About Plymouth Writing Project

Since its founding in 1974, the mission of the National Writing Project (NWP) has been to improve the teaching of writing and improve learning in the nation’s schools through professional development. The National Writing Project recognizes the primary importance of teacher knowledge, expertise, and leadership. Through its extensive network of teachers, the NWP seeks to promote exemplary instruction of writing in every classroom in America. There are writing project sites at universities in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. A 2005 Inverness Research Associates report found that "the NWP is not just another project. Rather the NWP is a nation-wide improvement infrastructure for the teaching of writing."

Founded in 2002, the Plymouth Writing Project is the New Hampshire chapter of the National Writing Project, and shares the values of the national organization: equity, diversity, and excellence. The Plymouth Writing Project believes that access to high quality educational experiences is a basic right of all learners and a cornerstone of equity. Through building an extensive network of teacher leaders, the Plymouth Writing Project seeks to promote exemplary instruction of writing in every classroom in the state.

About Summer Anthologies

Summer Anthologies collect writing by participants in the Plymouth Writing Project invitational and advanced leadership institutes. These works are typically written during the institute itself, and are as diverse in form, content, and theme as our participants. Some are inspired by one of the visiting professional writers. Most are shared and revised in writing groups or at open mic sessions. Each fellow or returning fellow is asked to contribute, and project faculty and staff are invited to do so as well. This year is the first to witness a print edition of the summer anthology, previous published only in an electronic format as “e-Anthologies.”

Visit us online at http://www.plymouth.edu/pwp

First edition

Plymouth, NH

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The New Hampshire Chapter of the National Writing Project
Hosted by Plymouth State University

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Matt Rolph, editor.
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Teachers on the Tahuayo

Gretchen Draper

She was about four years old, stocky with shiny black hair and dark eyes, the left one wandering a bit on its axis. Her name was Dorita and she was a member of the Yagua people who lived upriver from the Tahuayo Lodge in a remote corner of northeastern Peru.

Each morning she came by dugout canoe with her father, the man who sold fish to the Lodge for our lunches and dinners. He pulled back a worn board at the bottom of the canoe and held up foot long armored catfish, tilapia, and piranha.

The cook Marcel selected fish and after the business was done, the men gathered in the open-air kitchen to drink coffee and catch up on river gossip. They laughed, too, and discussed the strange behaviors of the guests from America, Netherlands, and Spain.

While the men talked, Dorita explored the covered walkway outside the kitchen. Marcel usually gave her some breakfast, so she ate bread and tortillas and peeked around the thick poles that supported the walkway roof. She examined the tree frog over the washbasin and watched orb weaver spiders wrap up giant flies. The green parrot squawked at her from its post. Pancho, the lodge’s survivor cat, kept just out of reach, like cats everywhere do in the presence of small children.

Mostly Dorita peeked at us, the two American teachers, who spoke only Tarzan-Spanish and who laughed a lot with everyone. She watched us return from our early morning paddle. From her spot behind the post, she studied our breakfast of eggs, plantain, tomatoes and bread. She kept a small, silent presence and waited for her father to finish his hand rolled cigarette, filled with the rich local tobacco.

For first few mornings, Dorita and I observed one another on the long open porch of the Lodge. She wore a pretty blue dress with a white collar that may have come to her from Minnesota or Alabama, through a good works donation of children’s clothing and shoes. Our guide Pedro had taken us to the plain wooden Pentecostal Church, newly built outside the small village of El Chino.

“Long ago it was Spanish priests,” he said. “Today, missionaries from Mexico and America. They bring us things.” He gestured to his dark jersey with a tiny white horse insignia.

It was June and that meant winter in Peru. The high waters from heavy summer rains receded day by day. Families along the Tahuayo River planted yucca, carrots and beets on the rich bottomland, newly exposed to the strong Amazon sun. We paddled past old men using machetes to cut and dig.
Early one morning, I spread drawing paper, colored pencils, and
graphs of our house in far distant New Hampshire on to the bench where
Dorita usually waited for her father. The parrot squawked at me and hopped
back and forth on his perch. I sat next to the materials and wrote in my travel
journal. I was ready for Dorita.

When they arrived, she stayed on the dock with her father while Marcel
inspected the day’s catch. The men bargained and Dorita stretched her head
back to see the oropendulas’ hanging nests. When they came up the stairs and
into the Lodge, Dorita tagged behind.

I smiled and patted the paper and colored pencils. “Para Dorita.”

Her father smiled back and spoke to his daughter. He waved at the
materials and gave her a gentle nudge in my direction. She looked from me to
the paper and back to her father. He left and disappeared into the screened
kitchen with Marcel.

Dorita’s cautious steps and wide eyes reminded me of children on their
first day of Kindergarten. Again I smiled and turned to the paper. I drew my
cartoon version of her and added the bench, wooden railing, parrot and trees by
the river.

She edged closer.

Next I sketched a house like those we had visited in the village of El
Chino. Thatched roof, springy bamboo floor, hammocks and mosquito netting,
posts to set the dwelling above the ground, chickens.

She stood next to me and watched.

Next to the house, I added a mother and children. Like the village, I
put in medicinal plants, a banana tree and the big community oven with a flat
pan for cooking tapioca.

I smiled at Dorita and received a gentle wisp of smile back from her.
This time when I patted the seat next to me, she sat on the very edge, legs
dangling and swinging.

I slid the first drawing over to her and started a new picture of Pancho
the cat and the kitchen with men at the table, smoking. By now
the guides and boatmen joined us. They laughed when I sketched them. They
joked with each other and with Dorita. I pointed to myself and said, “Profesora”
and like young men at home they all suddenly had a good reason to leave.

Dorita took the colored pencil I held out and made faint lines on her
paper. She sat back, considered those lines, and then jumped to add more using
bolder strokes and different colors. Finally, carefully, she drew one shaky circle
and slid the paper over to me. I turned her circle into a little girl’s smiling face
and stopped. Dorita leaned over the paper and put in her own touches to our
picture.

For the next two weeks at the Tahuayo Lodge, Dorita and I made art
together. We created drawings for her to take back to her mother. We played
with puppets made from socks left unclaimed on the laundry table. I dug in my
pack and found bits of string and ribbon. She entertained me in her quiet ways.
One of our last mornings, Dorita and I sat on the porch and watched canoes going up and down the river. There were fishermen and families with vegetables to sell. A man stopped at the dock and showed his hand carved wooden paddles. Marcel and one of the Lodge’s boatmen selected three to buy.

Two long dugouts glided by the Lodge, each with an older girl in the front, paddling. Behind her, three younger children sat quietly dressed for school in the required uniforms, clean white shirts, dark pants, and gray jumpers for the girls.

I pointed to the children and asked, “Escuela?” Dorita nodded and tapped a pudgy finger on her chest in that universal message that affirms, me, too. One day I’m going to school, too.

I gave her a hug and together we watched the dugout canoes round the bend in the river towards El Chino and the magic of the one room schoolhouse with its blackboards, dirt floor and rows of wooden benches and tables.
Nettie Ready
Meredith W. Vickery

As I walked into Jan’s house the usual feelings of bitterness crawled out from the depths of my stomach. All the family silver, displayed perfectly around the living room and dining room, glistened in the early afternoon light. The expensive furniture, rugs, and artwork covered the inside of the house showcasing the money and prestige my Aunt felt were so important.

“Hello, anyone home?”

I heard the low hum of the dishwasher and smelled the Comet that was probably in all the sinks and toilets. *Shit was it Friday,* I thought anxiously. This could only mean one thing: *Nettie!*

“Yeah, who’s that?” She shouted as she approached the balcony of the upstairs hallway. I looked up not really knowing what to expect. It had been years since I had seen her. My Mom, my sister, and I had moved out of my Aunt’s house nine years ago, when I had been 10 or 11 and that’s the last time I saw Nettie.

“Umm.. It’s Mer, Jan wanted me to do some work on her taxes today,” I said quickly.


She was smaller than I remembered her. I think she shrunk. She had more grey hair and her face had more lines. But those eyes were the same I noticed as she was trying to figure me out. I could see her going back in the files finding certain familiarities and cross-referencing them. Suddenly she must have remembered she was there to clean and let me out of her strange telekinetic grasp.

“Well go on, do what ya need to do.”

I gave a quick nod and hurried up to the office not even thinking of looking back.

Sissy is what everyone called my Aunt Jan. I refused, even at a young age, I hated the way it sounded and that my front teeth had to touch twice in the same repetitive method of exhaling air. It was also a subconscious, then, now very conscious act of defiance. Jan and I never really found our flow as family members.

We had been forced to move into her house after she was divorced because we couldn’t afford our rent anymore. This was three years of sheer hell and she seemed to add the fire and molten lava to the situation.

Every Friday was when Nettie would come to clean the house. Nettie had been my grandmother’s cleaning lady. She had watched my mother grow up with Jan and her two brothers, my grandfather’s death, and she was there when my Dad left that spring. The woman knew everything about us.
Mom would come into our bunkroom on Friday mornings and say, “Make sure this room is Nettie ready.” It is a phrase I still use, there’s no other way to describe that certain level of cleanliness that was necessary to prepare for the ultimate Nettie level.

Jan’s taxes were made up of write-offs and country club bills. As I entered in check after check into Jan’s computer I realized how different our worlds were. All three of us, Jan, Nettie, and me.

Nettie had this separate life from us and probably knew other families as well as ours. Her own life had been filled with death. Her husband of cancer, her son of aids, she was surviving all of them. I never once heard her complaining.

Jan was always complaining, always wanting more and more, she was never satisfied. She was so surrounded by stuff that she forgot about living. Everyone had moved away from her like unhappiness was a contagious disease. Nettie was a consistent person in her life. Pounce had been a ritual that the two women shared just as Nettie had shared with my Grandmother. The card game is a highly competitive form of Solitaire where the first one who goes out fist says “pounce”. I had watched the women in my life play it and the men try desperately to understand. Jan and Nettie still played every Friday during lunch hour.

And where was I in this mix? I had always been a child, slipping under the radar. Now, as I let myself think about my position in these two lives, I became exposed. I had these two connections that were each so valuable in their own rights, showing me what I could become. This was the moment I realized the responsibility in growing up.

Suddenly I remembered being scolded by Nettie, I had called her our maid when a friend came over I was obviously trying to impress.

“Bea (a childhood nickname) get over here,” she snapped. I knew I had done something really wrong. I felt it in that tone of hers, in the swift motion of her arm beckoning me. She simply said she was not a maid through clenched teeth. I felt my face get hot as I looked back to my friend. I realized this was the worst thing I could have called her. It cut to the core of her identity.

Neddie had also been a friend in a more maternal manner. Whenever I stayed home sick from school on a Friday we would watch All My Children together during her lunch break. I remember her shaking her head as the show ended and saying, “Always leave ya wantin more.” She would talk to the characters as if they were in the room with us and use phrases like “Dumb Doras” when a girl got mixed up with the wrong guy. When I would comment at the TV, mimicking her, she would laugh full belly, as if what I had done was original.

I stopped working and went downstairs in search of Nettie. I was ready to face her, to own my identity. On my way down I poked my head in the guest
bedroom and remembered how she made a bed. The covers you would have to
peel away to find the bottom sheet. Climbing into the tight cocoon and the
wonderful smell of laundry soap and I swear some of the warmth from the
dryer would linger in the center of the bed.

Nettie was in the laundry room and I slipped past her into the kitchen.
I quietly poured myself some lemonade and dropped a couple ice cubes in. I
turned around to see Nettie in the doorway, I gestured my glass and was about
to say would you like one but she nodded before I had the chance. I smiled and
so did she.

“You Bea right?” Her question caught me a little off guard. No one had
called me that since, well since Nettie. She had worked out my identity in her
head.

“Yeah Nettie. How are you?”
She laughed as I handed her the lemonade. Her laugh was amazing. It
was so pure and honest that its depth made her look like a little girl. Her eyes
softened as her body relaxed from the laugh.

Jan kept Nettie working for a long time. At the end it was Jan making Nettie
lunch and playing Pounce all afternoon after some light cleaning. It must have
been the loneliness that kept Nettie coming over on Fridays. The woman
worked until she could no longer lift a vacuum, climb stairs, and eventually
couldn’t drive.

The idea of Nettie seems so far away to me. She has turned into a saint
or a constellation. The essence she carried with her was timeless and has
seemed to remain when so many others were eroded away by life. Now she sits
in an apartment, a shrinking black woman with big eyes, thinking about it all. •
Driving Lessons
Meg Petersen

Sixteen years ago, in the moment when he was born
the world became more dangerous—
viruses swirled in the air poised to enter his delicate body
desperately high drop-offs posted inadequate guard rails,
and unforgiving surfaces of concrete and stone
threatened the tiny pulsing of his fragile fontanel.
My old Dodge Caravan has morphed as well
into a savage creature of metal and heat.
When I pass in front as my son and I change seats,
the engine breathes hot, a beast
contained beneath the metal hood
exhaling gas fumes, its piston heart beating.

I don’t tell him how at sixteen,
I banged on the accelerator to the beat
of a top forty song, hurtling down the highway
how I failed to signal.
How I drove to nowhere and told strangers lies,
would circle a city in the night, half feral with freedom
I took too many wild rides, past night into morning,
staving off sleep with orange juice and a quick run around the red VW beetle
crossing the country for the pure pleasure of seeing places
that had only been names on the map
how once I came to by the side of the New York Throughway,
emerging from across a veil of unconsciousness.

He is not me. And this is not then—.
But still we careen down a winding road
too close to the ditches that suddenly yawn at the sides,
at inconceivable speeds. He wants to keep moving,
wants it more and more
wants everything that waits for him, wants it now.
Tell me everything you know, he says.
As he grips the wheel, intent on the road ahead,
I brace myself against the dashboard, my right foot
pushing down futilely
on imaginary brakes.
Veterinary Clinic

Amy O. Wyatt

We study—
stillness behind the clinic door,
dusty pick-up cab,
calloused hands bearing his companion.

You study—
work-worn dungarees,
once-blue shirt,
eyes weighted with sleeplessness.

You study—
limp tongue from grizzled jowls,
motionless black and white flank,
eyes closed forever.

I study—
tiny hand tightening around mine,
wordless mouth gaping,
eyes filling with an old man’s tears. •
Junior Scientist

Amy O. Wyatt

Eli crouches in the tall grass at the base of the Silver Maple. The height of the grass reminds me that I need to get out the weedwacker, and I look around the yard inventorying other chores that have been neglected in these first few days of summer: the dusty front porch, the twigs that have fallen from the maple, the weeds challenging the hydrangeas in the corner garden.

But Eli is transfixed. I call his name again, wondering what could captivate a two-year-old for so long. I call a third time, and he turns to me, his miniature brow creased in aggravation under his white hair, his pointer finger pressed to his lips. “Shhh!” he tells me and then turns back to the tree. Feeling reprimanded, I walk slowly and quietly to where he is crouched down with his elbows resting on his knees and his chin resting on his primly folded hands.

As I kneel down beside him, he reminds me with his little finger to be quiet, “Shhh” and then he points to the grass, “Hop-hop.”

Still confused about what he is looking at, and about to blurt out “What do you mean, ‘Hop-hop’?” I instead look at the grass and see what he sees: there, almost invisible in its bright green camouflage sits a grasshopper, no more than two inches long and half an inch wide. Of course, a Hop-hop.

I stay kneeling beside Eli for a minute, laughing inside at this new moment of mother-joy. My children often surprise me with their mannerisms and choices of words, with the things they notice and remember, and this is no exception. Yet after a minute, when I am ready to get up and get back to work, Eli is still staring. What could there possibly be to see in a two-inch grasshopper? While I am bemused by his earnest concentration, he is still studying, his mind turning as quickly as it can, absorbing, swallowing with relish.

I stand back a few paces, with my arms folded across my stomach, intrigued, while he stares at the grasshopper. After another minute Eli’s eyes squint slightly, and his mouth begins moving, but he makes no sounds. Gradually, he starts talking in a barely audible whisper, pointing slightly at the grasshopper, reporting in his incoherent jumble of toddler sounds the details of its structure, the shape of its legs, the length of its antennae, the size of its head relative to the rest of its body, the color of its eyes, the slightly darker green of its back, and the transparency of its wings, as if he were talking to his assistant who was taking down all of his observations. Then he stops and again rests his chin on his folded hands and stares. So do I.

When the grasshopper suddenly leaps, Eli tumbles backward, landing on his bottom. As if remembering me for the first time in several minutes, Eli turns to me, trying to decide whether this embarrassment and shock are worthy of tears. After I help him back to his feet, he runs quickly back to the spot in the grass, searching for his specimen.

But it is gone. He turns to me, his hands upturned, and reports, “All gone
hop-hop.” Then he turns back to the tall grass at the base of the maple, crouches down, searches again, and waves a slow and subtle folded-finger wave at the spot.

Eli stands up, looks around the yard, and laughs out loud, suddenly filled with joy. He claps his hands and begins to talk rapidly. I am able to understand only a few words, but I can tell that he is reporting the details of his discovery from the repeated “hop-hop,” his crouching down near the tree, his whispered words, and his explosive jump at the end. I ooh and aah at the right moments, listen carefully, and clap at the end, as if I hadn’t just witnessed the whole thing myself.

At times like this I wish I could give him all the words he needs to tell exactly what he sees and hears and feels, to name all of the wonders of his small world. I worry that by the time he has all of the words he needs, he will no longer have that sense of wonder that makes things worth naming. •
Scattered Still Lifes

M. J. Ostrowski

Formidable.
Culling through
A chest, three boxes,
Two bags, our
Family photos.

Here’s one; we’re at Bear’s Peak,
The farm, the beach,
Christmas and the biggest tree
that we could find
Chopped and chopped again
Cleaving great huge gashes in my child memory.

Grandmother,
paring knife in hand,
kettle of potatoes on her lap,
no room for children.
Not smiling,
I never saw her happy,
Nor ever saw my mother cry.
If I look closely, closely,
will I find
Hidden,
unspoken,
souls of women?
Or, in silence,
duty,
work,
Did they get pared away?

Thanksgiving; mother cooked and cleaned
Banter in the living room
high jinx
chatter
She at the sink,
The ever-present apron
Tied behind
The rigid back.
Grandmothers, graduations,
  Stern-faced ancients
  I do not know

The four of us,
We are smiling,
my sisters, brother and I,
the lie,

My roots.

Clamoring voices raised high –
  Did I never hear low murmurings?
Now like shards,
  pipes out of tune,
  thundering skies.

How the pictures burn my hands
I let them go,
_I let them go._

Glass shatters,
  splinters,
That once seemed whole,
Now lie,
  scattered
  across the floor. •
The Outing
M. J. Ostrowski

The hands sit in her lap. Parchment paper skin. Blue veins run fragile patterns beneath the surface like my Oriental seen through the glass of the coffee table. I take her hand gently, afraid it will shred in my hands like the pages of an old diary. She chants again the sing-song “My, oh my, oh my” as, her face thrust forward, the eager eyes, hunting for the familiar, scan the streets and houses as the car speeds along. She has lived here for over eighty years.

We ease off the expressway at last, and I choose to pull the car right up next to the entrance. As I come around her side, I have my first moment of dismay as I suddenly realize how vulnerable she is without the wheelchair. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps I’m foolhardy to take her out. My impetuous nature can be discomfiting at times. But this time; dangerous? I count the stairs. Nine. A landing at the door, then two more. Walker beside me, I brace myself between the door and it, gently cushion her weight against my body, and hoist. One step. Stop, brace, shove, pull, stop, pant, rest, ready, brace, shove, push, pull. Made it! We do this nine more times. At the top, neither of us are speaking. We are both peering ahead, at the tables, where we can rest, goal in sight. I chide myself for not choosing a restaurant with a ramp.

Once seated, I look her full in the face, smiling brightly, attempting to be reassuring. Suddenly I see her. I mean I see her. Not the beautiful face of the woman I have loved for forty years, but an old woman. Her coat has long been out of style. I remove the lint from her jacket. When it remains, I deftly turn the collar under to hide the stain. And where is the mink hat she was so proud of? Where did this old crocheted cap come from? My cheeks burn with embarrassment, and also with the shame for acknowledging I’m embarrassed. They were right. After a certain age, you can’t take them anywhere.

I can see the beginning of the distance coming into her eyes, so I start our conversation, gently at first to avoid notice, then louder, then yelling, while a certain hilarity inside begins at the self-mocking that didn’t foresee how the miming and the shouting, so appropriate at the Manor, where everyone is shouting and miming, to scores of puzzled, wrinkled faces, would be so embarrassing here. “Do you remember the lullabye you used to sing to me?” I ask. “Yes, yes,” she nods eagerly. We are on safe ground here.

The drinks are brought. “Well, darling, happy ninetieth,” I say, then shout, then shout again. At which point she begins to hum, almost inaudibly at first, then more clearly, then very clearly, until the whole restaurant can surely hear the strains of my beloved childhood lullabye.
I can feel my smile freezing on my face. My knees are weak, even as I sit. Furtively, over her head, I am searching the other wall for an exit for our escape.

And then it happens. At the table next to ours, another voice joins in. Both are singing in German. Now, from across the room, another. And another. Is the whole German population of this town dining here today? I sit back, amazed. The restaurant is alive with song and good will.

The song ends, and a quiet voice, with a slightly thick accent, asks what part of Germany my grandmother is from. I become interpreter now, shouting to one, and, forgetting, shouting replies at the other. A couple are leaving. They stop by our table to wish the old woman a happy birthday. “And, we expect to see you here next year for your ninety-first.” She looks at me, questioningly, and I shout it all again. The afternoon follows in like fashion. At certain points, I can sit back and just watch, as I am forgotten, the other diners shouting for me. She is pure magic. No one seems to notice the frayed quality of her suit, the dowdy crocheted cap. Gloriously, enchantingly, she metamorphoses into a shadow of the vibrant woman I used to know. The teasing, the laughter, the false modesty, the energy and ability to draw people to her.

It is winter’s early twilight as we drive home. In the receding light, she seems quiet, rapt. At one moment, she says quite distinctly, “Those people were very nice” and “This has been a very special day.” I smile, and drive on. When, some time later, I turn to her again, I see the curtain has fallen. Her eyes stare out of an empty face, seeing nothing. This is the face I will always see from now on, as I come to find the huddled figure, waiting, in her chair at the window. I will take her hand, lifeless in mine. For years, I will come in, hug her, sit a while, and leave. There will be no sign of recognition. We will never speak again.

I wrote these words over a decade ago. It was a time of memories. Of triumph and deep loss. The soul ready to embrace life. Parchment hands over which I could close mine, a gaunt, empty face my hands could so lovingly stroke.

A single white gladiola in the urn on Memorial Day, under the trees where the breeze is always made gentle by tall pines.

The memory of that day has been relived many, many times. It is as potent and fresh as an orange upon being broken open, spraying its ripe wetness up into your face, the luscious aroma in your nostrils, the sensation of pith and juice, alive, fragrant, moist. The memory is one of contentment and pleasure, affirmation. It is a memory of the gift of human grace that we encountered so unexpectedly that day. The words “This has been a very special
day” have been measured many times since, against the juxtaposed fear and anxiety that those voices of my family can still create in me; the spectre of disaster, the expectation of failure and calamity. Beside those voices I carry the memory of that beloved face, luminous, upturned and eager, reaching out to love, adventure and the humble precious moments she was offered. I meet calamity sometimes. Sometimes, I meet grace. And, I continue, sometimes as if I am swimming and the current is strong and I have to fight to stay above water, sometimes gracefully, as if the water is supporting me and moving around me in paths of love. I move forward, to the things in life that invite me to wonder, to adventure and to joy. I move on. •
The Reunion
Naomi Halvorson

Jack arrived for work an hour late, but wasn’t concerned. By now he had won his boss over with his charming personality and arriving within an hour after his shift at the gas station was supposed to start became acceptable. Besides, it was difficult enough to fill the third shift position and Jack knew that however unreliable he seemed to the staff, he was better than nothing.

The cool spring night was shaping up to be like any other night and so Jack brewed fresh coffee (not so much for the benefit of his few customers that may stop in for a pump, a piss, and some caffeine, but more for his own sanity), poured himself the first cup, added five packets of sugar and one cream, and took his place on his stool behind the register with the most interesting celebrity magazine he could find.

The first few hours slipped by, uneventful. It started with the awkward teenager hurriedly buying a Mountain Dew, Doritos, a Snickers chocolate bar, two gallons of gas for his Nova and a three pack of extra large ribbed for her pleasure condoms. Jack completed his transaction with an enthusiastic, “Enjoy your evening,” just for the delight of seeing the teen squirm.

Next, Richard stopped in - a regular who was as much a part of the little store as the collection of dusty Twinkie boxes at the end of the second aisle. He always stood at the register with a frantic somewhat wild look in his eyes until he was able to control himself enough to point at a pack of Marlboros and then mutter, “Easy pick,” as he turned his direction to the lottery machine. As always, Richard walked away muttering to himself and scratching his head – a habit Jack no longer found intriguing or mysterious. It was the next customer who took Jack by surprise.

“Hi, pump two,” the customer announced, as if he weren’t the only person pumping gas or even in the store at the moment.

“Anything else?” Jack answered automatically.

“Jack? Jack Brown, is that you?” said the customer, a reply Jack was not used to hearing. Jack studied the customer. He was better dressed than most, wearing a button down white collared shirt tucked into kaki dress pants, belted at the waist. His facial features were unremarkable as well-plain dark brown hair neatly trimmed close enough to appear professional but not so close to look like a buzz cut. His skin was pale, his mouth turned into a ridiculous I know you from somewhere grin, and his eyes light brown and twinkling with the
pleasure of knowing something Jack did not. He looked Jack’s age, about
twenty three and he looked positively full of himself.

“Remember me? Warren Coleton. Class of ninety six? Kensington
High?” Jack raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes in shock.

“Warren, class president and trumpet player extraordinaire,” Jack finally
answered.

“Oh yeah, the trumpet! Last time I played was for the tribute at our
graduation. That was, what...almost six years ago? God, I haven’t played that
trumpet since. I should really take it up again.”

“We all have regrets,” said Jack. He chose his words carefully. Even
though he normally enjoyed talkative customers, especially towards the end of
his shift, he did not want to give Warren Coleton any more reasons to stick
around.

“I still remember the wind blowing so hard it knocked over the flags
and then they shot the cannon off too soon. Do you remember that?” said
Warren.

“I didn’t go.”

Warren looked puzzled for a moment. “Oh, that’s right. You were the
one who joined the army early and had to go to basic.”

“No,” answered Jack. This was the part he had been dreading. “I
didn’t finish school.”

“Right, right. You decided to take that bicycle trip across country,”
said Warren.

“No, I dropped out two months before graduation.” Jack waited for
the response. He had never encountered a person who could tactfully rebound
from such a reply. “But I got my G.E.D. a few months later,” Jack added.
Usually that gave people enough to say something like, “Oh that’s great.
Sometimes school isn’t for everyone” or “We made such foolish decisions when
we were younger, didn’t we?”

Warren answered, “I’m at Worcester Polytech right now. I’m enrolled
in a special Master’s degree program in Chemical Engineering.” Now this was
interesting. Never had a person responded with a brag.
“So, that’s a nice car,” Jack said and pointed out the large glass doors. “Is it your mom’s? I can’t imagine you have time to work and be a Chemical Engineer.”

“I’m studying to be an engineer, but I have these great paid summer internships. It’s like getting paid to go to school. Well, I got so many scholarships school is practically paid for anyways,” Warren hastily added. “What did you do after your G.E.D.?”

“I’ve been working ever since,” said Jack.

“Oh, saving up to go to school.” It was finally making sense to Warren.

“No,” said Jack. “Just working, not saving.”

“Well then, all this time working you must have yourself a pretty nice place,” Warren offered.

“Actually I did move,” answered Jack. He could tell this conversation was going to get even better. “I bought a double wide trailer on ten acres of land in Kensington.” Jack paused to study Warren’s reaction. “I live there with my parents.”

Warren seemed unphased. He brushed some hairs from his forehead. “That’s so great-taking care of your parents like that. I remember them being somewhat older than the other parents.”

“Truthfully,” said Jack, leaning over the counter a bit for emphasis, “I signed my dad’s name to the paperwork for the purchase of the double wide. There was no way they were going to accept my bad credit. I’m a junior remember, so I can get away with signing my father’s name. Hardly anyone picks up on it.”

The cool composed Warren finally started to break a little. He shuffled his shoes and reached for his wallet. “How much do I owe you?” Jack caught a look at a picture in Warren’s wallet.

“Is that your sister?” Jack asked pointing at the pretty brunette cradling her chin in her palms.

“That’s Emma, my girlfriend. I met her at the tech. She’s in the same program as me. We’ve been dating for five years.”
“Five years? That’s pretty serious. Will there be wedding bells soon?” asked Jack.

“I was thinking of proposing after graduation next year.” Warren placed a twenty in the space between them.

“Ahhh...soul mates,” said Jack as he slid the twenty into the register. “I proposed to Jessica Guard. Do you remember her? Class of 98?”

“So you’re married!” Warren suddenly reclaimed his enthusiasm for their conversation.

“Well, no. Originally she said yes, but she took it back the next day. She said she was too drunk to know what she was saying and that proposing in a Walmart parking lot was not particularly romantic anyway.”

“It was good to catch up,” responded Warren as he accepted the three dollars and sixty five cents Jack gave him. “Good luck with everything.”

“You too,” Jack answered and he watched Warren turn.

Then suddenly, Jack saw it. It shone like a brilliant sunrise on the dark horizon reflecting off the fluorescent gas station lights. Warren had a bald spot. Not a small speck of misplaced hair, but a whole patch – like a dead section of lawn, an eyesore to an otherwise enjoyable view. Jack couldn’t hold in a spontaneous laugh. The sound caused Warren turn for a moment and wave goodbye, a confident flick of the wrist and half grin that obviously said, good luck with your life buddy.

_Sure, we all have regrets, thought Jack, but at least I have my hair._ ♦
Canal Street

*Steven Goyette*

Went walking among the crowds of Canal, Chinatown street and so many faces matching with the thousands of Buddhas in store front windows.

Which Buddha will you buy? Buddha against Buddha, this one fat and Chinese, or Tibetan, Indian traditional. I try to walk softly, without pace but crowds compel and so I too am hustling, when the oldest man, Chinese I’ve seen shuffles, but too slowly for Canal, up the street supported by his wife with cane in hand and his face tired, seeing no Buddhas and no suffering faces but only the sidewalk and where his next foot will fall.

Is there room for this one walking? can we make room for him that has few steps left here on this street or any? ♦
Thoughts on Returning to a Neglected Pastime
K. L. Bliss

It had been left for so long-
years in fact.
I’m not sure why.

Motivated by my truthspeaking son who nagged,
“Why are you just growing weeds?”
I set out to fix things.

Armed with a shovel and rake
I dug and planned and decided
the fate of the overgrown in front of me.

And one thing led to another
as choices in life so often do…
more plans to make.

Armed now with trays of greenery
I pointed my car toward home
to my rediscovered piece
of peace. ♦
My Hair

Joanne Davis

With slow, deliberate strokes
I brush it,
brown of fall leaves
woven with cascades of silver.
As I brush, wisps of memory stray.

I used to wear it long.
My mother would take rags
and roll my hair up tightly in them.
Released the next day,
soft curls would unfurl and frame my face.

My mother would pull it back in a ponytail.
My uncle would tease me unmercifully
about using it to tie me up in a tree.
I was terrified inside.

I would braid it down the sides of my face.
Looking in the mirror, I would imagine
a proud, mysterious native woman.
I would smile inside.

I would let it hang loose and heavy, the same as my friends.
A burden of conformity,
it stiffened my neck.
Leaves tangled in it when I rolled on the ground.

I used to wear it short.
Before leaving home, I had it cut off.
I would look in the mirror, cheekbones appearing more defined.
I was surprised every time
I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

We met then.
He would tell me he fell in love with me at first sight.

I used to wear it long.
My babies would grasp fistfuls of it while nursing at my breast.
I would look down at them
and wipe drops of milk from their cheeks.
He would press me to wear it short, 
like in the days when he fell in love with me.

I wore it short. 
We fought, he drifted, and I clung. 
He left.

Years ago, I saw a woman, alone. 
She had circles of braids framing her face. 
When she took them down and set the braids free 
a silver cascade of hair flowed 
down and down. 
She brushed it slowly, 
then, with practiced hands, 
wove it back together 
and crowned her own head.

I remember now 
I thought she was beautiful. ♦
Ashes
Joanne Davis

I hear her crying before I even walk through the door, a high-pitched, insistent cry. I am mildly annoyed. I walk in, greeting her with a forced sweetness in my voice. “Hi, Kitty. How’s my Ashes doing?” She cries. I pick her up, rub her soft fur between her ears for a minute, and put her down. I pile the remains of the day on the counter-empty water bottle, papers from school I pretend I’ll attend to later on in the evening, orange peels and wrappers from lunch. She cries. I try to ignore her while I rummage through the fridge for something to eat. She cries louder and bumps into my leg. I go to her water dish, empty it out into the sink, and refill it with fresh, cool water. I put it back on the floor, watching drops spill over the side like tears. She walks over, turns away unsatisfied and cries again. “Want some food?” I pull the bag of cat food out from under the sink and shake some into her dish. The sound of the bowl filling draws her over, but she’s not interested. I scratch her behind the ears for a moment and then go to the pile of mail, sorting junk from bills. She follows, under my feet like a persistent puppy, crying more insistently. I feel my annoyance shift to irritation. “What do you want?” I ask. But I know.

The first to disappear was the white cat with grey marks like dirt on his forehead. He left one morning and never came back. I held onto hope like a fragile teacup, but days turned into weeks. A coyote, brashly walking past my window in the early morning light, affirmed my worst fear.

Next to go was the gray one with long fur that was always clumping and matting. She was an ornery survivor, living on her own for months before allowing herself to be taken in; so independent and feisty that I didn’t see her vulnerability.

So Ashes cries. Beneath my annoyance, my irritation, I understand. She is crying for attention, crying over being left behind, crying, even for losses to come and the loneliness attached. Silently, I cry with her.
Moments with Monica

Pamela Matthews

Strands of strawberry blond hair hang below her brow line covering blue eyes that can’t imagine a future. Freckles sprinkle across the bridge of her nose like clover in a field. Monica’s slightly less than average in size for an eight year old. She’s strong but not thriving. This morning her shoulders are rolled forward. Her arms hang low, swinging slowly and intentionally, as she walks across the room toward me. In a whispering voice and without looking up she tells me she’s tired and that she misses her “Paw-paw”. This is what she tells me when her load is getting too heavy. I can see that she’s “the little one” today. She doesn’t know what she wants or what she needs. Her days of love and honey have already passed.

After pouring her a cup of Kix cereal we walk over to the blue table where I sit down so we can see eye to eye. She’s wearing the same cut off shorts and red tee shirt she had on yesterday; clothes that have already had a life. Her “Little Pony” sneakers are a size too big and the laces are gone. There’s at least twenty mosquito bites on her legs and her hands are dirty. It’s 9:15 in the morning. I want to take her home and put her in a princess bubble bath, fix her hair, and put her in a new outfit of her choosing. However, this morning I’m sensing I’ll have to settle for a smile.

I ask her what time she went to bed last night and she tells me her brother kept her up late playing videos. They share a room. Reaching for her chin with my finger, forcing her to make eye contact with me I say, “Sweetheart, let’s show Paw-paw what a good day you can make for yourself. Let’s give it our best. It’ll make him happy to see you smiling.” Looking deep into her beautiful eyes I give her an honest smile. She knows the difference. She smiles back at me and I remind myself that I can help her the most by teaching her to help herself. I can’t save her from this life she didn’t choose. She has to make the change. She has to survive.

Monica’s home is on the south side of town near the general store and next to the Catholic Church. A sand pile surrounded by saplings and sprinkled with children’s bicycles edges up to the house. The sand covers an area where one might expect to find a soft green yard or a two-car garage. The house looks like it’s leaning on one end from age. The other end is under construction. Tyveck sheets cover the outer walls. A ladder is stretched out between grassless ground and a rugged rooftop. The front porch stretches the length of the house and is crowded with old furniture. There’s a bag of crushed cans tied up in a clear plastic bag next to the front door.
Living in the house with Monica is her mother, her ten-year-old brother, and her five-year-old sister. Her mother’s boyfriend John owns the house and lives there as head of household. His two sons (one nine and one eleven) live there. The mother of the oldest boy lives there as well. Two dogs and a few cats guard the property. It’s a known hangout, by the local P.D., for teenagers and activities that involve drugs and alcohol; a scary sight at best.

My radar went up in the fall of our first year together. The students and I were sitting cross-legged on the floor for Morning Meeting when I looked over and saw Monica with her hands in her panties. She was looking right at me. I cued her non-verbally to stop. Later when we talked about it I explained to her that it wasn’t appropriate for her to do “that” in school. She told me that people do “that” in the movies. I reminded her she wasn’t in the movies. That afternoon I called her mother in for an informal conference. She told me that Monica’s uncle had molested her when she was four. I asked her if she’d reported it. She said no that she hadn’t seen it and that she just didn’t take her to her grandma’s any more because that’s where the uncle lived. As far as the movie thing went, she had no idea what Monica was talking about. I called DCYF.

There have been many calls to DCYF concerning Monica. Last winter the librarian told me the kids were walking over to use the bathroom in the library basement. When I asked Monica about it she said the potty in her house was broken. That same week the clerk at the store told me John was buying propane tanks every few days in, an effort to heat, because he was repairing his heating system. I called the Chief of Police and asked him to check it out because I was very worried. He later assured me that the problem had been taken care of and that he’d “once again” alerted DCYF. I went back to my office files and found out that DCYF had been called last year because of truancy and neglect concerning one of the older boys in the house.

In the spring Monica fell into the “homeless” category. Her mother made a bold move; she took her children and left John. It was a very hard time for Monica. Her hygiene suffered. Her attitude suffered. The “angry one” surfaced. She came to school one morning with a can of applesauce, a ration from the food commodities program. The can was damaged, I had no way of opening it and I wouldn’t let her eat it. She threw it in the wastebasket; looked up at me with tears in her eyes and told me her mom had taken it out of the trunk. “That’s where she keeps the food.”

I didn’t know what to say to her. Silently I handed her my yogurt, took her hand and walked her over to the blue table. After that I started packing extra in my snack. I introduced her to foods she wasn’t likely to experience. We ate avocados dipped in Ranch dressing; rice crackers dipped in hummus and
sugar snap peas soaked in balsamic vinegar. She was even willing to try vegetable sushi!

Six weeks later she was back in the Bennington house. Her mother had tired of the struggle. It appeared that living with John was the lesser of the evils from her perspective. Had she stayed homeless she could have accepted great amounts of support from the state and other non-profit organizations. But that would also mean she would have to start taking care of herself and her children. It meant giving up the known for the unknown. Becoming accountable. Like her daughter she couldn’t see a future that didn’t involve her past.

Monica repeated first grade and it was during our second year that I began to fully understand her world. John’s oldest boy came under investigation for sexually molesting a little boy in my classroom. The boy had spent the weekend at Monica’s house. The following week on the bus the child tried repeating the behavior with another little boy. Two girls witnessed the behavior and ran home to tell their mommies. Needless to say both women were in my office the next morning in a frightful state. Again I called DCYF.

As a result DCYF mandated counseling for Monica and her brother. With a very sunny smile, in circle one morning, she announced to the class that she had her own counselor. Somebody just for her, somebody she could “trust”. That same morning I filled out the paper work to communicate with her counselor. I wasn’t prepared for what I learned. The counselor made a special visit to the school to see me. She said that Monica was “disassociating”, code for early development of multiple personalities. It’s a coping skill she said.

I began to think back on the times my teaching partner and I had noted Monica’s sometimes-swift mood changes. We could frequently tell within the first fifteen minutes of the day “who” we might be dealing with. Affectionately we referred to her personas in terms of, “She’s the little one today”, or “Today she’s the angry one”. We were always pleased when we could say, “We’ve got a captive audience today, she’s the strong one”. What the counselor said made sense. It was all part of the struggle to stay alive.

After the meeting with the counselor I changed tactics with Monica. When I saw that her behavior reflected “the little one” or “the angry one” I’d try connecting with her early in the day. I’d start by acknowledging her feelings as I could see them through her behavior. Then I’d tell her I had a very exciting day planned for Monica and that I needed Monica to be in school today. I started to see Monica more and the “others” less. But she still wasn’t thriving. How could she?
During my final conference with Monica’s mother in March I expressed my concerns with regard to the child’s academics. I was angry. Her mother placated me, assuring me she was studying with her little girl every night, that she was doing everything she could. Her fingers were clenched, her face thin and her eyes Sallow. I could see that she was tired of her own struggle for survival. She was caught up in a cycle. Letting her past hold her hostage. It was at that moment I realized she probably was doing all that she could. My anger turned to sadness.

During a morning writing piece about the recent April vacation Monica appeared to be struggling with a place to start. She began to present as “the angry one”. She threw her pencil down and crumpled up her blank paper clenching it in her fist. She put her head down in her arms and started to cry. At first I just left her to herself. Then I pulled her out in the hall and asked her why she was having such a hard time. She told me that she hated her life that she never got to do anything. How could she possibly have anything to write about?

I put my hands on her shoulders and looked straight into her crying eyes. I explained to her that people write about their feelings not just the things they do or haven’t done. I explained that it was important for her to come to school every day and try her hardest because it was her education that would set her free from this life she didn’t choose. That she was the only one that could save herself from her circumstance. I told her she could write what ever she wanted but she must write. She had something to offer. Her voice mattered. She looked at me as though maybe she knew I was right. She smiled ever so slightly, and then she wrapped her arms around my neck pressing her wet cheek against my face.

During the last eight weeks of school there was a change in Monica. She came as Monica every day. Her work showed improvement. She smiled a lot, helping others every chance she could. There was an air of confidence around her we were unfamiliar with. Her posture improved. She began to thrive.

A teacher never really knows where his or her influence begins or ends. I’d like to think that mine began when I tried to yank her out of a victim mentality. I expected more from her. I believed she had something to offer and when she looked at me, I think she believed me too. We are kindred spirits Monica and I. Someone believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself, wouldn’t settle for anything but my best. Someone wanted to see me get myself out of my own hole. Pay it forward. I think she will do the same. I’ll be keeping a close eye on her.
Don Murray Tribute

John Edmondson

I guess Jean Robbins, my friend and adjunct faculty member at the University of New Hampshire, got tired of hearing me just talk about Donald Murray, and how his many books on the craft and teaching of writing had absolutely mesmerized me. One afternoon, after I’d once again immortalized Murray and placed him on the literary equivalent of Mount Olympus, Jean asked, “Do you want to meet him?”

A few days later, Don Murray greeted us at his front door in Durham, New Hampshire. A full white beard lined his round face, a red plaid flannel shirt barely contained his ample midsection, and black suspenders held up loose-fit blue jeans. His dark sneakers were vintage Wal-Mart, Velcro-ed to slip on and off with no wasted motion.

There was a quick handshake and a “good to see you.” No sit-down small talk, no offering of food or drink, just right to the work at hand—a legend and a nervous neophyte talking writing.

We walked downstairs and entered a large room housing the tools of his trade—an imposing-looking computer, a printer, and large file cabinets on each side of a padded swivel chair. He’d just finished a draft of one of his columns for the Boston Globe. It had a Thanksgiving theme, thanking the staff at the Tilton School for giving a high school drop-out from Quincy some direction in his life. Murray brought me—a stranger—into his private professional world by asking me to read over his shoulder and tell him if I thought a line “worked” or not.

He wanted to know about me, but I mostly talked about how much his core beliefs about writing meant to me, how writing is an act of discovery, that writers “write from not knowing toward knowing.” At one point, as I continued to talk, he got up and walked over to one of his many bookcases. He grabbed a copy of “Write to Learn” and asked me if I’d read it. I told him I’d read it in a writing class a few years before. It served as my introduction to his work. “Which edition?” he asked. “The one with the flowers on the cover,” I said. “Aw, that’s the old one. Take this one, the new edition.” Next, he pulled down a hard-cover book and handed it to me. It was a novel he’d written years before, about a man who became paralyzed in a car accident. He said he rarely loans out his books anymore, but I seemed like the kind of guy who returned what he borrowed.
The time was flying by and I decided it was now or never. I’d brought a draft I’d written in one of Jean’s writing classes, an essay about potty-training my oldest son. I’d fantasized all day about asking Murray to read it. At that moment, bunging-jumping seemed like a safer risk than what I was contemplating, but I gave him the draft anyway. He gracefully accepted my request.

Before I’d gotten home, about a 90-minute trip, Murray called my wife to tell her he’d read my draft and would be sending me his comments. I didn’t sleep well that night.

A few days later, Murray’s comments arrived. The opening of the letter went like this: “Dear John, You may be apprehensive when you know I am reading your essay, but you may not know I am also apprehensive. I hate to deliver bad news. What if this guy writes with mittens? What if he does not know the subject-verb-object sentence? What if he does not write with specifics? What if he has no voice? Not to worry. I have no doubts that you can write for publication if you place your ass in the chair on a regular basis and submit what you produce.”

Murray had marked up my draft and filled it with comments on the margin like, “Cut…you are ‘writing,’ not letting the story tell itself. Respect the story.” “Stronger verb needed. Try to avoid depending on verb to be and watch out for ings.” “Wordy, cut. You write so well, you don’t have to write so much.” At the top of the page he wrote, “I’ve tried to cut away to reveal the sharp, slender prose in your text. You can only do that when a good writer has something to say and said it well.”

So began my “apprenticeship” with Don Murray. I revised the potty-training piece and he sent it to the editor of the Boston Globe magazine. It wasn’t published there, but to my shock and delight, the Concord (NH) Monitor ran it. I wrote other pieces, sent them to Murray, and through the mail or over the phone, he’d nudge me along, never giving me the answers, but asking me questions I eventually learned to ask myself—Is my focus clear? Have I used specific information? Are my nouns concrete and my verbs active?

But like all good teachers, Murray knew when it was time to step back and let the student go it alone. He kindly told me in a note that he no longer had the time to continue our tutorial, but to remember that “ultimately, all of us have to teach ourselves to write.” And to remember the advice of Sandra Cisneros: “Imagine yourself at the kitchen table, in your pajamas. Imagine one person you’d allow to see you that way, and write in the voice you’d use to that friend. Write about what makes you different.”
We didn’t lose contact. Over the years, I sent published pieces to Murray, and he e-mailed back with comments like, “So many talk about writing, so few get their asses in the chair.” And this one: “First you lose your virginity, then you go on the street—the writer’s story. Keep writing.”

We all have turning points in our lives, moments that clearly propel us in one direction or another. Mine was meeting Don Murray, who inspired me to get my ass in the chair. ♦
A Fireside Chat

Michael Woodworth

They could see the wavy reflection of the moon in the sand that was clinging to water recently left by the sinking tide. Their bare feet couldn’t sink into the wet sand the way they could earlier when the sand was dry. Barely out of view was the glow of a city on the horizon at the end of the beach. The two young girls walked towards the light in silence. A warm breeze blew lightly off the land towards the sea. Neither knew for how long they had been walking, or where they were coming from.

Sal was the first to turn around and see that the clouds had long since lost the purples and oranges created by the setting sun. Remains from supports of an old wooden pier that they had recently passed stood at attention while waves lapped at the bases of the posts closest to the water. When Sal looked forward again she saw that they were coming to a point. A row of piled up, glistening rocks stretched from the dunes into the ocean.

Sal’s twin sister, Leah, climbed on hands and knees over the rocks and disappeared onto the other side. Sal followed every step she had watched Leah take. At the top of the dozen foot high pile Sal stopped and looked toward the dunes on her right. A small house became visible through the waving grass. Leah had already started to make her way up a narrow path.

“Leah, wait up.” Sal quickly scrambled down the rocks. “Where are you going?”

Leah looked back over her shoulder. The wind blew through her light blue dress and shoulder length, dirty blonde hair. She gestured towards the house, “Think we should go in?”

“I dunno, you really want to?” said Sal.

Without answering, Leah turned a rusty knob and entered through the slanting doorway. Sal took a deep breath and ventured towards the vacant looking house that Leah had entered. By the side of the house she stood on her toes and peered in through a cracked window. A curtain blocked her view. She put her ear up against the peeling house and listened. Talking on the inside sounded like whispers. Anxious to find out what was being said, she followed behind her sister again.

Three leather chairs with their backs to Sal faced a lit fireplace. A small trail of smoke rose above the middle chair. As Sal rounded the chairs she could
see that Leah was sitting in the chair on the left with her legs dangling above the
ground. The figure in the middle chair wore a hooded robe and smoked a long
pipe. The only part of his face that was visible was his eyes when he drew air
through his pipe. Sal stood next to Leah’s chair and asked, “What did you say
to him?”

With an unexpectedly smooth tenor voice, the hooded man said, “I was asking
your sister about your walk. Why don’t you have a seat?”

Sal climbed onto the third brown chair and stared into the fire. There was no
carpet on the floor, only a small pile of wood waiting to be burned. It’s shadow
wobbled by Sal’s feet on the rough floorboards.

Sal leaned towards the middle chair and said, “How much farther do we have to go?”

“That’s up to you.” The hooded man looked at Sal. “You don’t have to go any farther if you don’t want to.”

Sal straightened herself in her chair, “Well, what happens if we stop?”

“If you stop now you’ll never reach the city.” The man reached below his chair for more tobacco.

Leah turned towards the man for the first time and said, “Can we go back?”

“You won’t be able to change anything, but by all means.”

“What would we want to change?” said Leah.

“I think you’ll find that there are some events you’ll wish had played out differently.” The man stood up and walked towards a closed door.

“What’s in there,” asked Sal.

“You don’t have to keep walking if you don’t want to, but you can’t stay here. You have three options. Go back and live your life over, but inevitably end up back here, keep on walking towards the city, or leave this way.”

“Ok,” said Leah, “What is that way?”
“It is a new path. If you go through this door you will forget everything you’ve ever known. You won’t remember who you were, where you’ve been, or even who you’ve loved.”

Sal shifted nervously from side to side causing the leather to creak. “I don’t really remember anything anyway.”

“I don’t either,” said Leah. The two girls looked at each other. Leah noticed for the first time the dark blood that stained Sal’s dress. “Sal, are you ok?”

Sal peered below her dress at a bone poking through a gaping wound on her chest. She snapped back into her chair anticipating pain, but felt none.

“I’m fine.” Sal pointed at similar markings on Leah’s dress, “how about you?”

Leah’s face twisted as if searching for an emotion. “I don’t know. What happened to us?”

Leah curiously poked at the bloody hole in her chest and looked back into the fire. Sal stared at the floor and then back up at the man with the pipe.

The man spoke again, “If you make it to the city you will remember everything. The good and the bad. And you’ll find yourself with everyone that’s passed before you.”

“But not if we go through that door,” said Sal, “and if we turn around we’ll repeat everything that we’ve done.”

“That’s right, Sal.” The man in the cloak crossed the room again and sat in his chair.

“Why would we want to go through the door?” said Leah, “Where does it take us?”

“It takes you to a new beginning.”

Sal and Leah looked at each other again. “I want to know what happened,” said Leah. Sal put her hands on the arm rests preparing herself to get back up. “I think I do too.” Soft moonlight forced itself through the shades of the windows inviting Sal and Leah to return to the beach. They got up and walked to the door.
The Hairy Man

Maryanne Cullinan

The Hairy Man was coming. Wiley knew it. He’d known it in his gut from the day he’d been born. Hairy man was coming. Coming to get Wiley.

Ama had made sure that Wiley didn’t forget it.

“He’s comin’ for ya, Wileyboy,” she’d tell him, through her long curtain of wavy hair. “He’s gonna come’n eat’cha up. Just like yer daddy.”

Wiley had never known his daddy. Daddy had been gone before he was born, scared away from Ama and Wiley by the Hairy Man. All the way back to The City, where daddy had come from.

“Don’t matter none, Wileyboy,” Ama would say. “Hairy Man’ll git’im just the same. Come for him, come for you. Ya best be ready.”

And so, Wiley knew that to be true. Ama knew a great deal about most everything, so if she said it, it was bound to happen. And Ama was never wrong, especially when it came to Wiley.

“Ama, when’ll the Hairy Man be comin’ for me?” Wiley used to ask when he was younger.

“Don’t know, Wileyboy,” she’d say sighing. It surprised him every time she’d say it, since Ama knew so much about most everything else. Hadn’t she been the one to find Old Chester Wilcott when he washed away in the swollen creek? And she always knew when Wiley was even thinkin’ ‘bout bein’ idle.

Ama would stand up and pace the cabin, arms slashing the air to make her point. “Hairy Man ain’t coming while ya Ama’s here, Wileyboy. He git yer daddy, he’s not gonna git you. Not while yer Ama’s protectin’ you.” Her eyes flashed, and Wiley knew if he were the Hairy Man, he’d sure give Ama a wide berth. “Now git yer lazy bones moving. Don’tcha worry, Wileyboy. Just be keepin’ a keen eye open. There’s other things out in that world than just the Hairy Man. He’ll be comin’ in his own time.”
Wiley felt the familiar shiver run down his spine, as he trotted down the rutted logging road to town. He quickly looked around, but the waist high grass in the track was still. The woods were quiet, same as always. No Hairy Man. And no time to waste. Ama’d have his hide if he didn’t git to town and back before she needed him again. He sped up, walking quickly and jumping over the ruts left by long gone cars. He smiled. If it wasn’t for the traffic of those folks driving the five miles up the old logging trail to Wiley’s cabin, the woods would have claimed it back way before now. Ama gave advice and cues ‘bout about most everything to the town people who needed it. The traffic was regular enough to keep the trees, if not the grass, at bay.

Wiley wasn’t too sure about cars, having never ridden in one, himself. But, if he was riding, the Hairy Man wouldn’t be able to catch him. He gave that some consideration, whacking the heads off the long tall grass with a stick he’d picked up on the way. Take that! And that! I’m not ‘fraid of you, Hairy Man.

The sudden flash, bounding out of the grass in front of Wiley startled him so much that he dropped the stick with a squeak. Was it finally the day he’s come?

“Oh!..... hello there, rabbit,” Wiley said, heart calming back down. “Now what could ya be doin’ today, lil’ cousin? Didn’t mean to startle ya.” The mottled brown bunny sat back on its haunches and looked at Wiley, with his nose wrinkled, and one paw up questioningly. “I see cousin fox hasn’t ate’cha up yet.”

“And I see that the Hairy Man hasn’t eaten you up yet, or brought you any manners for that matter!” retorted the rabbit indignantly, ears twitching. “Thanks for bringing the fox up. I really like thinking about that.” Cousin rabbit was so hard to please on account of his life on the run. Made him nervous and prone to gloom. “ Look at my paw!”

Wiley dutifully inspected it, to see a small red gash marring the soft fur.

“Well now, I’m truly sorry to be seein’ that, rabbit.”

“Well, I’ll have you know that I almost WAS eaten by that terrible fox today. I’ve got a lame paw and would you believe it? I’m a father again. Seven little leverets at home and the missus in a state.”

“Hmm…”
“Well, I was enroute to find Ama before you almost killed me bashing the grass with that stick. You need to be more careful.”

“I thought’cha might be the Hairy Man, comin’ t’eat me up.”

“Hmph. Me? Not very likely, is it? A rabbit as the Hairy Man? With my bad paw?”

“If Ama’ ain’t in cousin, I can make the salve for ya. I just got t’go into town first ‘n’ do the mail.”

“Well you better do it quick. You wouldn’t want to disappoint Ama,” said the rabbit, all trace of sarcasm gone. It was a fact. Nobody in their right minds would cross Ama, or even disappoint her.

Wiley and rabbit’s conversation came to a quick end as a sleek and shiny white station wagon bounced and scraped up the rutted trail, driver wild eyed and swerving. Wiley and rabbit jumped out of the way as the driver careened by. Rabbit startled and bounded away back into the woods.

“There’s going somebody’s new daddy,” Wiley said, humming to himself as he quickly continued on his way, fear forgotten. He knew that Ama would be in that car on the way back, with the new daddy bombing down the rutted road. Ama’s keen eye’d be looking to see how far Wiley’d gotten towards town.

Ama and Wiley had no car of their own, of course. They had no TV, or radio or even toilet, though Wiley didn’t know to miss them. Wiley’s Ama hated anything that wasn’t “made by hands,” as she called it.

In fact, the only time she would agree to even ride in a car was when a frantic soon to be father came coming down the path, desperate to get Ama for midwifing. Much to her disapproval, most ladies still insisted on having their babies at hospitals. Wiley knew that Ama would only go “if the machines wouldn’t be messin’ it up. T’ain’t natural”, he could hear her saying.

Due to her acid tongue and perfect record, the local doctors and nurses knew to more or less let her be. Ms. Penackel at the Post Office told Wiley that ladies liked having Ama there, because Ama even knew the gender of the baby before the ultrasound! Of course she did. Machines could never get the best of Ama.
Wiley came out of the forest, where the trail met the paved road. He hustled along, past the Colton house.

“Hello there, Wiley,” a voice called out. Caught.

“Hello Mrs. Colton, ma’am” he replied, somewhat warily. A middle aged woman, with piercing eyes that gazed through half- round glasses, stood up from where she had been kneeling in her garden.

“And what brings you to town, young man?”

“Just doin’ the mail for Ama, ma’am,” he replied, shuffling.

“And, young Wiley, shall I expect your attendance in our school this fall?”

“No, ma’am. Ama’s teachin’ me everything I have a need to be learnin’.” This always happened. Mrs. Colton was in charge of the school here in town. She always seemed to take it so personal when Wiley walked by her house. Like the fact of him just walking by insulted her.

“And what have you learned today, Wiley? She asked, deftly peeling off her gardening gloves and looking him square in the eye.

“Well, I talked with cousin rabbit. He’s got seven new leverets and his missus is goin’ crazy ….”

Mrs. Colton had that gleam in her eye that Wiley sometimes saw fox get when he was real, real hungry and Ama offered him up somethin’ nice to eat. “Why Wiley, what an active imagination you have. Wouldn’t you like to come to school this fall and learn how to write that story down? Why, then we could save it forever!”

Wiley slowly back away. “No ma’am. No thank ya ma’am. Ama needs me at home.” He’d long ago given up trying to explain what he was learning from Ama. ‘Specially to Mrs. Colton, would couldn’t even talk with rabbits, huh!

Mrs. Colton stepped closer, towards Wiley. He was rooted to the spot. She opened her mouth real wide, like she was gonna say something real important, or maybe just bite him.

A white station wagon turned onto the pavement, tires crackling as they spit up tiny stones and grabbed the tar road. It drove by, speeding up. Wiley just
caught Ama’s eye as she glared at Mrs. Colton. They’d had words, once. From that look, seemed like they’d be havin’ em again sometime real soon. The spell was broken.

“Bye, ma’am. Good luck wid’cha flowers. Yer carrots’d grow better if they was thinned out 3 inches apart,” he said, grinning as he skipped away. Mrs. Colton turned back to her garden in surprise. Ama was right. There was lots of things out in the big world to be keeping a keen eye on.

“Goodbye, Wiley, we’ll miss you in the fall,” Mrs. Colton replied, defeated. He waved and turned to town, knowing somehow he’d won.

Wiley liked going into town. When Ama had gone by, he’d seen she was wearing her green cloak. That meant business. Ama wouldn’t be back ‘til late tonight or probably tomorrow morning. He could slow down and enjoy town life.

He liked seeing all the other folks and what they were doing. They seemed to spend lots of time doing all sorts weird things, like washing their cars. What was the purpose of that? They’d just git dirty again. Or taking tiny trees from a store that sold ‘em and putting them all in a row. Why would anybody want trees in a row? Couldn’t they hear ‘em calling the forest? And why couldn’t they just grow trees from acorns or other seeds?

Why, Wiley had even seen a man washing his driveway down to get rid of sand and rocks. Imagine, washing the ground to get rid of stones. And sometimes he’d peek into their houses, just on the way by, to see what they was doin’ and they’d be just sittin’! Sittin’ and starin’ at that TV box. Not even lookin’ at the trees they’d just been plantin’ or the so clean driveway! No wonder these folks needed Ama so much.

Wiley walked by the houses, lawns and flowering gardens. Most folks were friendly, and Wiley gave ‘em a smile and a wave as he went by. They all knew him.

Some kids rode by on bicycles and a few kids his age stopped quick to say hello.

“Hey Wiley, what’cha doin’?”

“Nuthin’, just comin’ t’town to do the mail like usual,” Wiley replied. The boy looked around and gave a conspiratorial whisper.
“Wiley, I got that rock ya told me about. It is black with a white stripe all the way around it. Guess WHAT?”

Wiley had been teaching some of the kids to make hexes for a while now. It all started back when one of the bigger boys had given Wiley some trouble. He had taken offense at Wiley’s threadbare clothing and mistaken his quiet ways for fear.

“Hey, you!” the Big Boy had said. “Hey FREAK.” Wiley had been mighty surprised to realize the boy was talking to him, since of the two, the Big Boy was much freakier than Wiley. Black spikey hair and an earring. It must be like when Jaybird gets all his feathers all new in the spring and gets to acting tough so the other birds’ll know he’s a threat. The Big Boy had pushed Wiley down, scraping his knee.

“If y’aunt stopping that, I’ll put’a hex on ya,” Wiley told him, getting kind mad, on account of the knee. The Boy had laughed, but Wiley put a hex on him all the same, and didn’t everybody notice that the next week Big Boy’s Mama had made him cut his hair and his bike had gotten run right over by the mailman. Why, three weeks to the day after Wiley’s encounter, he’d even gotten braces and his daddy’d made him wear the headgear even to school!!

Since then, Wiley’d been given a wide berth by some, sought out by others, and generally known as somebody not to be trifled with. Wiley was proud. When Ama’d heard of the Big Boy’s troubles from some ladies in town, she’d only said, “Is that so?” and pointedly looked at Wiley. But, he’d seen the twinkle in her eye.

The boy on the bike, a thin red-headed freckleface by the name of Zach Picklin looked at Wiley expectantly. Wiley’d been helping him out. Zach’s aim was to hex all homework for the next year. “Guess what, Wiley?”

“Well, I don’t know that I can guess,” said Wiley, even though he had an idea. If Zach’d found the right stone, he’d have finished the hex and seen it work.

“Wiley, I did everything ya said, and buried the stone right under the classroom window at the school, like ya said, and BOOM! Next thing my mom’s at the grocery store and runs into a lady who turns out is the new teacher. And guess WHAT?? She don’t even believe in homework at all! Ain’t that awesome?”
Zach beamed and the other kids whistled in agreement. This was big time.

“I know we didn’t pay you for it yet Wiley, so what else do you want?” Zach’s twin sister, Zoë chimed in. She was pretty, in a real red kinda way, thought Wiley. She always made him kinda nervous on account of her being so pretty and talking so fast. Make yer head spin.

“Aww, nuthin’,” he said to his feet. “Guess some more marbles, if ya feel obliged.”

“Just marbles?”

Wiley did love marbles. They were great for magicking and just fun to play with. His hexes for marbles trade kept him on real friendly terms with everyone. Even if they did have a hard time understanding why Wiley didn’t have to go to school and didn’t play videogames. It was a good bargain all the way around.

The exchange was quickly made and goodbyes said. Wiley continued on, stopping in at some stores and saying hi to the townfolk. The town was proud of its small village feel. Even in modern times, the sleepy town had a feeling of tradition. Not much had changed since the 1800s, excepting the usual modern conveniences. With only a few hundred people living there, it was pretty far off the beaten track and most people worked local. Why, they didn’t even have cable yet available in the town.

Wiley lingered at the storefront window, eying some candy. Maybe he’d take candy for the next hex. This was workin’ out pretty good. The trick was not tellin’ em everything, so that they had to have his help just a little. Otherwise the kids’d be able to make their own hexes, and then where’d Wiley’s trade go? That seemed poor business plannin’ for sure.

Wiley noticed his shadow lengthening. There was a long way to go back to the cabin, and he had to be there before dark. Gotta attend to chores and check in on rabbit’s paw before nightfall. Gotta be in the house by dark and make sure the wards’re up, so Hairy Man couldn’t git him while he was sleepin’.

The post office was a large brick building that exuded majesty and seriousness. Wiley took his job of collecting the mail pretty serious. He didn’t read himself, of course, which made the letter that came every month even more mysterious. In fact, Wiley wasn’t even allowed to open the letter.
Wiley pushed the heavy glass door and went right up to the counter. He peered over it at the stacks of mail that were waiting to be sorted. Mrs. Penackel looked up from her numbers and came over to see Wiley. Wiley liked her. She was small and wrinkly and brown, like a friendly walnut come to life.

“Why, if it isn’t Mr. Wiley,” she said in mock seriousness. “And what might bring you to this humble post office today?”

“Aww, Mrs. Penackel, ya know why I’m here,” said Wiley, smiling. He fished out a walnut out of his pocket and put it on the counter.

“What did you bring me?” she asked. “A walnut? How did you know I’d lost my other one?” Wiley had known right away, of course. He’d been the one to hex it in the first place. Of course he’d known! But he didn’t say that. Poor Mrs. Penackel couldn’t help it none that she hadn’t been brought up right.

“Well, I figgured ya might be needin’ another one, to keep ya safe,” explained Wiley. Zoë had let it drop one time that mail folks and dogs didn’t get along none. So Wiley’d hexed this walnut to keep Mrs. Penackel safe from maurading packs of dogs.

“Ya haven’t been attacked none since it’s been gone? The hex should’a outlasted the walnut for a couple days ‘til I got here with the new one.”

“Yes, Mr. Wiley, thank you. I have not been attacked by any packs of dogs since you have given me the walnut,” her eyes twinkled merrily. “I appreciate you thinking of me. You know, I did notice the neighbor’s toy poodle was sizing me up this morning.”

Wiley nodded. He knew what it was like to be pursued.

Wiley had the suspicion that Mrs. Penackel might not 100% believe that the hex was protecting her, but at least she listened carefully when Wiley told her about it and kept the walnut on her desk, just in case. That was good thinking.

“I guess you’re looking for your letter, Mr. Wiley,” she said, handing it to him. “There you go, right on time!”

Wiley looked at the letter. It gave him a sense of forboding, like it did every month. Ama didn’t read none either, but she had this way of holding paper in her hands and just knowing what was on it. She always said she’d teach Wiley, but she never had the time. So Wiley held the plain white letter with dark
black marks. It was a mystery. He wondered what the marks on the envelope said. He tried to do what Ama did, but all he got was the sense even more. Made him nervous.

“Better hustle over to the bank, Mr. Wiley,” Ama’ll want you back before dark, don’t you think? Mrs. Penackel gave Wiley a smile and shooed him out with her hand. “Thanks for the walnut.”

Wiley thought about what the letter might say. He knew better than to ask. If Ama’d want him to know, she’d tell him. He mulled that over as he hurried to the bank. The shadows were longer now, and the sky starting to think about sunset.

Inside the bank were long red velvet ropes, to tell you where to stand, and bank ladies wearing lipstick to give you money. Well, they gave other folks money. They never gave none to Wiley. Wiley’d just hand them the letter. He knew it had something to do with money, though. He’d give the letter to the lady and then he and Ama could get whatever they needed at the stores in town. Maybe it said, “Please give Wiley and his Ama whatever they need at the store.”

Wiley handed the letter to the cashier. She was a new one. She was old, like Mrs. Penackel, but not so wrinkly. She smelled like fake flowers and put paint on her nails. Wiley didn’t know why she wanted to hide the ends of her fingers. Maybe her fingers were really claws, like cousin cougar, or horribly ugly, so she had to hide them. Wiley looked at the ends of his fingers. You could always tell what he’d been doing by what was under there. Like a little reminder that today Wiley’d been diggin’ before he came to town.

“Yes?” asked the cashier. She was new to town, and she looked at Wiley real funny. They’d never seen each other too close before. Neither of them really liked what they saw.

“I’m givin’ ya my letter,” said Wiley, trying to be patient.

“What do you want me to do with it?” she asked, not returning the favor.

“Well, I’m givin’ it to ya. So ya have it, like I’m supposed to,” he said, trying again. How was he supposed to do what Ama asked if this lady didn’t do her job?

She looked at the letter dubiously.
“William Prentiss Worthington Charboy, is that who you are writing to, boy?” she read, looking at Wiley. “Who is that supposed to be? There is no one by that name here. The post office is down the street.”

Another bank lady bustled over to see the fuss.

“Oh Wiley!” she said. “It’s you!” she looked at the painted lady. “This is Ama’s son, Wiley. Remember what I told you?”

The painted bank lady looked at Wiley again, frowning. He could see light dawn on her powdery face.

“Oh, yes. Indeed. Wiley. I do remember.” She took the letter and began typing at her computer. “You may go.”

Wiley wondered what she had remembered about him. It was probably about Ama. Nobody ever forgot her. She didn’t come into town too much, now that Wiley did it. He’d tell Ama about the painted lady. She’d keep an eye on her.

Wiley left the bank quickly, almost running into a tall man in a pressed grey suit. He bet that painted lady would be nicer to the man. That lady was no good.

His thoughts returned to the letter. William Prentiss Worthington Charboy. Now who could that be? He’d never hear of someone with such a overfancy name. He shivered again, the foreboding coming back. There was a mystery here all right. Why would Ama be getting letters from somebody with four names? Wiley and Ama had one, and every other folk did fine with two.

Wiley saw the sun dipping low and he knew he had to git home quick. The light of the sun was almost horizontal, and blinding towards the west. He wished Ama would be there when he’d be getting back. But she wouldn’t be, so all the more reason to hurry.

He hustled through the streets, intent on his goal. If he hurried he’d have enough time. He raced towards the opening of the logging trail, golden sun glaring in his eyes, and throwing his shadow long behind him.

He stopped at an intersection to let the traffic by and hustled through the crosswalk. He was just past Mrs. Colton’s when a big black car pulled up in front of him, blocking the logging trail.
At man stepped out of the car and into the brilliant sunlight. Wiley could only see his looming figure as he came towards Wiley.

“You! I’ve been looking for you!” the man shouted, coming close and grabbing Wiley by the shoulders.

“Are ya the Hairy Man?” Wiley asked, quaking with fright. The man spun them around, giddy with glee. As Wiley looked at him, he recognized him as the grey suited man from the bank. He didn’t look very hairy for a hairy man. “Are ya going to eat me up?”

“No William, not at all.”

“My name’s Wiley.”

“Is that what Ama tells you? No son, you are William. William Prentiss Worthington Charboy. I’m your father, boy. I’ve come to take you home!”

Ama wasn’t goin’a like this at all. ♦
Ruthie Lost Her Teeth Again
Maryanne Cullinan

Ruthie lost her teeth again.
She shuffles, moaning, down the hall.
She asks us, “Have you seen my teeth?”
She shakes her tiny fist at all.

They could be in the bathroom,
One time she left them in the plants,
There was that time, found in the freezer!
She never tells us in advance

And then it’s desperate. Where have they gone?
She can never quite remember.
Her daughter is just going nuts,
This is the 5th pair since December!

She howls at the hired help.
She peruses every person’s purse.
The nurses try to find them quick,
But Ruthie’s anguish just gets worse,

“How can she come to dinner now?
How will she eat her peas and custard?”
At lunch, they tried to feed her hotdogs,
She would only lick the mustard.

Sometimes I hear the nurses’ aides,
They want to tie them ‘round her neck.
Perhaps she does this thing on purpose.
She likes to have them at her beck

And call. I mean, how could the teeth
Have gotten in that decaf tea
Last Saturday? They ask each other
But they haven’t yet asked me…

Yes, Ruthie’s teeth are gone again.
She howls, stomping, down the hall.
She’s desperate to find her teeth!
The other folks don’t know, at all…
However:

I, Vivian Whitely, have discovered
That two sets of teeth in one mouth full of guile
Do not make it easy for a person to chew,
It just gives you a guiltier smile.
the specter

Jenifer J. Pellerin

Shifting uncomfortably in the hard plastic chair, she says, “this paper is about Nate.” It wasn’t until the bottom of the first page that I realize it was about that Nate. I wasn’t prepared for this. Not yet. But, in bringing closure for herself, she unwittingly gashed open a barely clotted bleeder.

Her nightmare vision, intricately retold, mirrored my own: a pale Nate swinging from a playground tree—the usual mask of joy constricted from his face by a nylon noose. The breeze swaying his lifeless body and nothing can be done.

I stop breathing as I read and only her anxious face brings my lungs back into functioning.

“Oh, god,” I say swiping the glasses off my face. Placing my hand over my eyes, I mutter, “give me a minute.” She laughs nervously as I beat back the nightmare image. I think, It’s too soon . . . too raw . . . How do I discuss this writing when the nerves are exposed and still writhing?

I replace my glasses and my eyes focus onto her pleading face. Her eyes are quivering slightly as she looks into one of mine and then the other. I suddenly become aware of my own humid breath, and as we both exhale, I imagine our exhalation intermingling in the space between us. Breathing out, I stammer, “I had Nate freshman year.” It felt stupid, trite, but as she imperceptibly nodded I know that those words don’t matter. Instead, our eyes discourse. I see in the depth of her hazel eyes and she in my blues. This moment, it lasts perhaps thirty seconds, and yet, as though by pure telepathy, months of haunting are engraved.

We are finally able to talk about that piece, but as we do, our common vision is an apparition reading over our shoulders and eavesdropping on our conversation.
Leaving

*Nan Colby*

The strut came naturally to his body
Rage bunching his scrawny shoulders
His wide mouth fixed in a silent whistle
“What you lookin’ at?”
In case anyone looked his way
Hasta la vista, Caesar Town
“You can bloody well piss off!”
The crest of his brow furrowed with teenage angst
The paring knife hiding in his jean pocket
His ripped vest the color of flame, hunter’s orange
His footsteps stomped a rhythm due west
“Eat my dust!” ♦
**Potty Trained**  
*Amanda Zabiski*

The forced intimacy  
of dorm life overloads my sensibilities.  
Brushing my teeth with a stranger,  
avoiding eye contact in the mirror,  
challenges all I understand about closeness.

As a child, I followed people into  
the bathroom.  
It began with my mother. I would  
walk in behind her and plop down  
on the bathtub’s edge.  
I would talk to her about her day.  
She would go about her business,  
sometimes using the toilet, often  
washing her hair or brushing her teeth

Then there was my stepmother.  
I’d follow her, reciting Shakespeare,  
telling stories about my friendships,  
making her laugh. I’d balance  
on the edge of the sink,  
while she shaved her legs,  
washed her face, brushed her teeth.

As a teenage girl, I learned  
the bathroom  
was a destination for women  
to explore together. They talked of  
men, the future, their families  
all while applying lipstick, washing  
their hands, brushing their hair.

So I struggle to not look  
into the eyes of a unknown woman  
as, in unison, we brush, spit and rinse.  
Smirking as I leave,  
I breach dorm bathroom etiquette,  
embrace the awkward  
and say, “Goodnight, sleep well.”♦
You Can Do It the Hard Way
Jennifer Larochelle

When we bought our home there was snow on the ground giving us a picture of the winter landscape. As the snow melted and spring took hold it seemed that a new wonder was revealed to us daily. The most magnificent of these was the granite foundation for a barn that once was the centerpiece of our farm. There were priorities to set and though the barn ranked below the wedding, electricity, insulation, plumbing and walls, Roger and I knew it was only a matter of time. The old granite foundation called us with each passing day and as spring faded to summer and summer to fall and the immediate projects got ticked off the list the barn drew nearer to the top.

As I have found in my marriage often, Roger and I spend a lot of time thinking separately about the same issue or problem. The barn was no different. One winter’s night I wondered into the kitchen and found Roger drawing plans. We collaborated and marveled at how parallel our thinking actually was. This happens a lot in our marriage too. On one point we differed and it is the point that has made all the difference in the way I think about our barn. “We’re going to cut our trees and mill our own lumber and we’re going to build a barn,” he said with conviction. Though that was certainly how the original barn had been built it didn’t occur to me that we would embark on that a similar incredible journey. And it wasn’t until the first cuts were made that I actually believed that we had begun. We were embarking on a dream.

If you aren’t familiar with life in small town New England it is probably important for you to understand at this point how information travels. Knowing what we knew about the barn and our dream of cutting and milling our own trees the next logical step was to find someone to help and the logical place to take that step was at our local Village Store. Whether the 6:30 crowd that was on their way to work and in a hurry or the 9:30 crowd that had done their time in the workforce and now liked to swap stories and tales of legend; a well placed question at the Village Store could usually get an informed answer. Just two years earlier, when I wanted to surprise Roger with a chain saw this is where I went for advice. Another thing that you should know and understand before you ask for the advice is that these are guys who expect follow through. They are deeply invested in your question. In the case of the chainsaw they were more invested then I was, but I understood the importance of reporting back on my decision. Alas I digress. What you really need to know is that the day after the question was asked, “Do you guys know anyone that mills lumber?” and the answer was given, “David Jaques.”, we met David Jaques at the Village Store. Was this coincidence or happenstance or destiny? You decide.
The first cut didn’t bring tears to my eyes. It was only the first part of the process. There were to be more cuts, deeper cuts before we would see the results of our labors. The cigarette hung loosely from David’s lips. His eyes gazed intently at the task before him. His job was to maximize the yield; to transform the tree into lumber. Cut and turn. Cut and turn. Cut and turn. He was masterful at his work. Even the scrap would be utilized: campfire wood bundles for tourists and ‘stickins’ for the next job and a pile of slabs that to the undiscerning eye were junk, but to the seasoned Yankee represented the heat source for next springs’ maple sugaring. Maximize the yield and minimize the waste.

The first boards were 2x6’s and they did bring tears to my eyes. They seemed enormous and then David explained that they were real 2x6’s not the 1-1/2 by 5-1/2 boards the local lumber yard wants you to believe are 2x6’s. Rather than pull them off as we had the edgings and the slabs, David used the claws to push them off the end of the mill. “You can do it the hard way,” he exclaimed, “or you can do it the easy way.”

This was David’s mantra and we heard it often. The familiar rumble of David’s truck marked the beginning of our days and we were eager as each day began to hear it and to see his familiar orange wool hat bobbing down toward the mill. In the first days we discovered a rhythm to the work and we learned that David’s simple gestures and nods were the extension of his words. A nod could mean leave it [the board] or take it off. His expectation, though never spoken, was that you cared enough to learn the pattern of the work and words were unnecessary. As the hydraulic lift moved the logs from ground to carriage, David’s mind began to work. His work was deliberate. His thinking was palpable. His experience and his frugal Yankee spirit required that the log be turned and measured and turned again, sometimes in what seemed like an endless cycle to the casual observer, and then the first cut was made. Though the desired yield was 2x6’s or 2x12’s, David’s intention was to get every board foot out of the log. And that was exactly what he did. And I watched.

Brimming with awe I watched. I marveled at the math being done in David’s head. With time I began to see the log as David did; with a mathematical eye. “You’re doing so much math in your head. How do you keep everything straight?”

“Everything I use every day I learned in sixth grade science and math,” said David.

“I won’t be telling that to the next kid that tells me school is stupid,” I said. He smiled and we laughed.
When one cut could yield two boards, sometimes of different dimensions, it was done and this was the cut that sparked my quilter’s eye. I saw in the wood at that moment not the barn or a 2x6, but a new quilt square design: The Sawyers Square. I told David of my quilter’s intentions. His appreciation of my quilter’s eye was immediate. His first wife Ruth had been a quilter and he understood and was pleased by the turn my eye had taken.

Clear in David’s approach was the value he placed on hard work and practical thinking. The big logs and the crooked ones burned the brightest flame in David’s eyes. They were the challenges; the logs that delineated the seasoned sawyer from the one who didn’t care how big the waste pile got. The waste pile was prides measuring stick you see. That is to say that David took a great deal of pride in his efficiency with the mill, and life for that matter. The smaller the waste pile the better the job.

Neighbors came regularly in those first few days. They marveled at our spirit and determination and at David’s prowess with the mill. It was on a day with an audience that David lost his first log. It was a ‘biggin’ and he had explained that the third turn would be the trickiest. “The weight of the log at that point will be away from the turn. If I don’t get it just right it could tip off the carriage.” And tip it did. With a thud that shook the ground and my nerves. A look toward David saw him shrug his shoulders in an ‘it happens’ way and move onto the next log. Nothing wasted. Especially not time.

The romance of the project escaped none that came to see it in action. And the stacks of milled lumber grew. Each board carefully ‘sticked’ and aligned so as to dry the wood properly without the threat of ants or mold or rot. At the end of each day a new tally was taken and we would relish in the thought that we were one step closer to our dream of building a barn.

When the logs got bigger and the boards they gave got heavier, sawhorses were moved in to lessen the lifting necessary before the edging occurred. “You can do it the hard way or the easy way,” he said a twinkle in his eye. And so we worked day in and day out. And the stacks of lumber got higher. And as the stacks grew and the number of logs for milling decreased we became a family of sorts. A family of circumstance: sharing our lunches and our stories around the picnic table all working toward a common goal.

The final day of milling was grueling. In some ways the romance had warn thin. David’s orange wool hat had given way to a terrycloth sweatband. At this point each of the logs had to be debarked with the spud before cutting. This was full body work. The kind that left you wondering, “Did I really do that,” though clearly the evidence said that you did.
Our brains were tired too. David’s concentration didn’t seem to come as easily. He looked longer for each cut and moved more cautiously with the controls. His “thinking cigarette” seemed to hang lower on his lip. The melancholy came not just from the end of a job well done because all jobs must eventually come to an end, but from a sense that we would not be seeing each other anymore. Sure we could have Dave’s family over for supper, but that would be different. The work that had bound us together for a short time was coming to an end. This was a special time, a special project one that had created comrades. After all how often do you get to knowingly participate in someone else’s dream?

The heat of the day made each board seemed heavier than the last. As David and I carried a 2x12 to the pile, I thought surely me body would give way. The pile had grown to shoulder height and David stopped to shift his body so he could lift his end over the top of the pile. I stared at him. He was tired. I knew it. Calling up a little sixth grade science of my own I said, “Just rest your end on the pile.” He stared back and tilted his head in question. With a superhuman effort I lifted my end and using the edge of the pile as a fulcrum I pushed the board which slid across the top of the pile with relative ease. When I reached David’s side, I smiled and said, “You can do it the hard way or you can do it the easy way.” And we smiled.
Three Cards
Lin Illingworth

I scan the Father’s Day cards in front of me, but none seem appropriate. There are ‘Daddy’s Girl’ cards, cards that say okay-so-we’re-not-really-close-but-here-you-go-anyway, cards with golfing bears or sailing boats, but not one that says what I need it to:

*Thank you, Dad. You’ve been a great dad and a great mom.*

Better yet, the card I need to send to my dad isn’t a card at all, but a stew—nourishing and practical as potatoes, sweet as carrots, and bitter as greens remembered by the tongue.

Instead I opt for three cards, one for love, one for humor, and one ‘From the Both of Us’. Even three cards don’t express what I wish I had words for; instead, they are just signals, flags placed on the iceberg’s tip, like a joke you two have known so well and so long that just a word of it calls you both into the circle of belonging that joins you irrevocably.

As I drive home from the card store, I realize how glad I am to be sending these this year, inadequate as they are. I am so glad that my father will be able walk to the mailbox in his bathrobe, that he can bring them in and sit at the kitchen table with his coffee, his newspaper, and his letter opener as he peruses each one.

I pick up the mail, put away the groceries, and make myself a cup of tea. Instead of signing each card distractedly, I sit with my tea and compose myself. More than ever now, I know the person I am sending these to will not be here forever.

The illusion of Dad’s permanence evaporated late this winter, on the day my brother Mark showed up at my classroom door. This isn’t unusual; we teach in the same school. But another teacher was with him, and so—without needing to hear Mark say the words ‘Dad’ and ‘heart attack’ in the same sentence—I just knew. Ever since Mom left us when we were in high school, my brother and I have grown a wordless language as subtle yet as definite as moss on a stone house. In the year after the divorce, the year that Mom spent most nights with her boyfriend, the year before Dad moved back in, our life together was like the wreck of a spacecraft. We were adrift, but we had each other to count on, while our parents were as distant as asteroids.
As I pick up the first card to sign, it occurs to me: if Dad is our father-mother, then Mark has been my brother-father, and I, his sister-mother; this is the uncharted constellation of our care, how survival has woven such gossamer thread into something so strong. Dear Dad, I finally write, you have been so much more than just a father. It’s a start.

I picture the three of us together last winter, my ruddy-faced father so strangely grey against white hospital sheets. The room seemed to breathe us, steady as a respirator. Shhhhh…click…whirrr…biss… shhhhh…click… whirrrrrr…biss… I fought off the cocoon of smells—Band-aids, antiseptic, dust motes under the heater—fought it, because, somewhere in there, I knew I was also breathing in my father’s decay. I held his hand, traced the liver spots scattered like old pennies on papery skin. His hand squeezed mine, almost imperceptibly. A reflex? No; he heard our voices. I looked at my brother. He had felt it, too.

Even today, trying to sign these cards, it is still difficult to breathe in the truth of that winter night: some day, my father will die. After intense and successful surgery, it is not, we trust, for some time. Yet it is the way of all mortal things, I know. It is all around me. It is the fledgling blue jay, from the nest under the porch that my husband had guarded so carefully, now lifeless in the mouth of the neighbor’s cat. It is these branches I watch drop from wet pine trees, or the brown leaves of the peonies now blown open by yesterday’s thunderstorm. It is merely the turning of the wheel, neither bad nor good. Then why do I sit here like this, unable to sign the next card?

I remember how hard Dad tried to make up for the pulled thread of an absent mother, for his years of being distracted enough for her to finally leave. There was Mark’s senior year, my junior, and the cast parties he threw for us after each school play, the cold-cuts and breads and pickles arranged on overflowing platters, his homemade beans in a crock pot, the way Dad silently pocketed the keys of anyone he knew had enjoyed too many beers. How discreetly my father arranged for two sober drivers—one to take the kid home, and another to take the kid’s car home for him. I remember how my Dad found me, earlier that year, after I had stitched two pieces of shimmery blue polyester into an irreparable inverted “V”. I was slumped over the sewing machine, wet-faced, incomprehensible, and light years from the elegant, low-backed gown I needed by the next night.

“Linnie—what’s the matter?” he ventured.

Because I had already passed full-catastrophe blubbing, I just held out the blue fabric, pointed to the fantasy picture on the pattern, then placed the weird ‘V’ against my back. “Hopeless,” I managed. “Backwards.”
“Yes. I see,” Dad said. He did not laugh. He did not ask me if I had tried everything to fix it. He knew exactly what the story was, and how he planned to write himself into it.

“I guess,” he said, “we’re going shopping for a prom dress.”

That night, the man who, when Mom left, had not known how to boil water or iron a shirt changed my view of the world: he picked out, suggested, held up, matched, waited, watched, adjusted, hooked, and—finally—paid.

“Honey,” he asked on the way home, “why didn’t you just tell me you needed a prom dress in the first place?”

After a year of Mark and me living on our own, a year of working so hard not to ask anyone for anything, I didn’t know how to answer him. “They’re so expensive,” I finally conjured.

“But it’s just money,” he said. “Don’t ever forget that.”

I pick up the last two cards. Finally, I know no card—not even anything I could write—will ever say it all. Yet I sign them anyway, knowing that my dad will understand the shorthand that words must always be when illuminated by the backdrop of the unnamable. I lick the yellow, red, blue envelopes, careful not to cut my tongue. The humidity rises from the driveway as I walk past our wild and overgrown garden. I dangle the cards like jewels into the black mouth of the mailbox, trusting in a chain of hands and trucks and mailbags and airplanes to bring each one to my father’s house.

And then I let go.
"Oh, you mean you didn't know?" the veteran, mentor teacher asked later in the hallway.

"How could I know? No one told me."

"Oh, well Nate probably said something about his father. See his father. . ." the veteran continued in the cool dark hall of hushed tones.

"Student confidentiality," spouted the guidance counselor when she asked afterward why she hadn't been told.

"But I'm his advisor," she retorted. "I'll be seeing him three times a day. Don't you think it would be in at least his best interest to share that information with me?"

"What could I do? Our hands are tied. It's simply a case of student confidentiality." The counselor left the room with her burgundy leather portfolio tucked up against her chest, shielding her heart. The new teacher stood alone in the sunlit office staring out the window.

Miss O'Sullivan watched for tension between Kevin and Nate later that day when Kevin had been released from the office. She saw none. Mr. Adams had handled the fight lightly since this had been the first day of school. The fact that it was Miss O'Sullivan's first day might also have helped Kevin's case. But what was she suppose to say to Kevin? And when? She had simply asked her advisees to write down something on the index card that most people in the room might not know about. "It's easy enough," she said, in her fresh creamy cotton dress with its tiny yellow and green flowers. "Think of something interesting or exciting. Maybe something you've done that no one knows about, or maybe somewhere you went with your family this summer. Did anyone see the balloons at the Hillsborough Balloon Festival? Anything really. Just something you think not many people in this room know about you that you'd be willing to share for a game we'll be playing after lunch." That's when it happened.

Nate, with his trim blond hair and still summer dark skin, leaned forward and whispered in Kevin's ear. Nate's eyes were flashing blue. "I bet she doesn't know that," he said loudly and quickly. He slid off his leg and back into his seat behind Kevin. Kevin turned quickly in his seat, got up as if to jump at Nate, and growled. And then he quickly turned back in his own seat, stiffly and
stared at his index card. "Is everything alright?" Miss O'Sullivan asked, the heat of the late August morning was already robbing her dress of its freshness. Silence. A reverent, downcast eyes silence filled the room. Twelve seventh graders and one not-so-fresh teacher sat in silence. She collected the index cards and thought maybe she'd try something else next year. She didn't like the tension in the room. Finally, Jessica, the bright freckled-faced girl with the orange hair began chattering to Jenna. "What did you put down? I wrote about the time…" "Shhh. Don't tell anyone what you wrote," Miss O'Sullivan chided. "You'll ruin the game." Kevin never looked up.

Fifteen minutes later the bell sounded. It was time for snack. The students began unzipping knapsacks and L.L. Bean lunch boxes as Miss O'Sullivan walked toward the door. She stood out in the hall by the top of the stairs relieved her first morning of teaching was nearly over. She smiled down the hall at the other teachers standing at their posts outside of their doors. Mrs. Raye, the math teacher next door, was assigned to be her mentor. She liked Mrs. Raye. She was sharp-witted and wore a strong smile. "Don't! Stop it! Get'm, Nate!" Miss O'Sullivan heard the loud cries in her room. When she stepped back in, most of her students stood in the center of the room, a few sat clustered together. Kevin was running on the far edge of the room by the windows. Nate had just turned past the back corner desk and was heading straight for Miss O'Sullivan. Kevin had a book in his left hand, lifted up high behind his head, tomahawk style, prepared to hurl it at the back of Nate's head. "Drop the book, Kevin," Miss O'Sullivan commanded. "And stop running NOW. Both of you. D'ya hear me?" The action slowed. Miss O'Sullivan sent Nate to the guidance office and pushed the button for the main office to report what had happened. Kevin sat down. His small dark eyes flashed at Miss O'Sullivan, looking strangely wild. He appeared excited and scared at the same time. She'd see this look many times before the school year's end. She noticed his rounded cheeks were flush and thick dark hair, askew. He looked happy, she'd decided. Maybe even a little evil. Her heart pounded until Mr. Adams appeared at the door. "C'mon, Kevin. Let's go down to my office." Mr. Adams sounded disappointed just then. He was not the firm authority Miss O'Sullivan had witnessed in the short time she'd been there. He glanced downward and lifted an arm, as if to put it around Kevin's shoulder. Kevin slipped by him and out the door. The room was silent once again.

Kevin's father had committed suicide, she later learned. He had hung himself in their basement and Kevin was one who found his father dead. Kevin was six years old at the time. His mother would allow no counseling. That was thing Nate had told Kevin to write on his index card, the thing Miss O'Sullivan did not know, and all the other teachers in the school did, and the thing the guidance counselor had decided not to share with Miss O'Sullivan in the name of student confidentiality. There were other incidents before that. The father
had tried to burn the house down with all his family in it. He had threatened to kill them if they left. The usual Sunday night movie at nine o’clock details. But all Miss O'Sullivan could see was Kevin, his round flush cheeks and his bright dark eyes.

The year progressed. Miss O'Sullivan, the new teacher, tried new things. She asked her students to write in journals, small, soft light blue tablets with black edging. "Can we write anything we want?" Heather with the orange curls chirped excitedly. "Can we write on the covers?" "Yes, yes, but be sure to write your names on the front. That's all I ask."

After lunch the students would run up the stairs, rush to their seats, and wait for Miss O'Sullivan to pass out their journals. They flipped the pages until they found the last entry and eagerly gobbled up Miss O'Sullivan's responses, written neatly in purple or green ink. "Of course Captain Crunch is part of a nutritional breakfast!" Heather gleamed at Miss O'Sullivan over the heads of her classmates. The other students laughed in agreement. "Hey, I can teach you a couple skateboard tricks right now, Miss O'Sullivan," Nate reported. "I've got my board in my locker. Wanna try?" "No, not right now, Nate. But I'm definitely up for it afterschool sometime." But she was always aware of Kevin. Even in the seeming coolness of the unlit room with its neat rows of wooden desks fastened to the floor, Miss O'Sullivan always left the lights off during journal time, Kevin's presence could be felt. He was like a dark void in small dark place. He'd sit upright and stiff staring out the wide window or his head would be down on his folded arms, revealing nothing but dark hair, his journal his only pillow. "Please tell me more" or "Feel free to add details" was written neatly under Kevin's one line, scrawled entries. But nothing was ever added. No response. "I like to eat ice cream" or "I like to ride bikes" was all he'd written. "My favorite flavor is Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia. What's yours?" Nothing.

On occasion she'd bring Kevin's journal with its torn, smudged cover to the school psychologist. It was strikingly bare. "I hate that kid so much. I want to kill him." Kevin’s rounded pencil tip tore deep into the paper, bearing its impressions several pages down. "I hate Mrs. Brouillette. I wish she was dead.” The word dead was written in strange, scribbled letters. The school psychologist would always hand deliver the journal to Miss O’Sullivan. They’d meet in an upstairs office. A handwritten note always accompanied the journal. "Kevin is so privileged to have you as his teacher. He is opening up to you.” Her cool blue cursive writing soothed her. Later, “He obviously trusted you. He needs such a place to write, to be himself.” Miss O'Sullivan was not so sure.
Kevin's behavior was erratic. Sometimes he was quiet and drawn into himself, but at other times he was clearly angry, especially when they worked in groups. Kevin would grow stiff like he had that first day of class. His eyes would get bright and wild. Click, click, click, click, click, click, click. Miss O'Sullivan walked over to the cluster of desks and kneeled down to Kevin’s slightly askew desk.“Kevin, would you do me a favor and ask the office for some extra boxes of tissues?” she asked, quietly taking the stapler. He stole a glance, made eye contact for an instant and sat still. She walked back to her desk. The large oak door quietly closed as he left. He seemed to enjoy intimidating his peers. One day when Miss O'Sullivan was sitting at her large oak desk, angled in the front corner of the room, she noticed Kevin get out of his seat and approach the front of the room. But as soon as he stood up, Miss O'Sullivan noticed something else as well. The two rows of students visibly shifted, opened up, and angled away as Kevin passed. It was like a mighty wind had cut a wheatfield in half, but only for a moment. She must see the school psychologist again.

It wasn't long before the school psychologist sought outside assistance with Kevin's case. Miss O'Sullivan was informed that a very reputable psychiatrist was coming in to observe Kevin's behavior in her classroom. She was relieved. The day arrived when the man in the white shirt appeared. He wore dark trouser and carried a long, legal pad at his side. He sat rather stiffly in the back corner of the room. Miss O'Sullivan walked to the front of her room to begin the lesson. She must first check the homework. She walked up and down the rows, blue rank book in hand, and made casual comments to her students as she examined their work. When she approached the final row, Kevin's row, she noticed how frequently Kevin stole glances over his shoulder at the man in the white shirt. Finally, when she stood by Kevin, he made a sound that indicated he wanted to say something to her. She looked back at the psychiatrist. He was busy scribbling notes on his legal pad in the back of the room.

"Yes, Kevin?" She bent down to hear what he had to say.

"Whose that guy in the white shirt?"

"Oh, he's here to observe me. First year teacher stuff."

"Do you want me to kill him?"

Silence.

"No, that won't be necessary, Kevin. But thank you," she whispered.
She looked back at the psychiatrist, who was sitting upright, and smiled.

After the bell sounded and the students left, the psychiatrist approached Miss O'Sullivan's desk. "Well, he certainly seems like a fine young man," the psychiatrist. "Very respectful."

"Yes," Miss O'Sullivan replied. "Yes, he is."

All Miss O'Sullivan could see was Kevin's round cheeks and bright eyes. What was that phrase the guidance counselor had used that first day of school? Ahh, yes, student confidentiality. ♦
“What a BITCH!”

Sheila Proctor

“What a BITCH! She…”

I closed the door blocking out the outburst Mary Ryan made as she walked down the hall. The last half hour had not gone well. I sat at my desk still shaking, replaying the “meeting from hell.” I guess I should have expected what had taken place. After all, we had a history, the Ryans and me, mostly surrounding attitude and behavior of their children, not Dick, but his older brother and sisters. I straightened and moved the pile of papers from one side of my desk to the other, giving me some sort of accomplishment, completing a task that I had total control over. All of the Ryans had traveled through my advisory, my penance on earth, so I had had several memorable conferences and phone conversations with Mary. I remembered the one that always made me laugh when I retold it because it is so absurd. Dan, Dick’s older brother, had received a failing grade in conduct on his weekly progress report. It seemed that every time a teacher asked him to do something, he responded in a less than acceptable way. If a teacher said, “Dan, please pick up the paper,” his common reply might be: “That’s not my paper; it’s the janitor’s job to do that.” When Dan had not gotten his progress report signed, it was my job, as his advisor, to call home.

I remembered standing in the teachers’ room, holding the phone away from my ear as not to puncture anything and listening to her ranting. “If you, teachers, treated Dan with respect, he would treat you with respect. You should get down on your knees and thank God every day that you have a student like Dan!” (I’m dead serious. No teacher could make that up).

Dick was different, though. While he carried a chip on his shoulder and could be a bit defensive, he was much more respectful than his siblings. In fact, he caused very little disturbance in the class, hiding, hoping that I would not call on him. This was because Dick really couldn’t comprehend what he was reading. How do you tell parents, especially the Ryans, that their seventh grader who had always been labeled an average reader can’t read? Very diplomatically and then some. I checked in his files, but other than the current results of his sixth grade testing, which certainly verified the fact that he couldn’t read, his last test results were from third grade and scored him as average. I have seen students slip through the cracks because students are masters at compensating to hide their lack of competence, but now it had been discovered. Dan could be tested, and intervention through remedial reading could be put in place. I had had meetings like this before, and parents were usually eager to get the help
needed for their child even if it meant pointing the blame at all of their child’s previous teachers.

I started to erase the board, cleaning off everything, every memory of the day, every memory of the meeting. I pictured Mary and her husband, tempers hot, sitting across from me.

“Until he got into your class, he was an excellent reader. It’s your fault,” said Mary. “He loves to read. He reads all the time.”

“I haven’t seen him pick up a book since he was in second grade,” Mr. Ryan said.

“That’s because you’re never home, and when you are, you’re always drunk.”

It was time to close the meeting and any chances that Dick had to learn to read, at least for this year.♦
Loving Hands
Nancy Bernard

I look at my hands
And see memories of another’s.

Those of a strong and loving woman.
Used to direct us as well as caress us.

Hands of a nurse, teacher, carpenter, chauffeur, and friend
Hands for giving, sharing, wringing, holding, consoling.

Used to turn yarn into warm cozy wraps
And create surprises we could never expect

Always time to brew her tea
Or feed her precious birds

Hands that share a family trait, DNA, similar cells
Strong and tender, always open

The hands so missed, no longer here to hold
But memories to hold when I look at my own. ♦
One afternoon about twelve years ago
My sister and I were shopping at Wal-Mart.
We had Allison and Jessica, two year old twins
Who were, for their age, rather smart.

Up and down the isles we traveled
We made it an hour or two
When Alli said she needed the bathroom
Well then of course Jessi did too.

So off to the foulest of restrooms
My sister took each toddler by the hand.
“Don’t touch anything. Do you understand me?”
“Not the toilet or the walls…JUST STAND!”

As one hovered above the toilet
I could hear her reading the wall
“If you’re looking for a good time
Then call 1-800-#*%?-you.”

Though I never imagined that would be the result
I am so proud I taught them to read.
Now years later they have learned to read silently.
And we all find it less stressful, indeed.♦
**Story Lessons**  
Donna-Marie Gamlin

“Little pigs, little pigs, let me in!” said the wolf.

“Not by the hair on our chinny, chin, chins,” said the three little pigs. Deliberately I pause while searching the eyes of each kindergartner seated with me on the rug. The late summer sun beats down on the brick school walls. The whirl of the fan sends a scant breeze upon our slick skin. As I observe the faces it is apparent that some children are eager to chant the well known reply of the wolf with me. Other children have puffed up their body to indicate that the wolf will speak again. Still others turn inward in fear—the stance of the pigs. All are smiling. And then I spot the two children for whom this experience is new. Their upturned mouths hang open; their eyes are filled with wonder and enchantment. It is obvious that they have never heard this story before and they are so caught up in the experience that they remain still and spellbound.

The excitement that leaps within me at the discovery of this inexperience causes personal guilt. I admonish to myself that I should spend some time acknowledging their loss. But as the years have unfolded, I have consistently met more of these children and I realize that misplaced empathy holds no purpose. So instead, I admit to my eagerness. Introducing the pleasure of reading into their lives will always be a role that I relish.

The next few months introduce the many moments that we will share over and over again: the movements of hands on thighs accelerating in sound as the Billy goats cross the bridge. The pregnant pause after we all chanting, “But my grandma, what big eyes you have.” The anticipation of baby bear’s discovery that, “Someone’s been sleeping in my bed and there she is!”, the terror felt as the birds eat the bread crumbs that Hansel has dropped, the certainty with which the Little Red Hen eats the bread with her chicks as the others look on, the humor when Strega Nona hands Anthony the fork, the naivety of the baby bird asking, “Are you my mother? Together we will pretend to be these characters and in doing so they will become our friends and we will share in their language, thinking and experiences through laughter and play.

Dear Mrs. Gamlin,

I am writing to thank you for welcoming my son Joseph into kindergarten. As you know, he is our only son and he was so scared to begin kindergarten in the fall. His father and I were so worried that he wouldn’t do
well because he’s never shown any interest in stories, puzzles or writing before. He is all boy and the outdoors and all it has to offer has been his world of choice for as long as we can remember.

Last Friday as I was giving him his bath he asked, “Mommy, can you buy me the story that Mrs. Gamlin read in school today. The one with the letter tree?”

I just couldn’t believe that he wanted me to buy him a book! I’ve also noticed that he enjoys singing in the shower and changing his voice to pretend that he is the people in the books that you’ve been reading. It doesn’t seem to matter to him that he still can’t name the letters or copy them on to the paper like some of the other kids. He doesn’t even seem to notice that his lines aren’t letters because he tells whole stories from those lines. I know that you’ve been telling me not to worry or to put pressure on him about his letters and writing and now I can see that you are right. Joseph loves school and he’s proud of the things that he can do and it’s all because he has such a loving caring teacher.

I hope you have a wonderful day.

Mrs. Dunn

Unfortunately, this narration causes me a personal sorrow as I look to the future. Today’s educational leaders reflect on test scores to make changes for our students. The tests that our children are taking at younger and younger ages ask them to evaluate, summarize, and recall information before they have had ample time to develop both foundational literacy skills and to discover the aesthetic value involved in reading.

Contrary to research that stresses the need for a strong oral language base and years of the experiences steeped in lap reading to form a foundation for reading and writing, a new approach will be tried in the kindergarten this fall. Pre-selected stories will offer kindergarteners the opportunity to experience a wide range of genres while engaging in scripted discussions that will help them to engage in the thinking needed to evaluate, summarize, and recall information. For some students, the first experience will be one of dissecting rather than
knowing the life of a story. This new method will replace a previously genuine interchange between teacher and student.

As administrators continue to accelerate the curriculum by buying programs that purport to teach kindergarteners the skills needed to attain high test scores, the role of the teacher is diminished. Scripted discussions cannot replace the genuine aesthetic experience and love that transmitted itself when the well worn books from my own childhood were shared. They can’t provide the continuity of a tradition that starts on a comforting knee. Instead, I am expected to become both receptor and transmitter while authentic personal connections are lost. It will never be a role that I can relish.

Dear Mrs. Gamlin,

I am writing to ask you for help with my son Joseph. He’s been having nightmares and he doesn’t want to go to school anymore. He tells me that it’s too hard and that all you do is ask him questions that he can’t answer. I know that you assured me at the beginning of the year that his disinterest in reading and writing was okay as you now teach in a way that makes it easy for all children but I don’t think it’s working for my Joseph. I have tried to help him by setting aside some writing time at home when he can copy those letters and I’ve offered to read the stories you send home to him but he just covers his face and cries every time I bring it up. Do you think we should set up one of those IEP meetings and get him one of those aids?

I have noticed that he likes some of the songs that you’ve been singing and that there are some boys that he wants to be friends with but you can tell how hard it is on my end to hear my son so unhappy and then to force him to go every morning. Please let me know what I should do.

Mrs. Wall
Story Lessons
Donna-Marie Gamlin

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“Not by the hair on our chinny, chin, chins,” said the three little pigs. Deliberately I pause while searching the eyes of each kindergartener seated with me on the rug. The late summer sun beats down on the brick school walls. The whirl of the fan sends a scant breeze upon our slick skin. As I observe the faces it is apparent that some children are eager to chant the well known reply of the wolf with me. Other children have puffed up their body to indicate that the wolf will speak again. Still others turn inward in fear—the stance of the pigs. All are smiling. And then I spot the two children for whom this experience is new. Their upturned mouths hang open; their eyes are filled with wonder and enchantment. It is obvious that they have never heard this story before and they are so caught up in the experience that they remain still and spellbound.

The excitement that leaps within me at the discovery of this inexperience causes personal guilt. I admonish to myself that I should spend some time acknowledging their loss. But as the years have unfolded, I have consistently met more of these children and I realize that misplaced empathy holds no purpose. So instead, I admit to my eagerness. Introducing the pleasure of reading into their lives will always be a role that I relish.

The next few months introduce the many moments that we will share over and over again: the movements of hands on thighs accelerating in sound as the Billy goats cross the bridge. The pregnant pause after we all chant, “But my grandma, what big eyes you have.” The anticipation of baby bear’s discovery that, “Someone’s been sleeping in my bed and there she is!”, the terror felt as the birds eat the bread crumbs that Hansel has dropped, the certainty with which the Little Red Hen eats the bread with her chicks as the others look on, the humor when Strega Nona hands Anthony the fork, the naivety of the baby bird asking, “Are you my mother? Together we will pretend to be these characters and in doing so they will become our friends and we will share in their language, thinking and experiences through laughter and play.

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Dear Mrs. Gamlin,

I am writing to thank you for welcoming my son Joseph into kindergarten. As you know, he is our only son and he was so scared to begin kindergarten in the fall. His father and I were so worried that he wouldn’t do
well because he’s never shown any interest in stories, puzzles or writing before. He is all boy and the outdoors and all it has to offer has been his world of choice for as long as we can remember.

Last Friday as I was giving him his bath he asked, “Mommy, can you buy me the story that Mrs. Gamlin read in school today. The one with the letter tree?”

I just couldn’t believe that he wanted me to buy him a book! I’ve also noticed that he enjoys singing in the shower and changing his voice to pretend that he is the people in the books that you’ve been reading. It doesn’t seem to matter to him that he still can’t name the letters or copy them on to the paper like some of the other kids. He doesn’t even seem to notice that his lines aren’t letters because he tells whole stories from those lines. I know that you’ve been telling me not to worry or to put pressure on him about his letters and writing and now I can see that you are right. Joseph loves school and he’s proud of the things that he can do and it’s all because he has such a loving caring teacher.

I hope you have a wonderful day.

Mrs. Dunn

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Unfortunately, this narration causes me a personal sorrow as I look to the future. Today’s educational leaders reflect on test scores to make changes for our students. The tests that our children are taking at younger and younger ages ask them to evaluate, summarize, and recall information before they have had ample time to develop both foundational literacy skills and to discover the aesthetic value involved in reading.

Contrary to research that stresses the need for a strong oral language base and years of the experiences steeped in lap reading to form a foundation for reading and writing, a new approach will be tried in the kindergarten this fall. Pre-selected stories will offer kindergarteners the opportunity to experience a wide range of genres while engaging in scripted discussions that will help them to engage in the thinking needed to evaluate, summarize, and recall information. For some students, the first experience will be one of dissecting rather than knowing the life of a story. This new method will replace a previously genuine interchange between teacher and student.

As administrators continue to accelerate the curriculum by buying programs that purport to teach kindergarteners the skills needed to attain high
test scores, the role of the teacher is diminished. Scripted discussions cannot replace the genuine aesthetic experience and love that transmitted itself when the well worn books from my own childhood were shared. They can’t provide the continuity of a tradition that starts on a comforting knee. Instead, I am expected to become both receptor and transmitter while authentic personal connections are lost. It will never be a role that I can relish.

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Dear Mrs. Gamlin,

I am writing to ask you for help with my son Joseph. He’s been having nightmares and he doesn’t want to go to school anymore. He tells me that it’s too hard and that all you do is ask him questions that he can’t answer. I know that you assured me at the beginning of the year that his disinterest in reading and writing was okay as you now teach in a way that makes it easy for all children but I don’t think it’s working for my Joseph. I have tried to help him by setting aside some writing time at home when he can copy those letters and I’ve offered to read the stories you send home to him but he just covers his face and cries every time I bring it up. Do you think we should set up one of those IEP meetings and get him one of those aids?

I have noticed that he likes some of the songs that you’ve been singing and that there are some boys that he wants to be friends with but you can tell how hard it is on my end to hear my son so unhappy and then to force him to go every morning. Please let me know what I should do.

Mrs. Wall