how can you be sisters and be in the same grade? It takes a year between babies.” We could not refute her logic. Laurie and I were born only six months apart.

I opted for the truth. “Neither of us stayed back and we are not twins. We are sisters because I was adopted before Laurie was born.” Cindy backed away nervously; I was triumphant; Laurie was relieved.
I do not remember being told that I had been adopted. I just always knew. It was okay with me too, and I patiently told hundreds of people why Laurie and I were in the same grade from that kindergarten moment forward.

Once I picked up the phone and placed a pretend call. My imaginary conversation was one-sided. “Hi,” I began, though only I could hear, “I have been wanting to tell you thanks, and I am okay. I got a good family and dog, and I like Vermont. In case you forgot, my birthday is on February 3rd, and I will be thinking of you. By the way, do we look alike?” I could never really make the call, of course, so I just sent good thoughts and hoped she understood.

Act IV ~ June 1990

I left my nursing twins and one-year-old son at home to go to Hanover to meet Muffy, my birth mother. Her name and her description were terms that seemed foreign and startlingly unfamiliar.

What would it possibly feel like to meet the woman who had carried me for nine months and then given me away thirty years earlier? How could I tell her how I had always known that she had made her choices for my benefit and I was grateful? How would she react to my three children, her grandchildren? Would we have anything in common?

Emotions were high as I approached the bench in Hanover. There she was, redhead, familiar looking, youthful, and clearly as nervous as I was. We had something in common! Without question, we absolutely knew how each other felt at that moment. This realization made it possible to relax. We reflected each other, and it was a feeling of peace and compassion.

“Hi; I’m Bonnie; I have always wanted to thank you for the choice you made,” I stammered.

Her emotion equaled mine. “It’s nice to see you again,” she said.
Ugh. Another Junior High dance at Middleton Academy. As always, I stand in the corner and watch. I watch a lot, say little, and wonder how many new couples will form tonight, only to break up first thing Monday morning when the buzz created by three Pepsis, disco lights, and Led Zeppelin’s *Stairway to Heaven* is gone. I’ve been here before, and I sense the anticipation of the girls around me. This is the night to maybe, just maybe, wrap their arms around that guy they stare at in English. This is the night to dance with more guys than any of their friends danced with, or, at least, dance with the *one* that’s going to cause a jealous fight among the group. I’ve been to enough of these dances to know the dreams of anticipation far outweigh the reality of an awkwardness that reduces most of the girls to a night of dirty dancing with, well, the girls. The boys share their own special dance the rest of the civilized world calls shoving.

The gym is a thousand degrees, and nine fans serve only to blow each angry degree into fusion with another, exploding over a floor already crowded with teen angst. I watch as Dennis, the only special needs student brave enough to show tonight, spins, arms out, to *Toxic* by Britney Spears. His eyes are fixated on the ceiling, yet he miraculously spins around the crowd, crashing into no one. Even though his spin is awkward as he rocks back and forth between his heel and toes with each step, I think he’s lovely because he came to dance. I catch Kylie out of the corner of my eye as I go to the cooler for what has to be my fifth bottled water for the night. Not only does she have the fleshy insulation of an extra 20 pounds, but her pink sweatshirt is zippered right up to her chin. I roll the bottle of Dasani over my forehead and down my cheeks, wondering how she hasn’t collapsed. She’s spent most of the night standing by the lockers with her best friend. No one has asked either one of them to dance, and I know both girls enough to know they didn’t come expecting to be asked. I think they’re brave because they came regardless.

At 9:45 my feet are really starting to kill. I should have known better than to wear shoes with any sort of heel. I know the last dance of the night is coming, and I know for most everyone in the room, it’s a huge deal to dance it with someone special. I have been alone before during one of these last dances. I remember the awkward feeling of waiting that slow song out by the water fountain, guzzling down a gallon of water, pretending I’m worn out and I’ve had it for the night, when inside I’m aching to be asked for one last spin on the floor.

I see Dennis and Kylie mulling around the teachers with a couple other students. I don’t think much of it and I look away, mouthing the words to the night’s last song. Two or three more minutes and I can kick off these shoes and go home to bed.

“Miss Flanders, come dance with us.”

I look to the direction of the voice, and see the teachers have formed a circle with the partner-deprived students. They are expanding and collapsing the circle, holding hands, raising them high in the air when they come together in the middle. I don’t know if it was a student or a teacher who asked me to join, but I do. They open a welcoming hole between a blonde girl I don’t know and one of the paraprofessionals who sat in so
Many of my classes throughout the semester. Even with my swollen feet cascading over a poorly chosen three inch incline, I really enjoy that last dance.

One of the other teachers had told me earlier she chaperoned every junior high dance that year. This was my first dance duty as an adult, and at thirty-one, I found dances were far better than they were at thirteen. At one point during the night I’d told her, “You couldn’t pay me enough to be this age again,” and I meant it more as a celebration of where I am now than a degradation of what I’ve been through. I really have come a full circle, ending up at the school I used to fully prepare myself to leave it far behind. With adult eyes and aging feet, I’m finding there’s quite a bit of celebration to be had in that circle.

**it’s the little things**  
*Kari Diederich*

you remember
that I like
cookies,
not just any kind
though.
the special ones,
painted with
frosting that turns them into
kelly green frogs,
pudgy brown bears,
Miss Piggies.
you remember the why
and the what
and that
i like these cookies.

and i remember it’s the small
things
like that.
A Sense of Belonging
Marlene Rolph

It was early, pre-dawn. I walked the few blocks through Roslindale to the bus stop that would take me to my first class. I was only a month into the semester, but it seemed I had been walking this path endlessly. Traveling through those grey deserted hours, I barely raised my head to look around; a fog engulfed me. I wasn’t thinking ahead to the dreary hours that awaited me in the anatomy lab, the numbing odor of formaldehyde stinging my eyes and nostrils, permeating my every pore and becoming embedded in my clothing. I didn’t dwell on the dizzyingly array of organs, muscles and nerves to be identified and teased apart within the innards of my desiccated greyhound. I wasn’t thinking at all. It was more a feeling than a thought which occupied me then, a gnawing sensation that something was amiss, that something was missing.

As a child of four, I had said to my mother, “I’m going to be an animal doctor; animals need doctors, too’ believing I had invented an entire profession in recognizing the need for it. Then there was an even greater potency in learning that it already existed, and, that it had a name: veterinary medicine. And now, here I was; I held that childhood dream in the palm of my hand, and yet I found it somehow lacking. It wasn’t so much the long grueling hours of study, the fearful state of constantly having to play ‘catch up’ nor my sense that an art major couldn’t handle these graduate level sciences or even the staggering debt I knew I was accruing.

At first, there was a nervous joyfulness in being chosen by Tufts School of Veterinary Medicine. My entering class of 37 strong was made to feel that we were indeed the crème de la crème, that we had ‘made it.’ The fierce competition was over. Yet in some ways, it had only just begun. No one would question our place in this class, and yet each of us had had to be ruthless in order to secure it. But then our like-mindedness, even in the midst of our differences, bound us together and led to an unexpected buoyant sense of camaraderie. As powerful as this was, it wasn’t enough to shake my vague sense of dissatisfaction.

I got to the bus stop and stood there waiting. I was still groggy, despite the vigorous walk through the bracing October air. I glanced idly behind me at the row of neatly trimmed hedges along the suburban sidewalk where I stood. There at waist level, I was surprised to see a tiny snail on one of the top-most leaves, wet with dew. It seemed somehow lost and out of place there, so I gently plucked it off its leaf and bent down to place it in the soft damp soil beneath the shrub. (I think now of my meddling nature. Perhaps the snail was exactly where it wanted to be after all, and had even spent most of the evening getting there, but I had just had to change the course of its passage.)

As I stood up and glanced again at the flattened top of the hedge, I was astounded to see that thousands of snails, of every size, shape and shade of grey, had materialized there out of the thin misty air in the time that it had taken me to straighten up. They covered the entire surface of glistening leaves, yet I had been blind to them only a moment before.
I was enchanted by their arrival. I reached out a tentative index finger to touch a delicate tendril of antenna and felt an electric wave of Consciousness course through my being. It was something, I imagine, like touching the hand of God. I became acutely aware of the life pulsing all around me and through me.

I started walking again. With every step I took, I seemed to live the words, “I belong to the earth.” I didn’t hear them so much as I felt them, come up through the earth itself and reverberate through me. I became, I knew then that I had always been, a single living strand in the web that is all life.

I reached the next bus stop as the driver was pulling up to the curb. I climbed aboard and could only stare in stunned silence at how he and the world had changed. I took a seat in the back, the first passenger of the day. As the miles rolled by in the same trip into downtown Boston I had taken for many long weeks, I saw, with eyes wide open, the familiar skyline transformed into so many shining monuments of Man the Animal. Like the intricate towers of the bower bird, these were built to attract mates, or to establish territory, or to demonstrate power or tool use, or simply for shelter.

As much as we would like to hold ourselves apart, to believe that there is an invisible border which separates us from the ignorant beasts, and indeed that we lord it over them, I saw with startling clarity that this simply isn’t true. And yet within this new-found truth was a glory of its own. It is the community of life in all its diversity which preserves and sustains us. In the concrete jungles we have constructed, we imagine we have conquered nature. And yet we are nature, no more and no less than any of its aspects.

For weeks, I had been slowly formulating questions about just how we may walk gently on this earth, how we can feed ourselves without the grossly inhumane mass production of ‘factory farm’ food animals, how to satisfy our quest for knowledge without using animal models in invasive experiments, how to expand our territories (or simply maintain the ones we have) without destroying all others’, indeed how to enact any way of life which did not rely entirely on the abuse of any and all living species as a means to human ends.

Yet not only were no answers forthcoming, most of the people I encountered did not even ask the same questions. Even my most enlightened professors seemed not to integrate their lives and their work as much as I would have hoped them to, in my desperate search for a model on how to live. I admired them, their scholarship and their diplomacy greatly, and yet I found their tolerant understanding of brutal practices in the name of maintaining open discourse to be discordant. I was being poetical and ironic there (and very judgmental, I know), but the phenomenon is known as cognitive dissonance, I think. When what you see and hear and what you know to be true just doesn’t add up. “How can you know what you know and not be screaming about it?” I wanted to say. And not be screaming.
I felt like a walking contradiction, and I suppose that being so acutely aware of my own failings made them nearly unbearable when seen in others. The farm animal folk seemed to be the worst of all, but could I honestly blame them? The stakes were much higher there. Our need to eat is so fundamental, and they were deeply invested in maintaining the status quo—this system which feeds the wealthiest of nations and quite literally starves the poorest, and ensures that they will go on starving by fueling the population growth in those famished realms.

I had only just become aware of such complex issues in my few weeks here at Tufts. I had turned a blind eye to all evidence hinting at such things in all the years prior to coming here. The bare minimum of science I had studied as an undergrad seemed like a caricature of the in-depth look we were taking now. In my first exposure to the material at this profundity, I had thought I had found the Holy Grail. It seemed to me that such knowledge should beget wisdom of some sort. Now, while I should have been studying anatomy and embryology, I delved deeper and read more broadly under the surface we had only scratched in our minor “Human/Animal Relations” course. I naively believed that some of the answers might be found here, or in the divergent articles I ordered up like mad through interlibrary loan.

Now that I knew what was at stake—the very earth itself and all life on it—I needed this place to show me how to live in accord with these new avowals. At some point, one simply needs to take a stand. Yet I needed something to direct my spirit. I needed someone to help me connect the dots, and not just have them be that trio of ellipses trailing off into nothingness at the end of my questions. I needed some answers. Where are we going? Where have we been? What happens now? I had hoped that I might be educated as a whole person.

But all that was forthcoming was more taxing of my intellect, and through that, an exhaustion of my physical self. Not only did my spirit lack a guide, it was slowly and painfully being ground under the heel of Progress, even as it emerged in its very infancy. These problems I had only just identified could not be solved through more knowledge, and the blind pursuit of knowledge devoid of wisdom was killing me. Yet it was not a turning away from this slow death, but a sudden, spontaneous and indefinable expansion of spirit which led the way. A tiny snail had catalyzed a transformation in me.

There was no longer a question of whether or not to stay. I descended the darkened stairwell which led to the lab and said goodbye to my stunned lab partners. Then I went to the admin building, and in a matter of moments, despite protestations, I ceased to be a veterinary student. I walked out of the building and into the street and looked up at the expanse of clear blue sky for the first time in months, it seemed. I made my way through Chinatown toward the fading green of Boston Common and stood upon the inviting banks of the duck pond. As I watched a majestic pair of Trumpeter swans gliding across its lustrous surface, I saw the full brilliance of the sun herald the start of a new day.●
I.

From the first moment that the headmaster escorted Sharline down to my classroom, she surveyed the scene with an eye far too practiced for a twelve year old girl. She looked like Billie Holiday, only darker. I wondered, even in that instant, if her path would be as troubled. Her gaze moved surreptitiously from one child to the next, as if she were casing us out, assessing how strong or savvy each of her classmates appeared to be. When her eyes lit on mine, she smiled widely. Before too long, I was to learn why.

I put her to the task of filling out a chart about herself. I used these posters when new students entered to gauge their level of preparation. I often got students from various West Indian islands who had attended little to no school and skills varied. At the bottom of the charts, I had spaces for them to draw pictures of what they looked like and what they wanted to look like. I had each student’s chart up on the wall.

Sharline took to the task immediately and with a fair degree of confidence. She could read easily and filled in the spaces for favorite color, birthday and favorite place with little hesitation. I was beginning to get the sense of a very self-assured girl who would be able to move on to another school after finishing this year. She worked diligently at the pictures, and spent quite a bit of time on them. By this time, my attention had been distracted. I didn’t see the pictures until she announced she was done. What I saw stunned me.

The self portrait on the left (what I look like) was a fairly accurate rendition of her appearance. She had crayoned in the tight black curls of her short afro over a darkly shaded face. But when I looked at the right hand side, I had to stifle a gasp. The girl Sharline had drawn to represent what she wanted to look like had long blond hair that hung straight below her crayoned shoulders. The eyes were blue, of course and framed with light brown eyelashes. There was a faint blush of light pink carefully shaded onto the cheeks. I have never seen a sadder drawing in my life.

I didn’t want to hang up Sharline’s testimony to her own self-hate, but I didn’t see how I could avoid it, so the poster went up. I did stutter out something about was she sure that was what she wanted to look like.

She nodded, looking at me almost reverently, “I want to look like you, Miss.”

Interlude:

(Having grown up in New Hampshire, I thought the difference between black and white people would be obvious at first glance. I wasn’t prepared for my first class in Bermuda where some of the students, especially the St, David’s islanders, were so white I couldn’t tell they were black at all. Saint David’s was a small island out beyond Saint George’s where the US Naval base and NASA tracking station were located. Through the years there had been so much intermarriage and interbreeding between the local
population and the white soldiers stationed on the base that the people had grown light enough to pass.

Adrene Lamb was one of the lightest of the light. Her skin was as light as mine, even lighter when I had been in the sun. Her hair was light brown and curly. Her cousin, Kenny was also in the class. When we switched to summer uniforms in the spring, I was startled to see his legs were the same light tan as the rest of him, having expected them to be winter white.

This presented a problem for these students in that they might be taken for white, with all that that implied. To compensate, they wore Ethiopian striped armbands and the girls wore red, green and yellow beads in their hair. Some tried to grow dreadlocks. It was as if they had to advertise their blackness. I didn’t understand it at first, until I came to know the kinds of things whites on the island would feel free to say when they thought there were no blacks present.)

III.

Johnny was one of those kids who made you wonder just how he functioned outside the school. The staff would wonder if he behaved normally while out on the street. His behavior was, well, crazy. He liked to loudly sing Reggae songs when others were trying to work. One of his favorite tricks was to hang in the door of the staff lounge during breaks, amusing himself by having the staff shoo him away. He always wore a wide grin, was very agreeable in his defiance, and seemed grateful for any kind of attention at all. No matter how sternly he was spoken to, the smile just got wider.

Johnny was never really disagreeable, although he wouldn’t listen to teachers. When I would ask him to stop singing when others were trying to read, he would pipe up, “Sorry, Miss.” But a few minutes later he would start to hum. The humming would increase in volume until he would scream out, “Rasta man vibration, yeah, iree!” and grin almost ear to ear.

The other students would complain, “Make him stop, Miss!”

Of course, I kind of understood why this kind of behavior was more amusing for Johnny than trying to read the primer texts which were all he could handle. When he read them, he mouthed the words to himself haltingly in a small voice, not at all like his booming Rasta one.

I was more understanding of that than his forays to the staff room door. The school was laid out in a series of buildings, each two rooms long and one room deep. Because of the heat, the doors were always open on each side to get a cross breeze. Johnny would appear at one door, be shooed away only to appear again at the other.

Generally, it was the British staff and me who spent time in the staff room on breaks when we weren’t on duty. I wasn’t comfortable with the racial division, but didn’t know how to approach doing anything about it. Usually, Sheila, my only friend, and I were in there with Mr. Jeeves. Sheila, who looked a lot like J. K. Rowling, was married to an American who worked at the naval base. Mr. Jeeves, the shop teacher, was a small middle aged man who had lived on the island for a number of years. I thought I knew him pretty well, although we weren’t on a first name basis. Bermuda is a formal place. In the four years I worked at the school, Sheila was the only one who ever called me Meg.

Mr. Jeeves had a better relationship with Johnny in some respects because shop did not involve reading. Johnny liked to make things, and would hoard the small items he
created in the shop. Johnny didn’t have much. He lived at a home for abandoned children. His one uniform was worn and missing a few buttons on the shirt. One day when he didn’t come to school, I called the home, to discover that his absence stemmed from his shoes having fallen apart. They didn’t have any others for him. The headmaster found some and he was back singing his reggae songs in the afternoon.

While Johnny liked shop, he seemed to particularly enjoy annoying Mr. Jeeves with his behavior. When Jeeves was in the staff lounge, Johnny would step up the volume and frequency of his visits, to the point where Jeeves would get as crazy as if Johnny were a particularly aggressive wasp bent on attacking. A few times Jeeves was even driven to close the doors, but Sheila and I would protest because the heat quickly became unbearable.

One hot afternoon when this was all reaching a new level of aggravation, we were complaining a bit about how we wished he would find something else to amuse himself. Jeeves had taken to muttering to himself after shooing Johnny away. On this day, he looked over at me where I was sitting in a plastic upholstered chair at the other side of the staff room. I remember how his short frame was backlit by the sunlight coming in off the playground side of the room, across the linoleum floor. In a moment where time stopped he said, “Bloody hell, I don’t know why we ever freed them!”

Evidently he expected me to share his sentiments, and that shocked me as much as what he had said. Sheila’s face betrayed no reaction. I looked at Johnny, who was still there, close enough to the door to have heard. Johnny didn’t react at all. Jeeves followed my line of vision and said, “Don’t worry, he’s too dumb to understand anything.”
The Secret

Lucia Acevedo

When I was a child, I got angry with my mother so I took her favorite necklace and buried it in the back yard. And, one day she was invited to a party. She chose her nicest dress and wanted to use her necklace. She was asking everyone about it. No one could help her to find it. Even I was recommending her to use another one because she probably had lost it the last time she wore it.

I was so angry that I let her go to the party without her favorite necklace. When she has forgotten the situation I decided to tell her the true. But, first I share it with my sister. My sister told me no to say anything yet because she was still think about it and she might be very angry with me.

So, I waited a few days more. And, when I told her what I had done I was expecting the worst from her. While I was talking, I was looking at her, analyzing her gestures. But to my surprise she did nothing.

Another day, there was a family party. We were supposed to go as a family. Everyone was almost ready to go, even me. My mom said: You are going to stay at home. We need someone to take care of the house and you are the ideal person to do this.

As my mom said, I stayed home. That made me angry too. But, I knew that if I did something else because of this, things would go worst. So I decided not to do anything.

Everyone got home after the party. They were talking about it and how they had enjoyed being there. My sister said she met interesting people. I got curious and I started to ask her what else she did at the party. She told me that there were people from different language and culture. She got to talk to a Japanese guy who speaks three languages, Japanese, Spanish and English. I ask her how she could communicate with him, in English or in her little Spanish or Japanese. She said: -we have a short conversation in English. -And, when he did not understand me I tried to pick some Japanese words to explain so that the conversation could flow. I asked: - What about him? -He speaks good English. –What was he doing here? -He was enrolled in a program at a university of George Washington in D.C. –What was the program he was in? -It was a Master in Business Administration and International Studies. –Are you going to see him again? -I don’t know, maybe.

The following night, he showed up to the house. I saw my sister’s face when she saw him. She did not move a muscle. She was confused, and didn’t know what to do. Now, she has to dress again and see what his interest is. She wasn’t expecting that would happen. He was in front of the house. Seems like if he was looking for something he did not know what was. He turns several times. Then he raised his eyes and saw my sister who was observing from a window. . She had just arrived from
work and felt she needed to organize things for the next day. She thought for a moment and finally decided to go down. And, did a signal to him indicating she was coming. He waited about three minutes. She got down and greets him as if she would not have been thinking of anything before taking the decision of going to invite him to get into the house.

She offers him something to drink.
-What do you have? He asked.
-I have water, some fruits and nothing else.
He decided to drink water and, she brought it to him. Then they sat one in front of the other.
-Nice house! He said.
-Oh, thanks
-It is simple, but very nice.
- Today is my birth day!
-Oh! You didn’t say anything about it last night.
-I don’t care.
-Are you going to a party with your friends?
-No.
-You preferred to come over to visit me?
-What are you going to do tomorrow after work?
She was working for the government. She was training fellow workers interested in apply for an international position in social work in the third world. She worked 9 hours a day. She usually got home after 5:00 in the afternoon, of course.
-I don’t know yet. –I have not plans.
-Is there a possibility for you and me to do something together, like a dinner or so?
She did not say anything, for a moment too long.
-If you don’t have any interest it’s okay.
-Why would I not be interested?
He assumes that she was accepting his proposal, and arranged everything.
She thought the dinner would be on Saturday. That day was Wednesday and the next day they were talking about the diner again. After a few minutes she understood that the diner would be that very day.

They had diner together. They talk about them for a while and a little about their families. They drank some cups of wine. And they dance. After dancing a couple of kisses came up. That’s what she said when an eleven year old girl asks her about her date.

They went to another area of the restaurant.
-You know, when I saw you at the party, I thought you were relative of the host family.
-You remember when we were near the drink stand.
-I remember when I was, but I didn’t see you.
-You impact me once I saw you.
- I was also after we started talking. At the beginning you look like Japanese but after a while your appearance changed and someone can get confused. You have kind of blue eyes, and very white skin.
-You know, my father has blue eyes, and he is from Belgian, and my mom is Japanese.

Their relationship began that day. They both had pans to go on a trip to different places, but this time with the same purpose. They wanted to visit new countries just for pleasure. He wanted to go to Haiti and she to Mexico. They share theirs plans and agree to see each other again when they return.

He returned first to DC. He was almost missing her and decided to send her an e-mail. “Hi Lisa, how are things going there? -You know, I have to go to Mexico on duty for my office. –You think we can meet there? -Hope you are enjoying your trip. See you there”. That was not possible.

Their relationship was kind of a secret she did not want our parents knew about it until they were quite sure of that. He agrees because of his position with a good friend of her family with whom he was working. He was ten years or so older than she. She might have thought that he had another reason to keep it in secret, but he was a very transparent guy. He just wanted to be very professional and respect their relationship.

There was several occasions when they were with some of the same people that went to the party where the met. People began to notice they were together most of the time and started to ask indirectly. He always kept saying “we are just good friends”.

One day, she called him to let him know she had to go on a trip. He wasn’t home, so she left him a message.
-Hi David!
-I just wanted to let you know that I have to go to California, where my father lives.
-My father was fishing and now he is in a hospital. He probably needs to have a surgery.
-He tossed his arm and can’t bear the hurt.
-I feel bad about it.
When he got home after work, checked his messages found out what was going on. He called her.
-when are you leaving to California?
-Tomorrow.
-How long are you going to be there?
-I don’t know.
-So you are not going to be here when I leave to England?
-No
-Can we get together tonight?
-Sure!
-Let’s have dinner at my apartment.
-Okay, I will be there early to help you.
They say good bye to each other.
She got to his apartment on time to help him with dinner. They had a great dinner together.
Suddenly he said:

“You know, I have fall in love in the past, but it wasn’t worthy”. She did not understand what he meant. But, he was so serious that she preferred not to ask. She just tried to let him know that things, with she, could be different. She wasn’t sure he understood that. Once again some kisses and hugs came up. They had a great time together, the best one in their relationship. They both said they will miss each other.

She had taken a taxi to get to his apartment. After being together for several hours, he took her home.

The next day, she left to California. While she was out he did not call or send an email to her. She decided to see how things were going with him. So, this time she sent him and email,

“Hi David,
I just wanted to know is everything is okay. I am fine here. I hope you are fine too”.

She met a friend who took her to different places. One of those places was the university from where she wrote him. Not answer. Three days later, she decided to write him again. This time she was a little worry. She wanted to know if things were okay with them, so she wrote:

“Hi David,
I haven’t heard from you in time. However, I have written you twice. I am serious about it.
Hope you are okay,
See you”
After this letter, he responded.
“Hi Lisa!!!”
I am sorry!
Everything is okay. I was in the mountains all the weekend and I am just arriving. You know, the summer, here in England, is hard.”

Both of them returned, he from England and she from California. She returned first. The day he returned she received call from him. She wasn’t at home he left a message.

-I am here. -I would like to see you. –Tell me when or give me a call whenever you can. She called him as soon as she heard the message.

-Hi David
-How are you?
-I am okay and you?
-I am okay too.
-Can we get together today at any time?
-Yes,
-Why don’t you come to my apartment in an hour or so?
-It’s okay. See you then.
-See you.
It was 3:00 P.M. when she got to his apartment. They greeted each other normally. It wasn’t like they had been apart for a month or more. I wonder if it was because she got to talk to him just once while they were traveling. Things seemed to be different. She would have liked to have had more contact with him during his trip. They just kissed like friends. And talk about nothing. After a few minutes they hugged each other with some passion. But not kisses yet.

Time went fast. Six o’clock, his cell rang.

-Hi Michelle, he said. -I’ll see you there, okay.

-Are you going out? She asked.

-Yes. He explained who Michelle was so that everything would be clear. They hugged each other again and then kisses came up.

-When are we going to meet again? She asked. -We could get together tonight once again. -I could go pick you if you want. She said –Okay. She was in bed when he called. -What are you doing? -I am in bed. -What about you? -I just finish a meeting can I go to pick you? -Why don’t we have breakfast together, tomorrow, it is Sunday. He agreed. The next morning he came to her house at eleven o’clock or so. They had breakfast together. They spent the day at her house. She wasn’t that a good cook. So, they prepared some food for themselves.

The next day both of them went to their work. He was very involved in a community program. This required a lot of traveling for him. And she also had to train different groups at the same time, which also required some traveling from her. It kept them apart for almost three months. A few e-mails were the only contact they kept during this time and a call she gave him. By chance, they got together once. Things seem to be okay but not that okay. She did not know what was going on. But no talks no questions.

December came. I heard my mom saying that she had the necklace. She had seen me when I was burying it in the back yard. And, David and Lisa were together in another event where their relationship was evident. People start to ask what was going on with them, and things couldn’t be a secret no more. Lisa said they were boyfriends to everyone who asked. He didn’t say anything, but seems to be okay with the information she was given to askers. ●
There is an adage that I will paraphrase for the purpose of a confession I am about to make. It goes like this: power will fill any void, and if an opening exists, the powerful will find the weakness in others. I tell this story as a kind of lesson.

Years ago, a friend who taught at the Bank Street School in NYC, introduced me to something called “Power in the Political Process.” She had helped develop this unit to teach students about politics and civics and the roles of the president, vice president, secretary of state and the cabinet. The backbone of the unit was a type of role play whereby students were assigned positions and had responsibilities that were closely related to those positions. For example, the secretary of the interior was in charge of keeping the room neat, emptying pencil sharpeners, asking students to pick up candy wrappers on the floor, etc. The secretary of transportation was in charge of deliveries such as taking the attendance to the office or returning books left in the room. The secretary of health took attendance and so on. You get the picture. And, of course, the president ran the show by asking each person to do his or her job, which meant calling them up in front of the room to give local or national news, reading the morning notices or holding open forums to discuss pressing matters. The theory behind the practice was to give students ownership and power over the classroom and take some of the burden off the teacher. Did I say that? It may have been true, to some extent, but there were always issues that would spring up which required intervention - breaking up the occasional power struggle or dealing with conflicts that arose during discussion forums or just plain putting a stop to something that had gotten out of hand. The story I am about to tell is just such an issue.

Every year brings a new group of personalities, each with its positive and not so positive qualities; each with his or her stories; each with lives outside of school. That year had an interesting mix and one student, in particular, who stood out. Hannah was a large boned girl, about 5’ 9’’ tall with a wide attractively impish face, sparkling dark eyes that danced when she smiled, freckles, thin lips, and curly dark brown hair. Hannah was taller than most of her classmates and me, and she wielded a power over them I had never seen before in a student. Years later, I learned from an administrator about students like Hannah whom other students are drawn to, for whom they would do anything, and about whom they emulate. Those are the ones companies pinpoint to set the trends, so they give them clothing or skateboards or video games or whatever else they manufacture in order to get other kids to buy those products.

Hannah was more than a trend setter; she was a born leader. I was fortunate to have her company in my eighth grade advisory that year, and when it came time to assign positions for Power in the Political Process, there was no doubt who would be president. And while most positions rotated, everyone agreed that Hannah should remain president for the entire year. Hannah took to her role with natural ease, ordering students to water plants, wash boards, clean lockers. “Jim, take these books back to the library, and while...
you’re at it, drop this permission slip off in the office. Shea, don’t forget you have to give the weather report this morning.” I was in heaven with her help, and my room was the beneficiary. Hannah ran the classroom with confidence. Students would check with Hannah to see what she thought before they acted, and even I looked to Hannah for approval.

Should our advisory sponsor an angel in the Littlest Angel Program? Should we compete in the Channel One Contest? I let Hannah decide who would take which positions in the upcoming weeks, and plan the morning and afternoon agendas. She made my life in advisory a breeze.

One day, when band was canceled, we had extra time in our afternoon advisory to hold an open forum. Students decided on the topics of discussion depending on the current crisis or anything else that was important and on their minds. That day, Hannah discussed how the school schedule needed an overhaul. She elicited responses from several classmates, all of whom agreed that starting school fifteen minutes later, cutting out morning advisory would give them a little more time to sleep in, a little more time to linger in the shower, a little more time to apply eye makeup, a little more time to eat their Captain Crunch cereal.

One boy had his hand up. “I wish we didn’t have to be here so early.”

“Yeah, me too,” another boy piped up. “I never have enough time to eat breakfast, and they say it’s the most important meal of the day.”

“Yeah, they say it helps you learn better.”

“What about you, Mrs. M, how would you like to have a little extra time in the morning?” While I thought it sounded like a good idea, I didn’t admit it, and I never expected anyone would consider taking the conversation any further than the discussion.

The next morning at 7:30, not a single student showed up for advisory. I waited, thinking that this was some kind of joke, looked at the calendar to make sure it wasn’t April first, and then started to circle the date on each of the attendance cards. 7:40 came and went, and still no students. The principal happened to walk by my room and noticed that my students weren’t there. “Where’s your advisory?” she asked. I shrugged my shoulders. She looked incredulously at the empty room and said, “They can’t all be sick. Is this some kind of joke?” I smiled and shrugged my shoulders again and shook my head slowly. My smile began to fade, and I found myself telling her what had happened the previous day at the open forum. She wasn’t happy that I had let them talk about coming to school late and suggested I give Hannah a talking to. I agreed and told her it wouldn’t happen again.

The eighth grade students’ first class that year was art, and at 7:50, I decided to take a stroll down to the art room to see if they had arrived.

Sure enough, they were all busy working on their projects. They greeted me warmly, but I saw a few smirks and heard a couple of chuckles. Hannah was busy
painting her papier mache bull a neon green color, and I walked up to her and asked if I could see her in the hall. Hannah said sure, and asked if she should wash out her brush. I told her it wasn’t necessary, that I only wanted to speak to her for a few moments then I walked into the hallway and waited for her to come out. She must have decided to wash out her brush because it took an extra long time for her to come. Finally, she sauntered out of the room and asked, “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Did you tell the students to skip advisory this morning?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“Well, you can’t do that. You can’t just change the schedule whenever you feel like it and think it’s going to be okay with me or the school. From now on-“

She interrupted me, “I thought I was president,” she said.

“You are president, but-“

Again, she interrupted me. “If I’m the president, who are you?”

In that split second, I thought carefully about what I was going to say. I knew that all of my power over her and the others for the rest of the year depended on my answer. For a brief second, I paused, not knowing what to say.

“God,” I said, looking her straight in the eyes. “I’m God.” She smiled and I smiled, and our silence meant that we had come to an understanding.●
Mill Ghosts
Stephen R. Goyette

“Been a long time dude, what are you up to these days?” He stood with his legs solid and planted shoulder-width apart.

“Yeah, I’m teaching up at the academy, goin’ to grad school here in town.”

I hadn’t finished speaking before I saw his eyes flick away from mine in the way people do when they’re not really interested in what you’re saying and just waiting for their turn.

“Yeah, I’m doin’ sales now, makin’ money and...”

Now my eyes flicked and I looked over his shoulder for only a moment and down the rolling hill and across West Ave. to the red brick mills along the river, red themselves in the rusted late sun. The Merrimack River is a broad rushing river over algae rocks and downed trees and along each side of the broad riversides there are ancient, grim brick mills. Industry and water always married whether on the silt sides of the legend Nile or among the oily surfaces of the fiery Cuyahoga River that actually lit on fire in the 1970s and burned, burned, burned. Cleveland has cleaned it up since, but still the image of that water-fire hangs in bars and restaurants and on a local beer bottle label.

“Hey!”

“Sorry, what was that?” my eyes flicked back into contact with Jake’s again.

“I said, ‘how was Indiana’ man?”

“Ohio”

“What?”

“It was Ohio, man. It was great.”

And I thought about telling him about the burning river and how much longer autumn lasts out there and the smell of those fields in August when you first get back on campus, but his eyes flicked again and I brought up the Red Sox. As we talked about the American League I could see crashing pearl foam where the river runs fast just below the faded brick dam and fishery; And rumbles heavy black and green, between dull brown red brick mills, themselves shaped like bricks, some flaking, chipped corners wearing slowly, slowly like the river gently washing granite boulders into small pebbles washing out to sea. I liked to think there were spirits in the mills; Specters and phantoms of mill-workers in coveralls and they work on spectral textile machinery of Industrial Revolution New England. I imagine they speak in low French above the silent din of the ghost looms. French is the forgotten tongue of Manchester, the French of Quebec City high above the seaway.

“I think Wells will come around. He’s had bad starts before and come out all right.”

A horn blared at the intersection near the corner of the park where Jake and I talked baseball and the sudden noise gave me a reason to look away from Jakes face up at Sainte Marie’s cathedral looming behind us. This church stretches its mottle green copper spire into as much sky as any modern building in town and its lines and shape would fit
In Old Quebec or Amiens in France where John the Baptists head rests under an alter. What marries Sainte Marie to Manchester is that all of the cathedral’s powerful shape is made up of brick. The cathedral of mill-brick with the sparkling pepper and gray glint of granite on the corners and gazing down on the mills and the river cast in the form of Joseph and Mary.

Jake moves on to girls we used to go to school with who he had seen on the street or in a bar. I’m just nodding now and smile just a little when I see the fleur de lei, symbol of French royalty painted in the street in the center of a four way intersection at the bottom of the hill below the park. I had seen it before but now with its paint fading from endless tires, the city feels like an empty museum standing there in sight of the black top fleur de les, and the redbrick mills, the cathedral, and I thought about the spirits working the spectral looms and my grandfather who was the last in the family to grow up speaking French; And this city is his museum and the mausoleum of the city where he sat on benches and talked about baseball.

“Maggie said she saw you at the Tavern” Jake says and I think of brown walls, ashtrays, empty green beer bottles and feel like we are ghosts to each other, only the residue of who we were when we were closer and our eyes didn’t flick away when we spoke. I thought that ghosts are not always dead and the ragged gap in the experience of each other’s lives, the non-witness, had made us familiar specters, rattling our polite chains and nodding and smiling, strange to each other.

“Well, it was good to see you dude.”

“Yeah man, take it easy.”

As Jake walked away I thought about shoveling his driveway to play basketball and how hard we used to laugh before I went away to school in the middle-west, Ohio by the headwaters of the Cuyahoga, the burning river. ●
Second Chance

Jenifer J. Pellerin

As Millicent trudged knee deep in her thoroughly trashed closet, she caught the glimpse of something out of her left eye. She was finally committed to cleaning the damned closet after almost a year of shoving junk in there that she didn’t feel like looking at anymore. Anytime something didn’t seem to have a more convenient place to live, she would open the closet just wide enough to jettison the thing inside and slam the door before everything spilled out. However, on this particular morning, she grit her teeth, turned the knob, and after the spectacular deluge of her life’s detritus lay about her feet, she decided it was not in fact time, but way past time. It was approximately at this moment that the aforementioned item caught her eye.

Millicent squinted into the shadows of the closet and reached forward. Her fingers grazed the surface of the thing only slightly before she grasped it wholly in one hand. She let the weight of it soak into her fingers and tingle slowly up her arm. With the help of the door jam, Millicent pulled herself back out of the closet and rested neatly upon her heels. She looked at the thin volume with scrunched up nose and forehead, but in moments, her face softened and a slight smile came upon her lips. She gently pulled back the cover to examine the contents.

In nearly cryptic scrawl, Jordan Webb pulled the breath from Millicent’s lips for the first time in years. Spider legs crept quickly up and down her arms and neck, yet the smile lengthened. Just as she remembered that breathing is essential to living, her eyes firmly planted on the scrawls of ink just below the obligatory well-wishing where seven digits stare back.

As though pulled by invisible strings of starlight, Millicent found her hand on the cordless phone pressing the buttons of Jordan Webb’s phone number. Her mind raced with personal reprimands. “She can’t possibly live there anymore…You’re an idiot to think…. What if she answers? What if she doesn’t remember…” Even as the ringing began, that long forgotten moment slipped back into her consciousness.

_I sheepishly pull myself through the halls of St. Claire’s High School. Clutching the day’s coursework to my chest and head bowed, I bob and weave through the onslaught of rowdy teens trying desperately to get to the next room and end the threat of humiliation._

Too late.

_Stupid Bobby Dresdan mortifies me with the flash of his hand. Sends my books flying all over the hall._

_Laughter echoes._

_Her face appears between two of the echoes and she pushes her way into my circle of tears._
I can’t breathe.

We both bend to retrieve my yearbook at the same time and our hands touch ever so slightly. If your heart just stops beating, do you die? I don’t. For that one moment, I live.

Jordan smiles, opens my yearbook in front of everyone, clicks her pen with conviction, and scrawls a missive that shames the echoes into recession. More importantly, Jordan’s greenish eyes meet mine and her gaze makes even my toes leap.

“See you around, Millie,” she says before she turns on her heel and strides down the hall.

“Hello?”
Click.

At the sound of a decidedly male voice, Millicent hung up. She closed the yearbook and let it slip from her fingers. A thud of finality echoed in the room as the window to her past hit the floor. She stared at her feet for a long, hard moment, before turning slowly back towards the closet.

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“Who was it, Mike?”
“Ghost call.”
“What’s the number on the caller ID?”
“Um…. Millicent Dubner.”
“I remember her…” Jordan mused. “She was the quiet girl from my Economics class Senior year.”
“That dork?”
“Shut up. You’re such an ass sometimes.”
“Whatever.”

Jordan flopped on the couch dismissing her brother. As he turned away, ten-year-old ghosts materialized around her.

I can hear them jeering down the hall. Bobby’s making an ass of himself again. Who’s his victim this time?
I round the corner just in time to see him flip the books from her cautious hands. The masses circle around her as her lips quake.

Images whirl around me, but I’m held by that inescapable recognition… that stirring in my core. My eyes travel down her face to her naked knees and scuffed Mary-Janes.

I push through the tumorous mass and glimpse Millie’s welling, puffy eyes. My chest aches for her . . . or is it for me? Why am I doing this? Why can’t I just leave her alone?
Like a wind-up soldier, I collect her yearbook off the ground. I look Bobby Dresdan right in the eye as I open the cover and write my name and number inside. He sneers and turns down the hall.

As I hand the yearbook to Millie, our eyes meet but I fight to deny myself.

As Mike shrugged and walked into the adjoining room, Jordan sat back into the folds of the couch. Her eyes slowly averted upwards and a sigh slipped from her lips. She curled her knees up closer to her chest and recalled the day she wrote her phone number in Millie’s yearbook. Why had Millie never called? Jordan could still clearly envision her curly black hair and school-girl socks hiked up to just below those cute dimpled knees. A curious feeling stirred within Jordan . . . One she had tried to drink away in her teen years, but came to accept, even embrace in her maturity. Could it be?

Jordan’s eyes spotted the caller ID box, and as though pulled by invisible strings of stars, she found herself holding the phone and pressing the numbers.
The Two Last Days

Helen Sullivan

Breathing or not breathing? It was hard to know. Only by moving my face close to hers could I hear a whisper of air. The familiar face contorted. Closed eyes and mouth frozen open made me think of a war-protest painting of Picasso. Was the title Guernica? Doesn’t matter because mother wouldn’t be protesting her death. “I’m ready to die,” had been her calm assessment for a few years. Still alive, but not really with us.

Tear-drops of morphine trickled through a clear tube into a vein on her left hand, nearly pointing to the filigreed wedding band. Never had that sliver of platinum gold come off her hand, even decades after her life-mate’s death. I could imagine her saying again, “There’s nothing like a good marriage.” But she might as well have been a still-life painting.

People were everywhere in the small room: all five children, spouses, many of the fourteen grandchildren and one of the fourteen great-grandchildren. To tend their patient, hospice nurses walked past the cozy furniture of the family area. Prominently displayed was a very old photo of a very young nurse in a bibbed uniform and white hat starched to the stiffness of cardboard, a reminder of this patient’s life of service to others. Though trained as a maternity nurse, mother had given end-of-life care to her mother-in-law, her father, and her husband. She did this in a home setting without a support system. Now that I could see the physical drudgery of moving, cleaning, medicating, hydrating people who are loosing control of body and spirit, I could understand mother’s horrific fear of dying in a nursing home, alone. Mother died on July 25, 2004.

But her last day of living was the day before, and what a day it was! As family matriarch, she reigned for a full day, using her diminishing energy to ease our pain, communicating with squeezes of a hand, a look in her eyes, and words. It did not matter that she spoke with an unnatural slowness, segmenting words into their individual sounds. We were just thrilled that she had enough command of herself to speak. Her communications met the needs of everyone.

To her baby brother, 80 years old, “You’re a good, boy, Ed. And did I ever tell you about the scariest day of my life? No? Well, you were just a toddler. I sat you up on the windowsill. The window was open. WOOSH, you were gone! I thought you’d be killed by the fall. When I went outside, there you were. You fell on your behind.” That five-minute stretch of a story made Uncle Ed’s shoulders shake with laughter. Uncle Ed’s tall frame bent over the raised hospital bed to kiss his sister’s cheek and whisper a final, “Goodbye and say hello to Eleanor.” No one who witnessed this gentle parting would ever guess that mother was the adopted sister of this man who was still grieving the death of his wife, Eleanor.

Mother cautioned travelers to be careful on the ride home and had stories for everyone. We hung onto her words and shared our own stories with one another. For
some time, the hospice room sounded more like a wedding reception with hoots of laughter drifting out. I kept the door closed so that we wouldn’t disturb anyone else in this small community hospital but mother glowed in the midst of such celebration. Having all five children together with her was the greatest holiday ever.

Sometime during that day, I heard what I needed to hear, “Don’t think that I don’t appreciate what you’ve done for me, dear. Never forget that I love you.” My mother’s name lives on through me. As her namesake, I have quite a heritage to lean on and the comfort of knowing that she showed us how to live even as she was dying. ●
Mary
Elizabeth Paul

“Can I talk to you about something personal?” Marilyn says peeking in my door. I’m working with my students creating a list of reasons why we read. I walk to the door and Marilyn motions me out into the hall.

“Diane just called me. She talked to Mary’s family and they have said they’d like visitors, but if we’re going to go, we need to go today.” Her shoulders slump. “So after school Cathy, Sheri and I are going to head to Boston and you’re welcome to come with us.”

Suddenly my chest fills with Styrofoam.

“OK, I’ll most likely go. I’ll talk to you at lunch,” I tell her.

The class finishes their list and then I read them “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros.

“Today I wish I was one-hundred-and-two instead of eleven because if I was one-hundred-and-two I’d have known what to say…” Cisneros’ Rachel explains.

I’m an adult. I’ve been through this many times. When my grandfather was in his last hours I was able to tell him I loved him and was grateful he had been in my life. I was also able to tell him it was ok if he needed to let go. But, Mary is only 16. Is it acceptable to tell someone so young it’s ok to let go? After all, isn’t that what this visit is?

Mary has been out of my daily life for a little over a year now. When she graduated from eighth grade and left us for high school I let my guard down. I began letting myself feel emotion again. We were no longer on the daily roller coaster of Mary’s health. We got updates, but she was no longer wheeling down the hallway sharing her mortality with us every day for seven hours. No longer wheeling into my room to have lunch and to plan for Student Council, to plan for tomorrow.

The thing is, Mary has had so many close calls and I keep waiting to hear, Oh, she’s back in action. They’re trying another experimental drug. And then all this emotional exhaustion will have been for naught. A major low and now back to some sense of normalcy. She’s not ready to let go. She still has hope for tomorrow. But now it sounds like there is no hoping left.

The ride to Boston finds Cathy and Sheri talking non-stop in the front. Marilyn and I interject things every once in a while. Otherwise, we’re silent. My mind’s on everything and anything as we sit in traffic.

We finally get to Boston Children’s and get the car parked. We hit the ladies’ room in the lobby and I brush my teeth. Someone wonders out loud if it will be crowded. Someone else responds it might be.

I’m not sure I’ll be able to deal with tons of people. How can I talk when everyone is listening?

The elevator lands with a lurch at the seventh floor and Sheri leads us to Mary’s room. Friends and their parents, as well as school staff, are spilling out into the hallway. Carey, Mary’s Dad, gives us a big hello and Cathy and Sheri walk right in. My eyes focus on Mary and I take one step inside the room. My knees start to buckle and I back away and leave down the hall.
The tears are streaming down my face as I look for a place to sit. I finally find some chairs in a corner with a television. I park myself there and stare straight ahead. From my seat I can see everyone coming from or going to the elevators. The staff is changing. There’s a dad and mom holding their two-year-old saying goodbye to the uncle who is taking off for Hawaii in the morning. A man rounds the corner with a lethargic, curly haired boy who has got to be younger than two, in a little tykes push wagon. The little boy is shaking a rattle and smiling. The man grins at me and the tears keep falling. A mom is pulling her six year old around. “Stop Mom. Sit here,” he tells her. “Are you gonna keep pulling me around?”

“Are you gonna pay me?” She smiles back at him.

“Nooooo Momma,” he giggles. She gets up and continues on. It’s the curly-haired boy’s third time around the loop and this time I notice his New Hampshire license plate that says N-8 DOG. He’s just holding his rattle now.

“Someone’s getting sleepy,” the man who is pushing says.

I go back to the room and everyone’s inside. Wanda, Mary’s Mom, gives me a big smile and Carey comes over and says it’s ok, I won’t tire her.

“I might faint,” I try to whisper. I’m not sure the words even come out at all. I look at Mary and see Sue, her sister, sleeping curled up under a quilt next to her. My eyes well up again, worse this time, and I’m speeding down a different hall trying to find a place less conspicuous because this time I’m going to make noise.

I find a deep windowsill and let my shoulders shake. There is this raspy noise in my throat and my neck is soaked. I don’t turn but I can hear N-8 DOG rolling past me. His caregiver is just murmuring to him now. I am sitting there I don’t know how long when Marilyn comes up and tells me Mary wants to go to sleep, so if I want to talk to her I need to hurry up.

Talk to her? Can I just hold her hand and cry?

I finally stand up and go back. There’s a wall near her room that is covered with snapshots of patients. I hear a door open and turn to see N-8 DOG’s driver.

“Have a good night,” he says. Where are N-8 DOG’s parents? I wonder. Distracted by this I walk back to Mary’s room. People are spread out now. Two more moms of classmates show up. They’ve got vases of flowers and Mary’s paintings to display in the room. There are four groups of conversations going on. I listen and smile and nod here and there.

Mary’s nurse is here to change her fluids and check her meds. I find my legs carrying me to the side of the bed. As the nurse fusses with tubes, Wanda puts a box of tissues on the bed in front of me and says it’s ok.

“Is it really?” I ask.

“Yes, her grandmother can’t not,” she tells me. “Hey, Ms. Paul’s here,” she says to Mary.

“Where?”

“Right here.”

“Oh, Ms. Paul, I didn’t recognize you.”

“It’s brown now.” I grab a hank of my hair and hold it up.

“It looks really nice. Wow, I really like it.” A few seconds pass as I wait for the nurse to finish. “Are you bored?” she asks.
“Me? No, I’m just waiting for her to finish up.” I motion my head to the nurse. I’m leaning forward now, trying to get closer to Mary.

“Good, because I like talking with you.”

My heart flips. I flash through pictures of Mary wheeling herself into my room for lunch on Thursdays. “So what’s going on?” I’d always ask her, and she would open up and fill me in on new drugs, new procedures, new dilemmas, and new triumphs. Our Thursday lunches left me feeling charged up. She was so honest and hopeful.

The nurse is fumbling around with more tubes and I have to move further away. Mary’s right hand is twitching and I put my hand on her arm and rub it lightly. “Is this too hard?” I ask.

“No, you’ve got really soft hands. I’m sorry. I’m itchy. Dad? I’m really itchy.”

“Hun, they just put the new medication in. You’ll be ok in a minute,” he reassures her.

I look to the foot of the bed and see Carey. It’s then that I realize the room has cleared out. Everyone is standing just outside the door. They have given me space, but now what do I say?

This is the one part I do not remember clearly, what I said to her. I know we chatted for a minute and I then I bent down and thanked her for being in my life.

I kissed her forehead and then I backed away. ●
“I have learned not to be afraid to read a 600-page book,” Randy wrote on his final exam. “I never would have dared to try this one before, but now I figure if I can read Shakespeare, and get it, I can read anything.”

I was stunned. Reading final exams is not usually a heartwarming experience…more often it is a chore. Although I always include, in one form or another, the question “What did you learn this year?” few answers surprise me. Randy’s blew me away.

After transferring out of my study hall his freshman year, Randy was no doubt as chagrined as I was to find himself in my College English 10 class. I remembered his few days in my room the year before, his hooded glare, his mutterings, his constant drumbeat. When I asked him to be quiet, or courteous, or both, he growled. One day, he signed out to guidance, saying “I’m outta here.” And he was. He never came back.

In September, we faced each other again, and the drumbeat went on. I tried my best to be welcoming and pleasant. “Oh, hi, Randy! I’m glad to have you in my class.”

“Yeah, right,” came the familiar mutter, delivered with a roll of his eyes. I feared it would be a long year.

We began the year reading Fahrenheit 451. The class was divided on that one: 50/50 love/hate. Of course I loved it. Of course Randy hated it. Unlike most of the other students, he did not keep his opinion to himself. “This book sucks.” As the night follows the day, so did his grades. He refused to read, therefore racked up a zero for homework. Quizzes he would not even bullshit, but wrote “No clue—I didn’t read”—so ditto there. Things were looking about as bad as they could get at mid-quarter.

Fortunately we moved to choice reading next, the only caveat: he had to read a banned book. Randy chose one of the Harry Potter books, actually read it, and liked it. No big intellectual challenge, but he rescued his grade from ignominious failure to almost passing. His muttering became “Can we just read today?” If I had anything else planned, he would quietly ignore me and haul out Potter. And most of the time I let it pass.

The alternative would have been a sullen or surly Randy, drumming loudly on his desk, tossing his hackey-sack, tilting his chair back and leaning into somebody else’s space, provoking a skirmish with a neighbor. Thwarted, he would do his best to thwart the rest of us. So I usually let him be. Reading, after all, was good.

When we began reading To Kill a Mockingbird, I stopped hearing complaints, and actually got a grudging “This book isn’t bad.” He read ahead. And he participated enthusiastically in discussions of the issues related to the novel, surprisingly showing up often in the same opinion group that I chose. Reacting to the statement “Girls should act...
like girls,” Randy explained “What else can girls act like but girls? That’s what they are. Whatever they do is what a girl does, right?” Good feminist thinking, in my book. At midterms, he had managed to boost his grade to passing.

By this time, I’d had two epiphanies: I had realized that Randy was a really bright kid, with a soft side that he kept well hidden. Boo Radley touched his heart, and injustice sparked his fury. “How could they DO that? Atticus proved Tom Robinson was innocent!” He was beating a different kind of drum now.

I also realized that he was one of those kinesthetic learners and that, as a result, he was driving the rest of the class crazy. At random moments, kids would call out “Stop it, Randy!” By that time I had tuned out all his little distracting noises. It was just Randy, the background rhythm of the class.

“Randy, you need to take up knitting,” I would say when his drumming started to scrape nerves. “It’s quieter and you end up with a blanket or something.”

“Yeah, right.” Now he actually smiled with the delivery. He’d laugh when I kept suggesting various types of needlework.

“Mrs. Thibeault could teach you how to crochet. You could make doilies!” I think he decided somewhere around the middle of the year that I was a complete nut. He started to tease me, in an almost-but-not-quite challenging way. “I suppose you’ve got something really fun for us to do today,” he might smirk.

“Randy—anything that involves reading or writing gives me a real kick. That’s my idea of fun!”

As I look back, I believe it was not me but William Shakespeare who finally toppled Randy’s resistance. Granted, I always teach the plays through performance, and movement is definitely Randy’s forte. He begged to “toss lines” and even volunteered his hackeysack for the game. I suppose part of the magic could have been the insistent rhythm of iambic pentameter working in the background. But I remember the moment when Shakespeare’s words captured him. “This guy’s a genius,” he blurted out, after we’d deconstructed a speech packed with double entendre. His face glowed with amazement.

He finished *Much Ado About Nothing* ahead of the class, too, loved the movie, acted out a scene alone, with aplomb, and pulled his grade up to a B+.

We moved on to Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Randy did not appreciate Dickens’s genius in the same way he thrilled to Shakespeare’s, but he managed to slog through enough of the book to garner a respectable grade for the year. I didn’t think much about his journey until I read that final exam.
That one response reminded me of how far Randy had come: he had given up the surly defiance, had begun to smile, and had learned he could read anything he set his mind to.

Not a bad change-up for one year.
Free Carpet

Jennifer Frost

“Are these carpets really free?” I wondered, as we yanked the blue straps once again. We had managed to secure them to the roof of the van the day before, when we carted them across town, but as we prepared to hammer up the highway at seventy miles an hour, we realized we didn’t want to pick dragonfly innards from our new expensive “multi-yellow” carpet we’d gotten for free from Henry Silversteen.

As we toured his still-under-construction new home, no, mansion, I admired the subtle pattern, creamy color and soft feel of the yellow carpet flecked with dots of red and blue. We had taken our shoes off back in the driveway, so we wouldn’t scratch the teak flooring on the porch or the newly finished cherry floors in the living room.

“I like this carpet,” I exclaimed, impulsively.

“Do you want it?” Henry asked, “You can have it. We just have to move the furniture.”

“Huh? I only said I like it.”

“Oh, we’re sick of this stuff. It’s going out anyway. You might as well take it.”

And so began the odyssey of the free carpet. Next thing we knew, we were hauling chairs and cabinets and stacking boxes, careful not to scratch the floor, placing them gingerly against the wall. “Hey!” Henry called from upstairs, “What about this white one? It’s really nice wool! Oh yeah, and I’ve got a beige one just sitting up in the attic. You can have that one too.” I heard him scurry from room to room looking for more stray carpets. We hoisted three twelve-foot rolls up onto the roof of our trusty ’88 Caravan.

“How ‘bout some windows?” By this time Henry was rummaging everywhere. He called to us from the garage. “They’re Marvin windows, but they were put together around here. We don’t want ‘em. We paid for MARVIN windows, assembled at the MARVIN plant,” he explained, exasperated at the ineptitude of the salespeople who had tricked him into an inauthentic “poser” product. “There’s nothing wrong with them.”

“Yeah, what the hell,” I thought, “We can probably wedge them between the cooler and the spare tire, maybe pad them with our thermarests…but…um…we don’t have a house to put them in,” I remembered, “oh well, when we get one, we’ll be really happy to have Marvin windows. For free!” They didn’t fit. No way. The frames were 12x9, maybe even bigger. I had forgotten about frames. I had only been ogling the glass panes. I felt a little deflated. I was so swept away with the deals of a lifetime: a
multimillionaire’s perfectly good trash. Unused. Or slightly used. In any case, this was nice stuff we’d never be able to afford.

At the moment, we wrestled with a stiff, new green tarp that wasn’t long enough to cover all three carpets. I remember thinking, “Why did we take all three of these? We really only wanted the yellow one. We’re not white carpet people. We’re always rolling around in dirt, clay, paint, mud, sweat. I don’t want to have to tiptoe around my own house, constantly scrubbing myself clean, worrying about stains.” I flashed back to the master bedroom at Henry and Julie’s: an open, airy space, sunlight streaming in the Marvin windows. A lavender-gray carpet covered the floor. Stunning, made of some sort of linen. But we couldn’t walk into the room, even with our shoes off. It couldn’t be washed. And if it was walked on too much it would crush. What was the point of that? Carpet is on the FLOOR, where you WALK!

“We’re too greedy. This is going to come back and bite us,” I worried. But at the same time, the feeling that we were getting something we couldn’t afford, for free, compelled us to suck it up and spend the extra 40 minutes wrangling with a too-small tarp and lots of duct tape. We decided to rotate the tarp so that the longest diagonal ran from front to back. Still too short. We pulled the front corner several feet so that we could tuck it under the front half of the carpets. We had to heave and tug and wiggle it into place because the rugs were so heavy. It seemed as if it would hold. Next, we methodically pulled the green wrapper taut, covering almost the entire length of the bundle like a giant, unwieldy upside-down burrito.

We secured it all with two kayak straps, cinching them as tightly as we could to the short rails on the roof rack. Multiple criscrossings with fifty feet of the crappiest “braided nylon rope” I had ever seen added to the illusion of immobility. Rope? Ha! It was a cheesy foam snake, stiff and impossible to knot properly, with a skin of braided fibers that frayed uselessly when cut. We willed it to hold together. Over the ends of carpet that stuck out from under the tarp we shoved some old laundry bags, winding several layers of duct tape around each one for added protection.

The tarp lasted about two miles. We had barely crossed into Stamford when green wings flapped frantically against the sides of the van. “Crap,” we yelled simultaneously. We took the first exit and pulled into a parking lot. “That’s some serious g-force,” Will exclaimed.

“Yeah, I know. Well, actually I don’t. I got a D in physics. But I get the gist.”

“We need a way to tie down the front end and secure it to the rail.” Will studied the bundle intently.

“Sock balls!” I proclaimed, joyfully, proud to offer a solution. I had learned this technique in Outward Bound. When a tarp has no grommets, or when they will surely rip (as when traveling down an interstate at 70 mph) you wad something up, wrap it in the tarp and tie it off with a rope, forming a ball. This prevents the rope from slipping, and it crates a secure tie-down. We wadded up two pairs of dirty white athletic socks and tied
down the flapping ends. Thirty minutes later, we were on our way again. I wondered how many more times we’d have to stop. We accelerated slowly onto the highway…40…50…60…so far so good. We didn’t want to jinx it by declaring engineering victory so we just looked at each other, eyebrows raised, and smiled anxiously.

Our lashing project held. We barreled northward. Surprisingly, the traffic was light. I even took a nap. Groggy, drooling and with a stiff neck, I woke up as we merged onto the Mass pike. As we passed a blue highway sign for the Charlton service plaza, a Ben and Jerry’s sign beckoned. We shot each other a glance. “Did you see that,” Will asked. “Hell yeah,” I replied. I knew it would be a rip off, Mass pike and all, but it was hot. And we needed ice cream. We pulled into a parking space and got out to stretch and inspect our roofbound passengers. Our cargo looked a lot like Aunt Edna tied to the roof of the station wagon from National Lampoon’s Summer Vacation.

“Holy crap!” Will stood staring in disbelief. I jumped out. “Whoa, that thing is toast!” The brand new stiff green tarp was shredded. Literally. It wasn’t even green anymore. Wisps of white fibers swirled in the breeze. The entire midsection of the tarp had disintegrated. We climbed onto the tire wells to see if we could patch it together. “It’s not raining,” an onlooker pointed out. “Thanks pal.” We didn’t want to remove the tarp because the front was still intact and it protected the carpets from the dreaded mosquito tripe. So we untied, reknotted, and cinched for another half hour. We must have looked ridiculous anchoring the shreds with yet more sockballs. “Oh well,” we figured, “only two more hours and we’ll be home.”

Mint chocolate chunk, perfectly semi-melted. Mmmm…. Revived, I began to plan my upcoming evening: untie the carpets, toss them into the storage unit, and get to work on the final pieces of my teaching exploration, type up a draft of…”K-K-K-K-rrrrrrrr…” What was that roaring metal sound? Probably a motorcycle that needs a muffler. I craned my neck to look back. No motorcycle. “K-K-K-K-rrrrrrrr…” Is that us? “Clank-clank-clank…” We lost power and maneuvered to the breakdown lane. “What the hell?” Will tried to start it up again. Not even a click. I smelled something like burning rubber. He opened the hood. Smoke curled from beside the dipstick. As he pulled it out, we noticed flakes of metal clinging to the thin film of oil. “Shit! Fourth of July. Mass pike. We’re screwed!” We need a tow truck and a hotel and a U-Haul to cart our free carpets to New Hampshire. Oh yeah, and a new car. How much are those free carpets anyway?
Trees
Sharon J. Pierce

Traveling east on Route 25A destination Plymouth. The sky is hazy gray over head giving the day a somber feel. Often I am hurried down this road in an effort to be on time not noticing the world around me.

Today I am on time. This truck passes me on the truck lane and I think he will slow me down. As I follow him I realize I can’t see very far ahead so I begin to look around. I notice the sway of the big silver trailer truck as it goes around corners and down hills. We are moving through nature with ease, it seems peaceful and quiet.

I look to my left and see the clouds beginning to break up as the sun tries peeking through over the mountain. The camp field is covered with dew in the stillness of the morning. Then I look back to the truck keeping an even speed as we continue on.

I look to my right and the lake is calm with a mirror image reflecting the mountains on the other side. I think of how many times I zoom by not seeing. As I continue on, I follow the lakeshore and see the camp cabins line the opposite shore. Bright towels cover the porch rails and all seems well. The sailboats are tied up with sails down, appearing to be asleep on this misty morning.

Here begins the tunnel of trees. The trees loom over the road creating a tunnel, filled with shadows and excitement. As the truck moves along the road it disturbs the leaves and creates an orchestra of movement. Different tints of green flowing along like a wave on the sand changing their direction on a whim moving gracefully overhead creating a serene feeling. The shadows change on the landscape letting more light in to this tunnel. The trees begin to part, creating space and the tunnel starts to fade. A feeling of great ease and happiness came over me like we are one with nature as we pass through.

Just then, the Mamas and the Papas, began to sing California Dreaming on the radio. I listened to a verse or two and think California can’t compare to where I live. As I continue on I look back in my rearview mirror and see the tunnel sink into the motionless landscape. This sense of tranquility in my playground of life reminds me to slow down and enjoy the simple things in life, like watching trees.
The Fie-Fie Man

Daniel E. Reidy

In the cozy gray house, tucked below Wentworth Hill, lived two young children with their young-at-heart parents. They had three cats, one fish and a hatchling turtle their father had rescued. Outdoors, they also lived with all the wild animals of the fields and forests of the countryside. The landscape was lush and green and full of springs, streams, waterfalls and ponds. In the distance, the rolling mountains lay covered in a thick forest.

It was in the last magical moments of a fading twilight, at the end of a steamy summer’s day, that Diana and her little brother Ian sat sprawled on the couch in their playroom with the lights out. They were trying to cool off after chasing each other in circles around the house. On and on they had run, until their laughter and joyful screams got too loud, and their parents signaled that it was time to wind down. Diana and Ian knew that when their parents told them it was time to wind down, it was near bedtime. Neither of them felt the least bit sleepy, so they started begging their parents to let them stay awake just a little longer.

Diana’s face could hardly be seen in the very last light of the Sun, that had long since gone to its rest behind the mountains, when suddenly she stopped speaking. Even in that low light, her parents could make out a look of great surprise as she stared past them and out the windows that overlooked their field. The look on Diana’s face told her parents that something was very different outside. In hushed tones, and without making any sudden moves that might scare off something that was out there, the parents started in with excited whispers, “What’s out there? A moose? A bear? Turkeys?”

Diana shook her head from side to side silently in response. Ian, who was just two, couldn’t stand the suspense and demanded in not-so-hushed tones “Whas out dayuh Sannah?” He had a hard time saying Diana when he was younger and still called her Sannah when he spoke quickly. Diana finally managed a whisper, “I see lights!”

“Lights?” the other three exclaimed together, forgetting all about being quiet.

This time, the parents were treated to a silent nod of her head up and down. She spoke somewhat in disbelief – as if her senses were deceiving her – “I see lights – flashing lights – all over the field, and in the trees!

At this, her parents looked at each other and laughed to themselves as they remembered the first time they saw this same amazing sight the summer they first moved into Rivendell, the name they gave their house.

It really is quite a sight to behold: Hundreds, even thousands, of fireflies flashing on and off for all they’re worth – females with long slow flashes in the tall grass and shrubs and males with faster flashes in the air, each trying their hardest to attract the other. It was as if there was a firefly ball being held and each dance required a different partner.
“Look! There’s one right here on the screen!” As they all looked, a light flashed as if to say hello and then slowly drifted away from the house. It was soon lost among the flashes of all the other fireflies out by the tree that a bear had clawed earlier that Spring, as it announced to the world that he had woken up from his long winter’s sleep and this was his territory.

Diana recalled a recess conversation she and her second grade friends had about how they would run around in their yards and catch fireflies with nets and keep them in jars to look at. Knowing she would be pushing her luck, she was gathering up the courage to ask if she could try that. Before she could utter those words, her mother surprised her with an offer: “Would you like to go outside to see them up close?”

“Oh, could we?” Diana said excitedly.

“Me too! Me too! I wanna see duh fie-fies!” shouted Ian in a near panic, fearing he was about to be left behind while his sister went on a grand adventure outside after bedtime.

“Don’t worry little buddy”, said his father reassuringly, “you can go too.” Underneath the excited cheers, he muttered so only he and mother could hear, “I don’t think we’d be able to get you go to bed now anyway.” Mother’s eyes somehow found the light to gleam in the dark as she smiled at father.

As Ian jumped up and down clapping his hands and calling out “Yay!” many times, Diana shouted “I’ll get the net and I’ll dump my rocks out of the empty peanut butter jar to hold them in and…”

“Whoa!” father interrupted. “Hold on there, now. Wait just a minute!”

Father gathered the children together and continued, “I have another way of getting to see them up close that won’t involve you two running around in the dark and tripping over everything.”

“I wanna see duh fie-fies! I wanna see duh fie-fies!” Ian piped in.

“What will we do?” asked Diana, sounding like she’d be willing to give it a try.

“You know those glow in the dark stars left over from decorating your bedroom ceiling?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Let’s grab those and stick them all over our shirts and find a spot to sit among the fireflies. The glowing stars should attract the fireflies to us. We’ll each bring a small flashlight to recharge the stars every once in a while. We could also try flashing the lights to see if that would attract the fireflies.”
“But I want to put them in a jar to see them up close!” said Diana, a little sadly.

Father replied “If we do this right, you will see the fireflies up close. They’ll fly over and land right on you!

He continued, “It is important to treat all living things with respect. In this case, it means not bothering the fireflies. Isn’t it the flying around free and flashing all over that has attracted you to them? Bottling them up takes that all away. The best way to observe wild creatures is to watch them do what they do freely, right where they live.”

The whole family put what was left of the glow in the dark stars on their shirts, stood for a few moments in bright light to charge them up and headed outside.

“Where shall we go?” asked mother.

Diana had already been thinking about this. “How about over to the tree the bear clawed. That’s where that firefly on the screen went.”

“I doe wanna see duh bayuh. I scayud!” said Ian very nervously.

Mother said quickly, “Don’t worry Ian. We’re not going to see any bears tonight. We’re making way too much noise for them. We’re just going to the tree that was scratched up in the Spring.”

“Okay” said Ian as he held on tighter to his father and did his best to try and sound reassured.

The family walked around the house to the backyard slowly at first. As their eyes got used to the dark, they were able to move a little faster and could make out where they were going. When they got to the bear tree, Diana and Ian took seats at opposite ends of a log near its base, and both parents stood silently close by.

A few years passed. At least it felt that way, but really, only minutes had passed when Ian started to get restless and Diana noted “I don’t think it’s working.” Her disappointment was hard to hide.

Mother then said “Don’t be so sure of that Diana, look at your brother’s shirt.”

As they all turned their heads to look at Ian, they noticed, first one, then another and yet another one of Ian’s stars was blinking.

Ian jumped up and in his excitement shouted “I have duh fie-fies! I have duh fie-fies! Day on me! And you Sannah! Day on you too!”
Ian was right. Diana had some on her too. They started on her back and walked over her shoulders flashing as they went. When they got far enough down her front, she was able to look at them closely by shining her flashlight on them.

What an evening that was! No one was really sure how long they stayed outside visiting with the fireflies, but it was long enough so that Ian stumbled his way over to his father, raised his arms up and said “I ty-ud. I carry you?” Ever since father once offered “Can I carry you?” when Ian was younger and very tired, Ian used the same phrase without turning it around, meaning he wanted his father to carry him.

As they walked up to Diana, a firefly suddenly flew away. Diana seemed to be asleep except for the fact that her eyes were open. In a few moments, she saw that her parents were trying to get her to come inside with them and she came along, every once in a while glancing back toward the spot where she had been sitting. When they got inside, mother took Diana to bed, and father took Ian to his room.

As she was tucking Diana in, mother commented on how tired Diana was outside. Diana looked up at her mother and shared with her: “I had the funniest dream outside just before coming in. I dreamt that a firefly was talking to me and he was thanking us all for being respectful of them. But he didn’t get to finish what he wanted to say because I woke up.”

“That’s an interesting dream” mother said with a raised eyebrow as she went to the door and turned off the light. “I guess you really learned that lesson tonight and that’s why it was in your dream. Now get a good night’s sleep. Sweet dreams. I love you.”

“I love you too Momma. Sweet dreams to you.”

Over in Ian’s room, father had already tucked Ian in, had turned off the light and was about to close the door, when Ian jumped up out of his covers and stood up in his crib. As he stumbled to the end of the crib nearest his window, father asked him “What’s the matter Ian? What’s wrong?”

Ian waved out the window and said “Bye!”

“Who are you talking to Ian?” asked a very puzzled father as he tucked Ian back into his bed.

“I say night-night to duh fie-fie man.” he said through a big yawn before falling deeply asleep in an instant.

Father grinned as he shook his head gently from side to side and closed the door.

As the last lights went out, all was well in the cozy gray house tucked under Wentworth Hill, while outside the Firefly Ball went on.●
Four Gardens in a Day

Helen M. Sullivan

A July tradition,
Visit each other’s gardens
What’s thriving and what’s not?
What can be shared?
Notebooks in hand, making wish lists

Luciel’s hosta garden:
The dusty blush of blue leaves make spectacular contrast with
leaves of all shades of green and yellow in a startling range of shapes,
sizes, and textures from smooth to crinkled,
As roots tucked in a gravel-bed make survival possible against predators.

Karen’s acre of flowers:
Indigo delphiniums rise from dainty swaths of poppies bending with
cups of brilliant reds and pinks as a bitter-sweet waft of lavender scent
commands attention to ground-level,
Where months’ old cuttings spread the bee-laden lavender patch outward.

Helen’s Garden:
Feathers of golden heather brush against blue shades of Geranium, Veronica
and Salvia in the sunny border while the shade landscape grows tropical
with the glossy palm-like leaves of hellebores,
Which self-sow a new colony as evidence of fertility and strength.

Marcia’s garden of stones and sculpture:
Simple expanses of flowers, incidental to constructions of rock walls,
wide stone paths, and sinuous mounds of interlocking tree-roots
from the pine trees that were cut to allow the sun to shine through,
Proof that gardens have endless variety.

July’s plant-trading becomes an exchange of garden lore and more,
adding to a cycle of friends’ sharing time, interests, love of life.
And we didn’t think to include that on our wish lists.
Lessons from Recess Duty

Helen M. Sullivan

“I used to be mean,” said Ellie, “but I’m not any more.” The personal declaration belied her real purpose of making sure that I was doing my job which involves mediating power struggles of second grade girls who’ve been friends since preschool. “Sally is crying,” added Ellie with the solemnity of an executioner. I sensed an unspoken message of someone needing to pay for Sally’s pain.

Moments ago I had noticed the platinum-haired blur of Sally, cartwheeling across the playground. From a distance, I now could see that Sally was crying. Sobbing, actually. Dragging myself towards the concrete-supported wooden bench, I could see her muscled little frame coiling into her lab. I wondered how to proceed with the investigation.

How might I tiptoe through this minefield of misunderstandings. Two years of mediating playground issues with these children should have prepared me. From first grade through second grade, resolution of their playground issues typically arose from the girls stopping and talking face-to-face about what was bothering them. I was often struck by how nice these girls were and how complicated they made their time together. As I approached the limp pink pile of teary wails, flashbacks came to me of other districts and other schools and other kids’ teasing each other with calculated precision for maximum damage. One part of me was getting tired of the on-going drama of these friends while another part of me wanted to respect the genuine feelings that sparked their theatrics.

“What’s wrong Sally,” I began.

“It’s… ...the… ...way… ...she… ...looked… ...at… ...me,” came the words, spilling out with gasps of indignation. Not much for me to work with. Clearly in Sally’s mind, her friend, Tess, was the cause of the tears. Tess said nothing but her head hung down in a way that I had seen before. I also knew that the 100 degree weather and emotions of the last day of school could have as much to do with the problem as any indignity that Tess could inflict. Reviewing the possibilities, I listened to Sally’s spurs of words. Also listening was seven-year-old Tess who looked my way in total confusion blurting out a quiet, “Huh?”

While my brain worked at what next to do, my hands flew up into the air, signaling a response from me that has never happened before and likely will never happen again in my teaching career. “It’s OK, Tess,” I heard myself saying.

I whispered to the students gathering around Sally, Tess, and Ellie, “We are friends. Say it with me. We are friends.” This became a louder chant to which I added all the cheerleading moves that I’ve ever dreamt of doing. The group joined my silliness until we were all laughing and shouting, “We are friends.” I abruptly ended the chant with a decisive, “Act like it….. We can talk about how to act like friends for the last five minutes of recess….. or you can go play.” Playing was the instant choice. Recess wound down with shouts of laughter and sounds of giggles. A good way to end the year.
Breath

Corey Stalilonis

The exhalation of the wind haunts me,
Needles me.
Wooosh in, wooosh out.
My nostrils do not fill with the deep green scent
Of the shifting soil of this cliff face,
But with the smell of grey damp skin, plastic coiled tubing,
Wet salves applied to lengthen life.
I step forward, my foot licking the sharp edge,
My leg dangles.
I pine for this precipice.
Yet when I gaze at the depths below
My stomach surges.
The winds whir.
The seductive slant of rain skews my senses.
I hear her breath is this wind.
Those breaths still breathe in me.
The crackling hiss transplants me to the ninth floor room,
To her shrunken shape.
My hesitant hand touches the starched cotton, the bone beneath.
How easily her shoulder fits in the palm of my hand,
Her body wracked by the action of taking in life.
Woooosh in, wooosh out.
The steady beep of the heart monitor,
the click, swish, click, a wind ensemble.
My whisper insistent, “breathe, breathe.”
And she did.
This current gale bares her rhythm,
The push harder than the pull.
Closing my eyes, I can no longer see hers.
Underneath her eyelids, I wondered if she dreamt,
Wanted to pry them open so I could see
Fiery brown pools I didn’t know I should have memorized,
Find words she could no longer form with a slack mouth.
I knew I could not be comforted,
Could not lay my head against her hardened chest.
The weight would be too much.
Wooosh in, wooosh out.
“Breathe, breathe.”
Now, insidious gusting whirs and twists around me.
The dry rattling drives me from my jagged perch.
I hang in the air for a moment,
My body folds and spins as I drop.
The steady, thick buzz of the flatline
Fills my ears, my mouth,
Stopping the scream of my descent.
I hit the ground with a thump.
My eyes crack open,
My lungs crack open,
    Wooosh in, wooosh out.
“I Got It!”

Claudia Sysyn

From the moment he jumped off the bus on his first day of first grade, Philip was always ready for recess. His exuberance for life and action were visible in every inch of his small body. The bell would ring and he would manage to be one of the last stragglers to make it up the steep playground hill to get in line and always needed that extra reminder to settle into silence so his group would be ready to go inside.

I first met Philip on my first day of my first grade student teaching assignment. The class of 24 had many effervescent children, but he was one of the bubbliest. You couldn’t help but have your heart melted by that impish grin that stretched from ear to ear. The sandy brown hair was cut fairly short, but the curls still managed to show up. If that wasn’t enough to win you over, his sparkling blue eyes would twinkle with “the devil” in them and then you were hooked.

When finally settled in his seat, Philip-always Philip, never Phil, had all he could do to pay attention to the lesson of the letter and sound of the day. His mind had already made the leap to one or more of the “work centers”. In his eyes, the Art Table was second only to the Block Area. He would rush through the three daily work papers to scoot over to one or the other.

The old brick school had two walls covered end to end with gray slate chalkboards. Another held the coat hooks and the door and the last had three large windows that stretched from my waist almost to the ceiling. Each had a center glass block resembling a livingroom window and was framed by smaller panels. One window at the top and one at the bottom of each of the three sections could be opened to let in air. Books, plants, and interesting objects like empty birds’ nests and seashells would be arranged on the wide sills. In front of each window, there was a massive silver piped radiator with a fairly wide top.

One morning shortly after school had started, the 4th grade teacher popped her head in the room to tell us what her class would be doing outside. They would be going to the lower playground to release their tagged monarch butterflies. After giving us that very exciting information and NOT inviting us to come and watch, she left the building with her students. Even before the side door banged shut, about half the first graders, with Philip in the lead, had jumped out of their seats and scrambled up the radiators onto to those wide window ledges. They stood with their hands on the glass, peering down at the field, eagerly waiting for the butterfly release.

As luck would have it, my student teaching supervisor happened to pop in just at that moment. He had been driving by and decided to do an unannounced observation of my first weeks in this class. He announced rather gruffly, that he had NEVER seen such an unruly bunch of “monkeys”. The gang on the sills proceeded to move their arms in the air and make wild monkey sounds until we got them back down on the floor. This wasn’t the last of Philip inspiring the class to get into mischief.
The months I spent working with this group of students flew by. By the time I left for the second half of my student teaching experience, most were reading, had made it through the three pre-primers, and were well into the first primer. But Philip hadn’t. He was still struggling with his letter/sound identification and hadn’t yet put meaning to text.

Next semester, on days I did not have college classes, I came back as a volunteer to work and help with these students. By early spring, almost everyone was reading in the second first grade reader. Some children were even finished with that book and were now using “enrichment” texts. Even most of the “late bloomers”, students, who had struggled earlier in the year, were reading at some level of understanding. Philip was still left out of the group of readers. I offered to spend some extra time with him playing sound matching games and working with word cards on blending and trying to make the letters make sense.

As June came into view, Philip still hadn’t made that leap. With that fact and his small size, his parents and the teacher decided another year in first grade would be the best placement for him. On my last day, I said good bye to the class and thought that it would be my last connection to Philip as a student.

The following fall, I was fortunate to have a one year teaching position in a school the next town over, still in the same district. Throughout the year, specialists would keep me up to date on “my old” class. As my temporary position was coming to the end, a veteran teacher in Philip’s school retired and that job was offered to me. I would have a class of 27 students. It was the same group I had had as a student teacher, but now they were in second and third grade. Once again I was Philip’s teacher and he still couldn’t read.

All through fall and into winter, we worked diligently trying to make letters make sense. I had found or made games and activities to provide him more practice in interesting ways. He used the tape recorder with picture/ sound cards, and worked with an older student who volunteered.

In addition to all the classroom effort, Philip was now working with the reading specialist every day. She had been trying to help him “break the code” by using the “Sullivan Programmed Readers”. These were little workbooks that had six or so boxes on each page. Each box contained a small picture in black and red ink with a short sentence underneath. There were one or two words missing with lines to show where they would go. The student would look at the pictures and look at the sentence frame, deciding what should be written in all the spaces.

Philip had plodded through the first book, still agonizing over which word should be inserted. Now he was in the second one, the red one. He was still only working with three letter words—a consonant, vowel, consonant pattern. Lately his frustrations had been giving way to some behavior issues as he was the only one not reading at all. He would make noises or throw things to distract and bother other students. I understood how hard it must be for him, but I still had to scold him. I was struggling, too, wondering what I should try to do for him next.

One morning late in February, Philip sat quietly on the floor, once again crouched over a workbook page. He looked at the first box at the top. The sentence was, “The
blank is on the blank.” There was that small picture to help him identify the missing words. He did know the words: “the”, “is”, and “on” by sight.

“The blank is on the blank,” he read slowly.

“The C---A---T--- is on the M—A—T,” he stretched the sounds to blend them together.

“The C-A-T is on the M-A-T,” he repeated a little quicker and a little louder.

“The CAT is on the MAT!” he shouted. “I get it! I get it! The CAT is on the MAT! The CAT is on the MAT!”

That moment was Philip’s break-through into the world of reading. For me, it was like watching the exhilarating fireworks on The Fourth of July!

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**Moose Brook**

*Claudia Sysyn*

Quiet all winter, blanketed with snow.
Spring thaws wake you,
now bursting with new-found energy.

Your frothy water, icy cold,
churns and gushes in torrents
up and over moss-covered banks.

You surge and crash
into rugged, glacial boulders
endeavoring to drag them along for the ride.

Your soft, gentle burbles
become deafening, mighty roars
as you bolt downstream.

You revel in your temporary youth,
knowing summer will come too soon.