



# The Trunk

A Creative Companion to The Writer's Loft:  
MTSU's Low-Residency Certificate in Creative Writing

Fall 2004 Semester

[www.mtsu.edu/~theloft](http://www.mtsu.edu/~theloft)

Middle Tennessee State University  
Murfreesboro, Tennessee

Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service



Committed to Service, Quality, and Excellence  
**Continuing Studies and Public Service**  
Middle Tennessee State University • Murfreesboro, Tennessee  
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# **The Trunk: A Creative Companion to the Writer's Loft**

The Writer's Loft  
MTSU's Low-Residency  
Certificate Program in Creative Writing

**Fall 2004**

**Middle Tennessee State University  
Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service**

**Fall 2004 Editor  
R. L. Burkhead, M.F.A.**

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Randy O'Brien  
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*The Trunk* is published each semester

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ATTN: The Writer's Loft

# Table of Contents

## The Program

Program Overview.....	5
From the Editor.....	9
Welcoming Remarks from the first Writer’s Loft Graduation Celebration	
J. Terry Price, student.....	11
Charlotte Rains Dixon, mentor.....	13

## Writings, Fall 2004

Anne V. Cole.....	16-23
Peggy Smith Duke.....	24
Alvin Knox.....	25-26
Matt Baggett.....	27-30
Randy O’Brien.....	31-36
J. Terry Price.....	37-39
John D. Stafford.....	40-46
Suzanne Craig Robertson.....	47-48
Janelle Rodgers.....	49-52

## Creative Writing and

## Poetry Contest Winners .....center section

Peggy Smith Duke, poetry: Minstrel Show  
Greg Plemmons, creative writing: “Home Study”

# **Announcing Summer Youth University and Young Writer's Loft: Seeing is Believing**

Young Writer's Loft kicks off its first summer with a five-day writing workshop for rising seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students. This program provides an opportunity for serious young writers to spend concentrated time and effort writing and revising with committed peer writers under the guidance of an experienced writing teacher/professional writer. Each day of the workshop will be spent reading, writing, revising, and sharing writing with peers; writers can also expect daily feedback from the guide/teacher. At the end of each day, students will complete one writing activity to share with their peers in the Loft, and each evening, students will be expected to read and write to prepare for the following day. The Young Writer's Loft will culminate on Friday evening with a public reading of students' works followed by a short reception.

Course Number: CY05U-1981

Dates: July 18-22, 2005

Time: 9:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Fee: \$250.00

For additional information, call our offices at (615) 898-2462 or visit the program online at <http://www.mtsu.edu/~learn/noncredit/syu.htm>

# Program Overview

## **The Writer's Loft:**

### **MTSU's Low-Residency Certificate in Creative Writing**

The Writer's Loft is an intensive, 18-month program that is the focal point of a certificate in creative writing offered through MTSU's Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service. It is a unique program consisting of an exciting mixture of workshops, one-on-one mentoring, public readings, and panel discussions. The Writer's Loft's focus is on developing the student's maximum skills, style, and voice as a writer, and it is a supportive, open environment in which the student can become the best writer possible at this point in his or her development. Additional certificate goals include:

- developing a student's skills in the art and craft of poetry, nonfiction, and/or fiction;
- providing a foundation in the analysis of poetry, nonfiction, and/or fiction;
- expanding a student's grasp of grammar and syntax;
- preparing the student to face the business aspects of the publishing industry; and
- coaching the student in effective marketing techniques.

### **Interested in Entering The Writer's Loft?**

While Middle Tennessee State University is in the Nashville suburb of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, The Writer's Loft is not limited to Murfreesboro. Our certificate program is designed to include many different areas throughout middle Tennessee. Thanks to the program's low-residency feature, we are redefining what it means to be a student. The students determine when to study and when to work based on their lifestyles and schedules.

### **Low-Residency**

The program's low-residency feature allows a huge range of students spanning many different generations, lifestyles, and schedules the opportunity to pursue their craft on a customized, individual basis. Students meet on MTSU's campus once or twice a semester and participate in gatherings throughout middle Tennessee, but The Writer's Loft is a one-on-one experience between student and mentor.

### **The Program's Core: One-on-One Mentor Study**

Throughout the semester, each student works individually with a mentor, and no mentor has more than five students, maximizing the individual attention given to the aspiring writer. After an orientation weekend, students and mentors return home, and the students submit three packets to their mentors, delivered by mail. Students mail packets at approximately five-week intervals, and mentors have about ten days to respond to each packet by mail. No student will have the same mentor for two consecutive semesters unless approved in advanced by the mentor. Throughout the semester, mentors are available by e-mail if students have questions or if guidance is needed, and at the end of the semester, mentors and students submit evaluations of the semester's progress and their overall experience in The Writer's Loft.

## **Inside the Packets: The Writing and the Reading**

As agreed upon by the mentor and the student during orientation, each packet will contain a minimum of 10 pages and a maximum of 25 pages of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, or any combination thereof. The manuscript will be double-spaced with one-inch margins and set in Courier or Times New Roman font. In addition, each student will read one novel, non-fiction book, collection of short stories, or book of poetry for each packet. For that one book, the student writes a short essay on what he or she learned “as a writer” from the work. This is NOT a book report or traditional review that one might read in a magazine. (Please note that the fiction and the short essay combine to create the 10–25 page count total.)

## **Orientation Weekend**

The Orientation Weekend is the student’s first introduction to the community of writers known as The Writer’s Loft, and it’s the official kickoff for the semester, filled with panel discussions and workshops during the day and readings and receptions at night. All students will participate in the opening address, at which time students will receive their materials for the semester and the graduating students will receive their certificates.

The weekend’s structure mirrors that of the entire program. Most of the weekend will be filled with some sort of activity, but some are optional, allowing a student to slip away for a break from time to time.

Most important, this is when the student meets one-on-one with the mentor to plan the semester, to agree upon the page range (or count) in each packet, and to identify what type of writing will be in each of the three packets.

## **Public Readings**

Each semester, The Writer’s Loft will offer three opportunities for public readings. Each student is encouraged to give a five-minute reading of something created while in the program at one of the readings, and everyone is encouraged to attend as many readings as possible in order to support our fellow writers.

## **Panel Discussion**

The Writer’s Loft will sponsor one panel discussion each semester, usually held on the orientation weekend, and attendance is encouraged.

## **Publication Opportunity: Literary Journal**

The Writer’s Loft produces this literary journal, *The Trunk: A Creative Companion to the Writer’s Loft*. In addition to spotlighting each semester’s literary achievement, the journal gives students and mentors another forum in which to publish and showcase their work.



## **Creative Writing and Poetry Contest**

The Writer's Loft sponsors a creative writing and poetry contest each semester for students in the program. Winners are published each semester in *The Trunk*, and the Writer's Loft's Web site presents the winning entries for at least a full semester.

## **Potluck Events and Activities**

Throughout the semester, the Writer's Loft staff offers a variety of literary events and activities, all designed to foster a sense of community among students and mentors. Attendance is optional.



...sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, "Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say. If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut that scrollwork or ornament out and throw it away and start with the first true simple declarative sentence I had written.

– Ernest Hemingway  
from *A Moveable Feast*

# From the Editor: R. L. Burkhead

February 2005, Paris

The cold wind blows and flaps my shirtsleeve as the man across the courtyard plays his violin. As unfamiliar as the song is to me, I enjoy it. I'm happy to be here, and I'm glad he's here, too: *Here* is Rue de la Bucherie on the Left Bank of the Seine River, just in front of the famed Shakespeare and Company booksellers. Sylvia Beach opened the original Shakespeare and Company at 12 rue de l'Odeon in 1919, and for two decades, she fostered the arts and the writings



of artists such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Shaw, Pound, Stein, Joyce, and many more.

The place that I am about to enter has been around since '51. The owner (American bibliophile George Whitman) changed the name of his shop—then known as Le Mistral—to Shakespeare and Company in 1964 with Sylvia Beach's permission, of course. According to the shop's Web site, the purpose of Shakespeare and Company is to "honor and continue the ethos and traditions of the former famous bookshop." The fact that I am standing here with back issues of *The Trunk* verifies the honesty of this mission, regardless of geography. Starting with the fall 2004 issue, Shakespeare and Company has agreed to make *The Trunk* available to its patrons in the bookshop.

A couple days ago, the first group of aspiring writers graduated from The Writer's Loft, MTSU's low-residency certificate program in creative writing. And in a couple more days, I will turn the program over to a new member of the Continuing Studies team. In the meantime, I am here in Paris, promoting the fiction, poetry, and nonfiction of my fellow writers, all done with respect to Sylvia and George.

As I focus on my own fiction, giving the program up is a necessity. Energy and time are finite, and being in Paris is (among other things) therapy *with a view* for me. The Writer's Loft is now in its second year and fourth semester, and much has happened since the days when I sketched the program out on yellow legal pads in my living room at 2:00 a.m. on a Saturday night.

Over the past three semesters, 12 instructors from six states have converged in Nashville and MTSU four times to mentor 27 aspiring writers from nine cities throughout middle Tennessee as well as one student from Canada. After a journey that has included 14 workshops, 10 lectures, five panel discussions, and nine packets of original writing

each, the seven students of the Loft's inaugural class have become our first alumni.

Essential to the program's survival have been the many people and organizations across the midstate (and now across the planet) who have come together to help us transform this abstract idea into something real and meaningful.

Please join me in thanking Dr. Rosemary Owens, dean of Continuing Studies and Public Service at MTSU, for believing in this vision and allowing her people to start The Writer's Loft. And there's the MTSU English Department, the Nashville Public Library, the Tennessee Writers Alliance, Davis-Kidd Booksellers, the Linebaugh Public Library, and so many authors, editors, and literary agents in Nashville—all of whom donated their time, facilities, energy, and creativity. And we shall not leave out Shakespeare and Company!

I am excited about the arts in my community and about the future, and I know that I will continue to slip into the Loft's literary events for as long as there is a Loft. But for now, I am going to give the man across from me a couple euros and stick around for a few more songs before I go.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of two stylized, overlapping shapes that resemble the letters 'R' and 'W'.

# Welcoming Remarks from the First Writer's Loft Graduation Celebration

## J. Terry Price, student

On behalf of the first graduating class of The Writer's Loft, I would like to welcome the administration and staff at MTSU in attendance here today, the mentors, students, and our families and friends.

In the summer of 2003, I read an advertisement in the newsletter of the Tennessee Writers Alliance for a new creative writing program at Middle Tennessee State University that was to begin in August. Up until that time I had been writing in isolation. I had no sense of a writing community and certainly no sense of the craft of writing.

I arrived at orientation that August and discovered far more than an eighteen-month certificate program. I found a home, a room full of people who were as passionate about writing as I, people who bonded immediately through this common goal to write as well as one can. And I've been on an eighteen-month adrenaline rush ever since.

This past fall, I was watching a special on PBS on the Boston Pops Orchestra and its conductor, Keith Lockhart. Lockhart succeeded John Williams and is only the third conductor since 1930, when Arthur Fiedler began his 50-year tenure with the famous orchestra.

Let me share some of Lockhart's credentials. During his tenure with the Boston Pops, he has conducted more than 600 concerts; made 56 television shows, one of which won the 2002 ASCAP Deems Taylor Award; led 21 national tours and four overseas tours; conducted performances in Carnegie Hall with the Boston Pops; released eight albums; conducted major symphony orchestras throughout the country and the world; and mastered the ability to play many of the instruments in the orchestra.

During this show, Paula Zahn commented on his many achievements and asked this question: If you could do anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?

His response? "I'd love to be a writer. I'd love to write a novel." And I thought to myself, "Yes, I understand!"

For you see, two of the things I lacked upon entering the program were the audacity to consider myself a writer and the justification for making my writing more of a priority in an already full life. My mentor, Cate McGowan, during our first meeting, was the first person to say to me, "You are a writer." That simple affirmation empowered me to believe that I can do this. She didn't say "You ought win a Pulitzer Prize" or "You are an unbelievable writer," but simply "You are a writer." Incredibly powerful words to me, and, I believe, to all of us.

An acquaintance of mine was sharing a story about her ex-husband, a large, gregarious man from New York. He was very successful at the time and didn't mind sharing that fact with anyone and everyone within earshot. And she shared this great line that he said to her on a particularly good day (and one, I might add, that is going into one of my stories). He said, "Babe, there are only two kinds of people in this world. Me, and everyone

who wishes they were me.”

Well, I know it’s a gross generalization, but if you listen to people when you talk with them about writing—if you listen to Keith Lockhart, a man at the top of his profession—there are generally two kinds of people in this world . . . Writers, and everyone who wishes they were writers.

We are those fortunate souls who have made the transition from “just wishing” into the first group. We are writers.

And so it is today that on one level we celebrate the completion of The Writer’s Loft program, the vehicle that facilitated our transition. But on a much larger level we celebrate the simple fact that we are all writers, without apology.

In representing the inaugural graduating class from The Writer’s Loft, I wish to thank the following:

1. The administration of Middle Tennessee State University, for having the wisdom and the vision to make the commitment to this wonderful, necessary program.
2. Roy Burkhead, for his dream, his vision, and his leadership in creating and nurturing this program.
3. The mentors, and especially my mentor, Cate McGowan. I am reminded of a description written by Annie Dillard:  
Writing a book is like rearing children—willpower has very little to do with it. If you have a little baby crying in the middle of the night, and if you depend only on willpower to get you out of bed to feed the baby, the baby will starve. You do it out of love. Willpower is a weak idea; love is strong. You don’t have to scourge yourself with a cat-o’-nine tails to go to the baby. You go to the baby out of love for that particular baby. That’s the same way you go to your desk.

Thank you for mentoring us not because you have to, but because you love us and because you love the craft of writing so much. Thank you for your willingness to sacrifice your writing time and your energy to help us become better writers. We are all truly grateful.

4. My family and the families of all the students, thank you for allowing us this opportunity of pursuing something very dear to us.
5. All of the students, my fellow graduates, and to all of the rest of you, we thank you for caring enough to continue finding your way to this program, for proving to each other that we are not alone. We thank you for the friendships and relationships we have formed that will nurture us when we have, as James Thurber described it, “inflammation of the sentence structure and a definite hardening of the paragraphs.” You are a valuable asset to the program, to each

of us, and to the written word.

During that first meeting with Cate McGowan, she told me to always remember that this is a journey of fun and discovery. Through the Loft experience, I've discovered how much fun this journey truly can be.

Thank you.

## **Charlotte Rains Dixon, mentor**

Hello, and welcome to all of you. Thank you for coming. I'm Charlotte Rains Dixon, representing the mentors on the program today.

A year and a half ago, in August of 2003, a small group gathered in an auditorium on the MTSU campus to launch The Writer's Loft. There were ten students, eight mentors, and one administrator, and it was hard to tell who among us was the most nervous. Except for Roy, I'm not certain any of us knew exactly what to expect. We spent most of the morning introducing ourselves and listening to Roy explain how the program would work. Then we broke up into hesitant mentor/student groups to plan our semesters.

And this is where the strength of the program immediately became evident. This was not to be a theoretical course of study, where we all sat around and debated abstract aspects of writing. No. Students were to go home and write, and we mentors would read the work and write some about it ourselves. The Loft is founded upon the simplest of guiding principles: what a writer should be doing is writing. Not sitting in classes, not listening to mentors expound on the finer points of prose. While all those things have their place—in small doses—the most important thing a writer can do to master the craft is to write. And all of the graduating students here today will tell you that they have done a lot of writing.

Any leftover nervousness we might have had on that first day melted away during those initial mentor/student meetings. Because we discovered a funny thing. We discovered that at heart, we are all the same. We're all writers. Writing is a craft that takes a lifetime to master, and so all of us are students in a way. While there are differences in skill levels and experience between beginning writers and professionals, we all do exactly the same thing every single day—we sit down at our desks and write. This is the commitment that binds us, our common passion, our shared love.

In the determination and zeal of my apprehensive students that day in August, I saw reflected my own fierce desire to write. I remembered my own hesitant beginnings. The impulse to write is so strong and yet where do you go with it? What do you do with all those random journal entries scribbled late at night, on the lunch hour, at the coffee shop over a latte? How do you write a good description, shape a plot, design a memorable character?

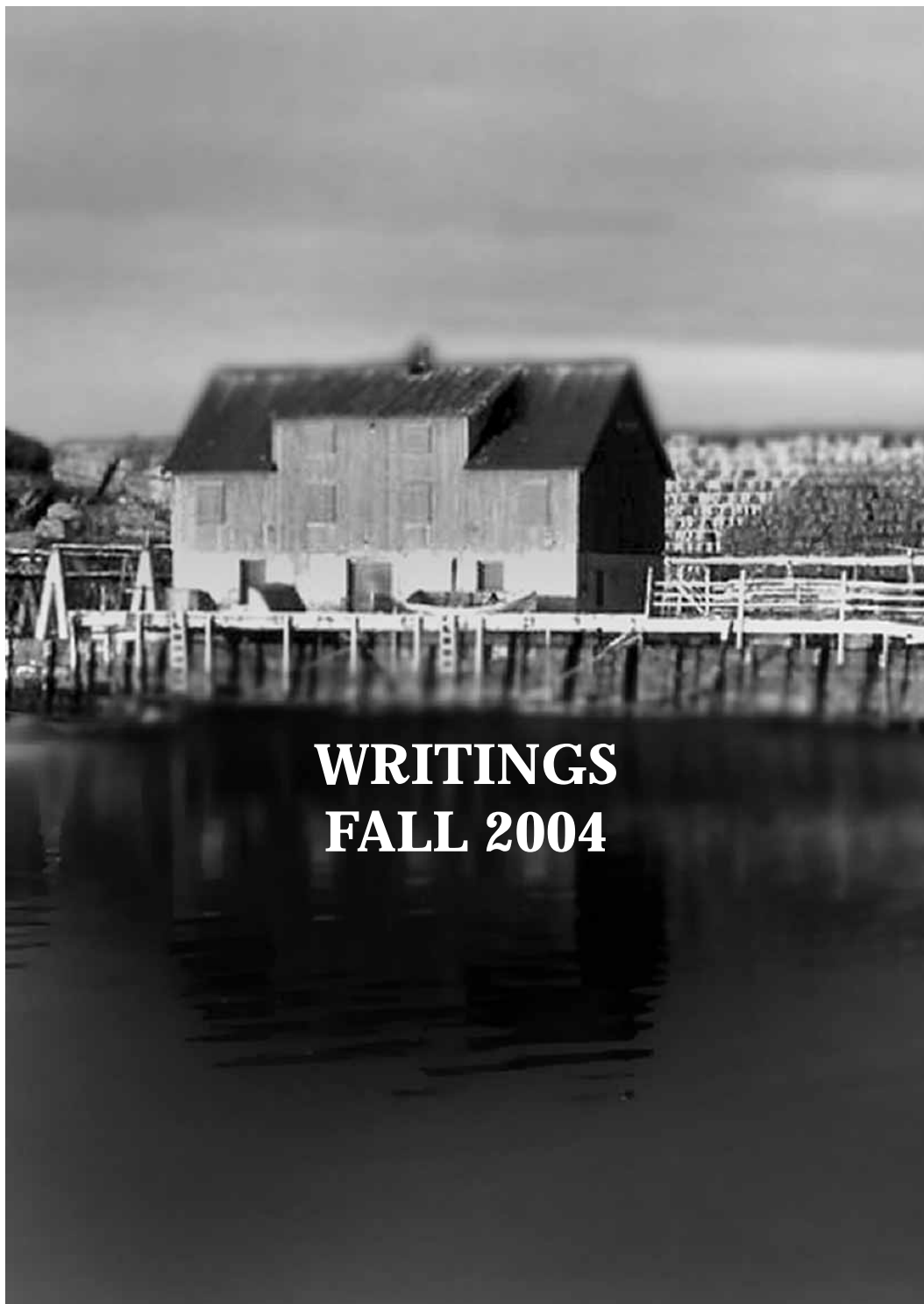
The Loft shows students how to take their yearnings and give them form. We mentors exist not to change our student's writing, but to shape it, to nudge the story in a clearer direction, to urge one more rewrite, to make the work as good as it possibly can be.

Contrary to how it sometimes appears, this is not easy. It is difficult to be a writer. Today's graduates have sacrificed much to be here. They've given up sunny summer days, quit watching favorite TV shows, forsaken family gatherings. They've listened to people ask them, why are you wasting your time on this? Or worse, when are you going to get published? They have endured all this and more in order to write. For the gods of writing demand strict fealty. They demand you worship at their feet, day in, day out, and not just when you think you might feel like it. They demand sacrifice. To earn a Loft certificate, today's graduates have toiled long and hard over the past 18 months.

And for what? A chance to express themselves. Writer Julia Cameron says, "We are, ourselves, creations. And we, in turn, are meant to continue creativity by being creative ourselves." This I believe, is why we rise before the dawn to get our writing done, why we suffer the scorn of the uncreative, why we stand up in the face of the disbelievers. Because we are creators. Because we are writers. Because writing is like breathing, and for many of us, one does not exist without the other. The Loft recognizes this and gives students—and mentors—a chance to create. To write. To communicate.

Whether any of you graduates publish a book of poems, write a bestseller, create stories for your children, or simply find more pleasure in writing in your journal, the commitment you've made over the last 18 months will have profound consequences on your life—because, when all is said and done, one simple fact remains: you are a writer and you've learned what it takes to commit to that craft. Congratulations to all of you; thank you to Roy for starting this program; thank you to the administrators of MTSU for having the foresight to sponsor it. In closing, I leave you with one piece of advice: go forth and write.





**WRITINGS  
FALL 2004**

# Memoir Times Two

by  
Anne V. Cole

A sense of bright  
of nothing holding, nowhere touched  
coldness  
I am born.

'It'  
Pink and scrawny girl.  
'It' is now a mouth  
That ends in swaddling clothes.

To name. What Name? Appropriate name.  
From long used names of family's past  
Let Grandmother choose:  
"Yes, Mom can choose," he said. "Thank you my dear."

GEORGIA  
I was born of rich red clay  
Now time sifts down like Georgia sand-  
Midsummer's dream and I the Queen  
Name this Granddaughter - Titania-  
To dance as I.

GEORGIA  
When legs like metronomes move me  
to shift and merge with friends, we dance,  
I feel their airs slide past.  
My inner eyes see muscles pull.

TITANIA  
At one I twirled, they said.  
At two I skipped, they said  
At three, my being was made.  
Moving I swam as a fish in air.

In my room, I rise, do endless turns

When waking rise to pointe until it burns

feel light as air when press to toe,

I brush my teeth while stretching slow

Against a chest I named Igor

Arabesque I press against the door

I paused like cloud in highest space

My hair I brushed in air's embrace.

Scholarships became my life  
and earned my way to far off schools

School of State Ballet took over life  
Minuscule bud among the rules

Then home to study all I could  
A debutante you'll be, before you wed.

Enchanted land this Fairy wood  
Delicate Sugar Plum Dancer am I, they said.

Daily classes, sweating aches,  
Training of the instrument  
Wrenching pain of bone and joint  
forced position learned by rote. Perfection.

Living stillness, standing smooth,  
Feel the lack of nowhere going  
Struggle for the fouette, jet action foiled  
yet always and again the whipping foot.

Know more than merely words can tell  
see feelings when the dancers touch,  
my muscles too contract in grasping thought  
as ribs are held and legs delight in space.

Falling off the bleeding toe  
comes close to living  
through tears of full frustration,  
'can-not' to can. Then truly live.

GEORGIA

Cattle call. Auditions. All the same.  
Adjudicated barre, centre was the brutal bit,  
Chosen for corps and company paid  
allet Russe de Monte Carlo - I was in.

Not much money, I waited tables

Struggle against gravity, no effort is apparent  
and ate my needs that way, then danced

Thrust and float, a moment in the endless,  
and studied more. Life was almost

In full motion, leaps freeze, the body is  
fine but for the boy back home.

tremendous instrument in light embrace.

Igor was there, older now,  
but still my prince. His muscles  
bunched to entrechat dix.  
Small dark hairs on arms lay flat in sweat.

Performance became what class had been:  
sole reason for existence  
I woke to live in sound and shape  
Choreography was based on me.

In dance we partnered  
Strength, finesse and power held  
Music filled each atom of myself.  
I never knew his personal tastes.

I became the special one  
With arms like Faerie Wands, LIFE said  
Real life was happening on the stage  
and nowhere else.

TITANIA

Georgia was my chaperone in NYC Ballet.  
She made all possible but never pushed,  
Schoolgirl yet dancer in the corps  
for I was Faerie Princess born to dance.

Igor, my King- Midsummer dreams,

The world was mine. I flew

His Queen was I.

to twine the people with these arms

War Came.

Whine of engine, throb of dance

and drafted the boy from home.

Whine of engines throb of dance

pulsed in my veins.

My Mother wrote. He called.

Faerie Queen and her mistakes were mine

We fell for asses. She was saved and I

Woke up back home in Georgia.

Triumphant land this Russia

where flowers spewed from pressing hands,

whole balconies cheered for love of me,

and I loved dance.

For near a year, we didn't, and fell in love.

Hot with praise, I drank the heat

in the only way that good girls could,

and went to sleep in glory

(abstinence added heat).

yet from the inside came a stillness

We married.

mounting in the heat to strike.

I turned the hi-fi loud  
to mask the slide of foot fall  
relished in horns and power of drums  
whispering pull of fingers touching strings.  
I danced for love. My costume  
was my skin. My audience, his eyes.  
And like no other stage  
when music peaked, we came.

My eyes saw not as fever burst  
The sickness grew  
POLIO  
Medics came with flares on dust drift auras.  
Alarum screams of sirens ruptured night,  
hammer and tongs seer pain's  
black night,  
needles pulse through skin:  
soft sleep  
on sunspots' flowers.  
Sickness grows. Devouring nerves  
first from muscles of my toes where  
yesterday I pushed, blood flows  
allowing my disease to dance with life.

Our son was born. Four months later-  
he shipped out, another son had started.  
Posthumously, that son was born. My other  
love was gone. Society and sons imposed.

No way to be a dancer in Georgia  
Those who can't dance- teach. Not I.  
A nerve fights not to go,  
to stay,  
to hold the pulse and speak.  
"Good girl." they said, "It is after all, only  
Burdens of life exonerably leave.  
only dance. You will survive. Never mind."  
Death creeps in.

My quest, is it survival?"      Is it dying that hurts?  
Music roars and overflows      Or does the living part scream  
fuse body and mind with sound.      through pain to live?  
Is the instrument broken?      Is it the dying that hurts?  
Or does the living part scream through pain to live?  
I don't know.

He died.  
My sons appeared  
with all their panoply; of life  
and I did care.  
People came.  
I barely knew their faces  
shattering the pain with verbiage  
while floral emanations clatter  
against somniloquists chatter.  
Bring comfort for loss they never dreamed.

Words, like a musical mute,  
non-resonate, yet play  
a softened havoc in their hue.

My legs drew up  
and these were then massaged  
but they said 'Niet'.  
Oblique, uncoiled, coagulated mush  
my legs  
yet dream of rubber rims  
hand propelled.  
Death crept.

And then one day, or maybe night  
as I lay panting in my bed  
in and out - to death and back  
There was no breath.  
They put me in a breathing can.  
Enormous sound. this in and out  
mashes breath away - release -  
MY body sucks it in again.





Thought alone is never ending.  
Turn off this parody of life. Life masques, a joke.  
It's gone, you see. But will not stop. Don't you see?  
There is no being left  
no instrument to play the tune. no instrument to play the tune  
An honorable death An honorable death  
I beg. I beg.

Georgia walks over to the electric plug on the wall.  
The iron lung wheezes and clangs. She looks back at her Granddaughter,  
the girl's eyes close in sleep. Her hand closes on the plug.

She falls to the floor weeping.  
too weak too weak

A suggestion on reading:  
Centered lines: the omniscient author, both know.  
Verses alone are first person: left- Georgia, right- Titania.  
Lines intertwined: emotionally-kinesthetically conjoined, read also on their own.  
Verses side by side -separate lives move, so similarly connected yet  
each one alone in time.  
Memoir / times two.

# Cricket Music

by  
Peggy Smith Duke

Stillness rills  
the cricket voices  
hidden  
in the katydid choruses  
drowned now  
by hurricane rain.  
A single  
silver woodwind trill  
begins,  
a somber solo still  
and tentative,  
Mahler work  
with sparse  
and vibrant strings  
of cricket violins  
filling  
the autumn air  
with music breath.

# Suffrage

by  
Peggy Smith Duke

Brittle bottled  
sunshine hair  
framed an artist's  
crimson sketch

of swollen lips.  
A sweater hugged  
two bulging bags  
of sterile saline.

I never vote,  
she snapped.  
You can't believe  
a thing they say.

# Baseball and Me

by  
Alvin Knox

I play right field.  
I scrawl my name in the dust.  
I fill my glove with dirt and empty it  
and fill it again.  
I crawl under the fence to walk along the rails. I like  
to lay my ear on the searing steel and listen  
for rumors of the Empire Builder. I like to take  
giant steps from tie to tie, leap from whistlestop  
to stationyard from Seattle to Chicago.

# Coughed into Sunlight

by  
Alvin Knox

Dry dirt and crackling leaves, a canvas  
of autumn's littering dragged down the hill.  
Crows complain for roadkill.

My daughters gather sticks and twigs,  
scavenger's daughters, grasping  
and laughing. Why would anyone reinvent  
the extinct jurassic dung beetle?

Ants cut leaves. Four trees  
downed by the last storm mark paths  
through hickory, dogwood and poplar.  
Broken branches tangle and mass,  
scratch one last time toward the sky.

Down in the woods, at the merging  
of sunlight and leafshadow,  
stands a shattered pine trunk, raising  
its splintered dark wingtip into the air.

# **Restless in the Predawn Fading**

by  
**Alvin Knox**

The engineer has stopped the train  
and disembarked. He waters  
a track-side garden, yelling  
over his shoulder at us  
not to play with the switches.  
My daughter, seven and easily bored,  
has scurried down the steps  
to lay pennies along the rails.

# **Seascape in Black and White**

by  
**Alvin Knox**

The meteor fell straight down  
and as it burst upon Puget Sound  
a ragged lightning bolt  
chased it—

But this was not the cataclysm.  
Heaven is preparing my prison  
and it is beautiful. Inside,  
my youngest daughter stretches, stirs  
after a long nap. The crease of pillow, red-  
imprinted on her face, fades to a bruise  
of seraphic blue.

## **The Fall 2004 Creative Writing and Poetry Contests Winners**

The Writer's Loft is excited to announce the continuation of its semester writing contests. In fall 2004, the contest became one for creative writing and poetry rather than short fiction and poetry, in order to allow students from all genres to participate.

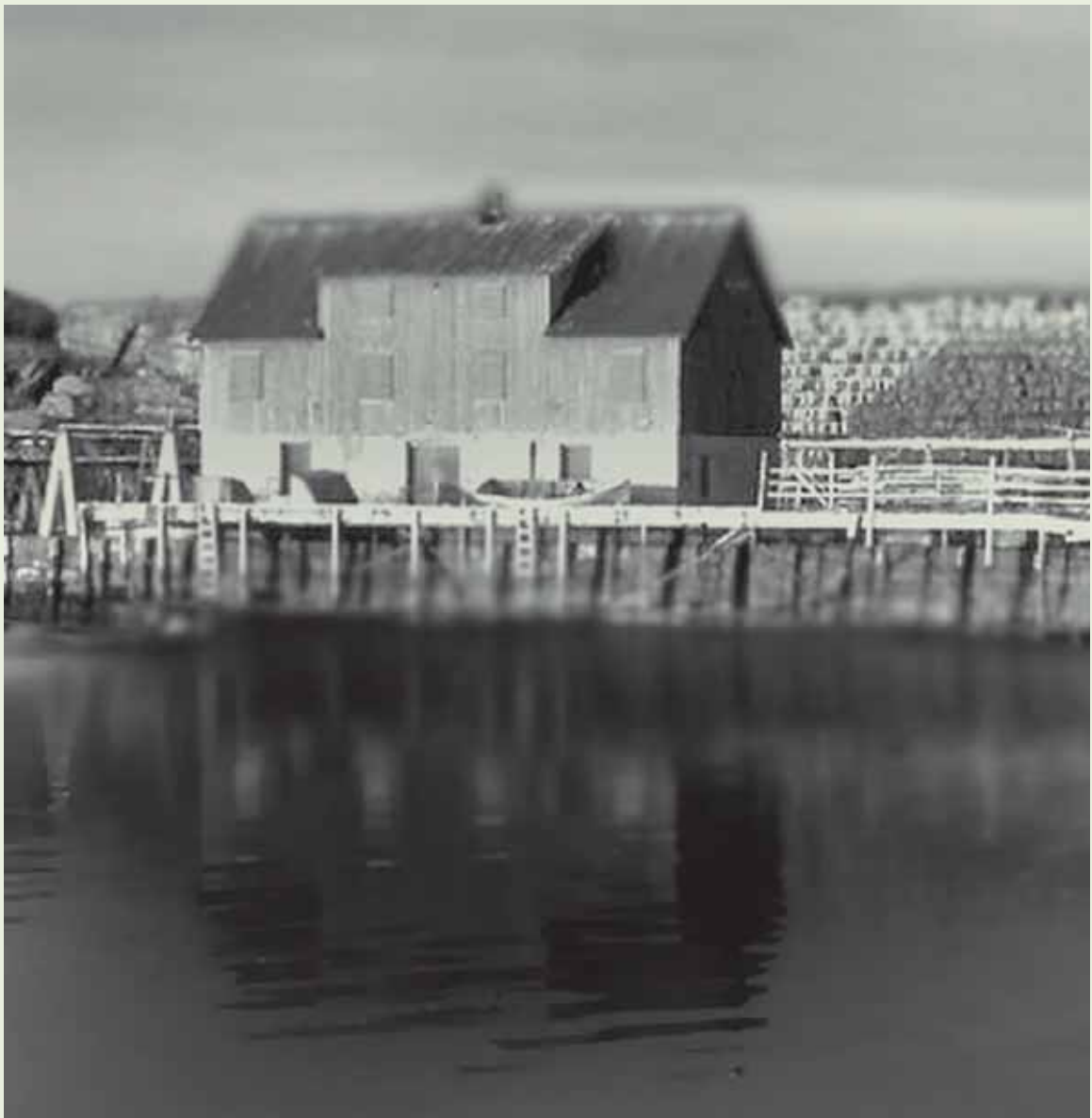
### **Fall 2004 Winners**

#### **Poetry:**

Peggy Smith Duke, for "Minstrel Show"

#### **Creative Writing:**

Greg Plemmons, for his short story "Home Study"



## **Fall 2004 Poetry Winner: Peggy Smith Duke, for “Minstrel Show”**

Peggy earned her B.S. in Mass Communication and her M.A. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from MTSU. Afterward, she went to Vanderbilt University to earn an Ed.D. During the day, she is a consultant for the human resource development industry. And like so many aspiring writers, she dedicates her mornings to reading and writing poetry and prose. Everyone in Continuing Studies was so happy to learn of Peggy’s participation in The Writer’s Loft, especially after reading the following passage in her application package: “I appreciate the well-turned phrase as well as the ability to convey a cogent idea. Many writers are gifted in taking the reader into familiar worlds with new eyes or in creating worlds that have never existed. I would like to be one of them.”



# Minstrel Show

by  
Peggy Smith Duke

Swearing wakefulness,  
she later dreamed  
they came from the closet—  
a single-filed endless row  
of black-faced men with  
shiny patent leather faces  
painted the color of dark  
with wide white mouths—  
frightful clowns  
in flag-colored waistcoats,  
spats and white gloves  
laughing, scaring a little girl  
who knew them white  
and could not understand  
the dark side  
of white men  
playing black  
like an instrument

## **Fall 2004 Creative Writing Winner: Greg Plemmons, for his short story “Home Study”**

Greg received his B.A./B.S. in English/Biology (and the Senior English Award) from Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where he also edited the college newspaper. Things unfortunately took a turn for the worse, however, when he was accepted to medical school, and he received his M.D. from the Medical University of South Carolina in 1995. Now a seasoned pediatrician at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital, he spends much of his working day among frequently illiterate folk with poor grammar (not to mention lots of children). He hopes there is still a little creative juice left at the bottom of the glass and would like to sell as many books one day as Dr. Atkins. All joking aside, several of his inspirations have been physician/writers such as Walker Percy, William Carlos Williams, and Anton Chekhov, who said about the craft of writing: “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”





# Home Study

by  
Gregory Plemmons

Two aisles over from the Kotex and condoms, Anna Grace stands, overwhelmed by thermometers. Too many options dangle before her, digital versions, sci-fi devices that slip into ears. Liquid crystal forehead strips that alter like mood rings when laid upon a fevered brow. There's even an audible one that can broadcast your temperature like the weather report so you don't have to squint at the mercury. She presses a button to sample the voice. It's a woman's, of course, the voice everyone's heard, that verifies bank account balances, arrival times. Soft, yet assured, faintly Midwestern, occasionally bilingual. A voice she imagines new parents might find annoying at two in the morning with searing hot toddler in tow as they listen to disjointed robospeak and wait for the doctor's call: The temperature is. One. Hundred. And. Three. Degrees. Fahrenheit. Please press Five for more options.

She's not a mother, not yet. She feels ill-equipped to make such a purchase. She and her husband Sean have been trying for over three years now. They've undergone hormone tests, sperm counts, chromosome tallies. Nothing has turned up so far. Their obstetrician scratches her head at each visit like a frustrated accountant as she pores over their chart like an unbalanced checkbook, their unconceived child a missing cent, a misplaced penny. Sometimes we never find reasons, she had told them at their last visit. Maybe it was time to move on to Clomid or Serephene or the fertility drug du jour, unless they wanted to give temperature-taking one last whirl. Core body temperature apparently correlated with peak ovulation times.

"Gives new meaning to the term *in heat*, doesn't it?" her doctor said, handing her a temperature chart. "It's worth a try." Anna Grace had been game. She is not willing to risk having a *litter*, not yet. Although she secretly suspects that Sean's family, the Catholic side, would not be opposed to this. Ellen, her sister-in-law, already has three children and one on the way. Ellen sensibly bulk shops at Costco, knows all the best consignment shops. She's constantly repeating her own pregnancy horror stories, misplaced epidurals. Twenty-stitch episiotomies.

"If I were you, I'd just start taking those drugs," she tells Anna Grace. "Get them all out of the way. Right at once. Just one labor then poof. Instant family." Just add water, Anna Grace thinks. Of course it would have to be holy water.

She had thought that marrying a Catholic would not be a big deal. Her parents had voted for Kennedy; the Pope overall seemed like a nice man. When she had announced her engagement to Sean, however, her Baptist grandmother had suddenly thrown up her arms, her wiry frame trembling.

"They're gonna make you sign those papers!" she wailed.

"What papers?" Anna Grace had asked, suddenly panicking. She had thought she had at least a working knowledge of the Catholic Church after dating Sean for a year. She had taken communion a couple of times. But suddenly her grandmother was talking about *papers*? Maybe there was a secret plot, a subterfuge. She had simply accepted a proposal of marriage.

"They're going to make you sign those papers saying you promise to bring your babies up Catholic," her grandmother had warbled. Sure enough, there had been papers.

Even a mandatory, prenuptial, getting-to-know-Catholicism weekend with Father Ryan. Five years later, they've only been to Mass at Christmas and Easter, but she still has those papers, stuffed somewhere in a closet. Now seemingly as worthless as Confederate money, an empty lease. There has been nothing to raise so far.

She grabs the cheapest thermometer and heads to the checkout. Simple glass mercury, skinny black case. One she'll be able to slip in and out of her purse, surreptitiously, like mascara, along with her folded-up temperature chart. An unattended infant in a stroller is wedged in the aisle, but she doesn't even stop to cajole a smile from the crumb-spackled face staring up at her. She's already anxious to know what her temperature is, where she might plot on the curve of fertility. *Ovulate. Copulate. Make that baby.*

Anna Grace was a cheerleader in high school. She's a physical therapist now. Some days the rehab clinic where she works still requires the same relentless pompom enthusiasm. *You can do it if you try, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y.* Sometimes her patients take months, even years, to learn how to walk again. Her husband Sean is an orthopedic surgeon. He often refers his patients to her, frequently elderly women who notice her nametag, Anna Grace McConnell. "So you're Dr. McConnell's wife!" they exclaim as she carefully guides them alongside the handrails. "He's quite a looker," they wink, beaming Efferdent smiles as bright as the titanium screws that he's just installed in their hips. Anna Grace blushes and sighs. Sean can rebuild hips and knees and she can rehab them, but neither of them have been able to make one from scratch yet. Not one little knee, not one chubby cheek. Not one single baby part. Some days their infertility feels like some chronic neurological disease, sapping away at their marriage. Some days it is hard to be cheerful.

Sean calls to tell her that he's running late again for dinner, a pharmaceutical event freebie at their favorite restaurant. He tells her to go on ahead, order the salmon. Mingle and mix.

"What time do you *think* you'll be there?" she asks.

"We just started this case," he groans. "I don't know." She can hear his pager going off again in the background. "Bob and Lisa are going. Hang out with them till I get there."

"You know I hate these things."

"Honey, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Anna Grace has never cared for DWFs, Doctor Wife Functions. Some women lived for them. Now that the DWs are all moms or expecting, talk always drifts to Mother's Days Out programs, the cellular numbers of reliable, affordable babysitters. At least Bob and Lisa will be there. They're the only other couple who don't yet have children. Lisa and Anna Grace are the only wives who work fulltime. They are not like the rest of the women, the rest of the Ortho Wives. Of course Ortho Wives are not nearly as scary as Plastic Surgery Wives, or Psychiatry Wives, she imagines. With Ortho Wives, only one's joints are theoretically artificial (more often than not the result of an unfortunate tumble in Aspen). But who knows what lies under the veneer of Plastic Surgery Wives, the Prozac grins of Psychiatry Wives?

When she arrives at the restaurant, Lisa's sipping a Sprite.

"You're not drinking," Anna Grace notices immediately. "Don't tell me you're pregnant."

"I wish," Lisa laughs. "I think we're about to give up." She plays with her earrings, dangling miniature wedges of lemon meringue pie. "Get some of the crab dip. It's actually not bad." Lisa's a caterer and Anna Grace usually trusts her opinion. She's always doing wacky things with food. Once, for a party after gynecology finals in medical school, she

fashioned an entire female reproductive system out of crudités—a pâté uterus, celery boat Fallopian tubes. And deviled eggs, of course, for the ovaries. *Maybe that's what's wrong with me*, Anna Grace thinks for a moment. *Maybe my own eggs are deviled. Bewitched by some Catholic voodoo priest.* She stares out at the women circulating about.

"They're all reproducing, you know," Anna Grace says. "The Ortho Wives."

"They're not aging, either. Look at Melanie." Lisa points out a pencil-thin blonde across the room, giggling as one of the husbands pats her pregnant belly. "She's expecting her *third*. Her third! Five to one says she's already on Botox."

"I wonder what the world will be like when we turn forty," Anna Grace sighs.

"They'll be able to do face transplants by then," Lisa says. "I'll bet we'll be able to wake up every morning and just pick out a new face to wear."

"You'd think modern medicine would have solved the infertility problem by now," Anna Grace says. Sean arrives at that moment, comes up to her, apologetically massaging her shoulders. "Have I missed anything?"

"We were just talking about infertility," Lisa says, popping a canapé into her mouth. "Have you guys ever talked about adopting?"

"We've thought about it," Anna Grace says.

"Anna Grace's family has convinced her perhaps it's not such a good idea," Sean says.

"That's not true. I never said that. You just need to be careful. You just need to know what you're getting into."

"I believe her grandmother's exact words were that you don't want to risk getting *bad blood*," Sean says.

Lisa looks puzzled a moment. She is not from the South or even South Boston; she does not quite understand the implications of the term *bad blood*, at least not in the Biblical, fatalistic sense. "Bad blood?" she asks. "You mean like hepatitis or AIDS?"

"Well yes. There's that too," Anna Grace says.

"You might change your mind," Lisa says. "Bob and I are going to an adoption workshop next weekend. You ought to come with us."

"I'm not on call," Sean says with a smirk, shrugging his shoulders.

"You promised you'd keep an open mind about this," Sean says on the way to the workshop. "At least listen to what they have to say." Sean is full of enthusiasm this morning. He has already read up on orphanages in Russia and China.

"I know." Anna Grace looks out the car window. "It just seems so . . . *drastic*."

"Stealing a baby from a shopping cart is drastic," he says. "There are lots of unwanted babies out there. Healthy unwanted babies."

*International Adoption Workshop This Way!* the rainbow-colored sign taped to the door of St. Anne's announces. They enter the sanctuary and follow more signs down a dim stairwell to the church basement. Children's drawings of saints from catechism class line the hallway. Her grandmother's right, maybe this is all part of the Catholic conspiracy, another Crusade. Sean's mother had screamed with delight on the phone when he had told her that they were considering an overseas adoption with a Catholic charity. Perhaps this will make up for the Jesuit priest Sean's parents never had. As far as she knows, priests still trump doctors, unless you get caught boinking the altar boy.

The session has already started. Several couples sit in a semicircle on gray metal folding chairs. *The Infertile Crescent*, Anna Grace thinks as they slide into two empty seats and give a quick smile to the others. It feels like they're at some underground support

group. This must be what a Shaker meeting must feel like, she imagines as she studies the other couples, their expressions a mixture of childless austerity tempered with hope. *Except we're all having sex! Sex in the morning, sex before bedtime, sex on our lunch breaks, sex at the whim of thermometers!* With nothing to show for it.

The agency director is portly, has a baritone voice, wears a full salt-and-pepper beard. He could be Miles Standish, if you put him in a pilgrim hat, Anna Grace thinks as she listens to him talk about the joys of overseas adoption, new adventures in parenthood. There's a child now, in some foreign land, just for them, right this minute. A pinchable, pudgy Plymouth Rock to anchor their hopes on. He shows the group slides of orphanage life, bundled-up infants and toddlers, rickety cribs. Some smiling, some not. But all *waiting*.

The social worker speaks next. Her name is Gabrielle. She's blonde, surprisingly svelte, the mother of three kids adopted from Russia, she tells them. She reminds Anna Grace of one of Sean's old girlfriends, the one who sends blissfully unenveloped photo postcards of her rapidly expanding family each Christmas. Gabrielle doesn't look like any of the hospital social workers she knows at all, mostly middle-aged women who shuffle from crisis to crisis in peasant skirts and Birkenstocks, arranging custody and nursing home care, dispensing cab fare like alms.

Gabrielle tells them that every couple will need a home study as part of the adoption process. Family members and friends will need to be interviewed, documents of financial stability and good health will need to be produced and verified. The actual home will need to be visited. Inspected. Anna Grace's head swims with information by the end of the session. Sean's taking notes now, writing everything down that Gabrielle says. Anna Grace sneaks off with Lisa to the bathroom during the break.

"Did you see all the guys practically drooling over the social worker?" Lisa asks from the next stall over. "I bet she's some sort of infidelity marker. I bet it's some secret part of the home study. Like if she detects the husband flirting with her, you no longer qualify as a suitable couple."

"Terrific," Anna Grace says. "She already looks like an ex-girlfriend of Sean's." Surely they'll be able to request their own social worker. Maybe a postmenopausal Maxine or Miriam from the hospital where they work. One with thick ankles and facial hair. She washes up, reassesses herself in the mirror. Lisa patiently waits while she dawdles inside her purse.

"Go on ahead. I'll be along in a minute."

"Are you sure?"

"I just need to look for some aspirin. Headache."

As soon as Lisa exits the bathroom, Anna Grace reenters the stall, slides back down on the toilet, takes her thermometer out of her bag. She feels like a rebellious schoolgirl lighting up in the church basement. She slips the silvery stem inside her lips, counts out the minutes and pulls out her chart. She can't believe she forgot to take her temperature this morning. *Take upon waking, before doing any activity, and keep in place for a full five minutes. Don't fall asleep with the thermometer in your mouth! You could break it and swallow the mercury.* She pulls the thermometer out of her mouth. 98.8 degrees and rising. *Ovulate. Copulate. Make that baby.*

She corners Sean at the water fountain, cupping her hand over his ear. "I'm ovulating," she whispers.

"You really know how to come on to a guy," he says, wiping his lips with his sleeve.

"No really. We need to go."

"What about the rest of the session?" he asks.

"Lisa can fill us in later."

The closest motel to St. Anne's is a chain motel, reassuringly tidy, familiar. A cardboard menu of cable channels sits atop the TV, wrapped lozenges of soap are freshly laid out by the lavatory. Somewhere down the hall Anna Grace hears the clatter of ice machines. Sean slips off his shoes while she peels back the quilted acrylic bedspread and fluffs up the pillows. This is what it must feel like to work in the porn industry, she thinks, as they shuck off their clothes. Another day at the office. Sex on command. At the directorial whim of their own Rodgers and Hammerstein, Celsius and Fahrenheit. Her porn star name would be Lulu Morningside. You took the name of your very first pet for your first name, and for your surname, you took the name of the very first street where you lived. Sean is simply Geronimo.

"How can you not remember the name of your very first street?" Anna Grace asks.

"I was an army brat. We moved around a lot," he shrugs, and slips off his pants.

"Look, we don't have to keep trying, this, you know," he sighs. "We can adopt."

*We can adopt.* Already she can tell this is going to become Sean's new mantra.

"Indulge me, Geronimo," she purrs, suddenly surprised at herself, her aggressiveness. She can tell Sean is too. She kisses his neck and works her way down. His body is achingly familiar. *We can adopt. Babies are waiting. Already made.* She tries not to think about making a baby. She tries to let sex become sex again, cheap chain motel do-not-disturb on the doorknob sex, agendaless sex. Her mind wanders back to her very first pet, her very first street: sweet Lulu dog kisses, the big airy house on Morningside Drive. Still, it's hard not to think of their unconceived child somewhere in the room, in every room they've had sex. She remembers the story about the princess and the pea. Even under a hundred mattresses, a hundred different bedrooms, she can feel a kernel of sadness that seems to grow harder each time they make love.

They drift in and out of sleep afterward. Anna Grace lays her head on Sean's chest.

"Whatever happened to Geronimo, anyway?" she asks.

"The dog or the Indian?" Sean mumbles.

"Your dog."

"He got hit by an ice cream truck when I turned twelve. I was away at Catholic Camp." He rolls over, looks at the cheap digital clock on the nightstand. "I loved that dog."

"What about the Indian?" she asks. She knows he will know the answer to this. He is always watching the History Channel late at night.

"I think he finally surrendered." Sean strokes her hair. He is always stroking her hair.

"Hiding out in Arizona. *Somewhere in the Chiricahua Hills,*" he says, in a fake documentary voice, goofishly planting a kiss into her breasts. "Somewhere in those Chiricahua Hills."

The social worker assigned to their case is not a Gabrielle but a Doris. Anna Grace furiously cleans up their house for her first visit. She scours the enamel, deodorizes the carpet. Lisa even comes over and helps her bake up a pie. Fortunately Doris turns out to be a frizzy-haired fiftyish woman who wears chunky jewelry and a shirt-dress frayed at the edges. Her voice has the hard, raspy quality of someone who's chain-smoked, someone who's heard enough sad stories for one lifetime. Anna Grace is relieved. She had somehow expected white gloves and a clipboard.

"Can I get you some pie?" Anna Grace offers. "Homemade, of course. Apple."

"That would be lovely." Doris slides a faded canvas totebag off her shoulder and plops down on their sofa. "You have a wonderful home here. Are you sure you want kids? They'll destroy everything, you know."

"We're not worried about it," Anna Grace says as she hands her a small plate of pie and a fork. Lisa's outdone herself with the pastry dough latticework this time. Doris admires it a moment before taking a bite.

"I'd like to interview both of you together at first," she says between mouthfuls. "And then I'll set up a separate time to meet with each of you separately." She takes a quick sip of coffee and gets right to business. "So why do you want to be parents?"

Anna Grace and Sean look at each other a moment. They've already rehearsed a stockpile of responses. *Unconditional love. Sacrifice. Growth as a couple.* Suddenly they all sound hollow and awkward now, right here inside their own living room, in front of a stranger. They both pause a minute.

"We're trying to save our marriage," Sean finally says in a deadpan voice. "We thought a child could take our mind off things. Make everything right again." Doris looks slightly alarmed for a moment.

"He's *kidding*," Anna Grace quickly says, gives Sean a dirty look, as if he has just made a bomb threat joke at the airport. "We've always known we wanted a family. We talked about it before we got married."

"We're ready for children," Sean says. "Ready for earaches and soccer games. Adolescence and heartbreak. The whole package deal. Where do we sign up?"

"Slow down, Dr. McConnell," Doris says, peering over her glasses, looking slightly amused. "We'll need to complete the home study first." She scribbles something on a memo pad and smiles. "I'm sure you will pass."

Doris makes several trips to their house the first month. She leaves behind personal items: umbrellas, pocketbook, cell phones. At first Anna Grace wonders if this is simple forgetfulness or perhaps some secret parental screening test. *They didn't return my breath mints—unsuitable for parenthood?*, she imagines her jotting down on a Post-It note. Anna Grace calls and returns every stray item. "I've been looking for that everywhere," Doris says. "It must be early Alzheimer's. I'd lose my head if it wasn't tied on me." This is not something you want to hear your adoption worker say, Anna Grace thinks. After all, they've decided to adopt from a foreign country, a communist one at that. They've decided on China. How will their baby get through customs? she suddenly wonders. Through communist customs? So many questions. Doris's tote bag begins to swell with more and more paperwork, each time they see her. Anna Grace and Sean have to get physicals, produce doctor's statements, copies of tax returns from the last three years. Doris has to interview their parents, colleagues from work, Lisa and Bob. Anna Grace worries about what everyone's saying, what their marriage is beginning to look like on paper.

"Honestly, we're not trying out for the CIA," Sean tells Doris. "We just want a baby."

"We have to document *everything*," Doris winks knowingly. "Just in case." Anna Grace wonders about the just-in-case part, the parents who've turned out to be child abusers, kiddie porn freaks, but decides not to ask. *Curious about molestation*, she pictures Doris scribbling. *Could be a red flag.*

Several weeks after finally completing their home study, Doris calls to tell them they've passed. That's it, they just *passed*. No report card, no letter grade. Not even an N,

Needs Improvement. Anna Grace has somehow been expecting more than this. Some feedback to work on, to fix whatever needs repairing to make their home life as happy as possible before they become parents.

"We *passed*, Anna Grace," Sean says. "That's all that matters."

They begin to acquaint themselves with China. Sean buys a map, Anna Grace visits the library. They attempt to strike up conversations with waitresses in Chinese restaurants, unsure how people will take their plans to adopt at first, especially other Chinese people. Sean has the usual, Mu Shu Pork; Anna Grace orders Happy Family almost superstitiously. They fumble with chopsticks, practice the words for Mama and Daddy. Foreign syllables slip out of their mouths like wet noodles, awkward and half-bitten. They wait and they wait and they wait.

Then, one day there's a phone call from Doris. Their first referral. They have a name. They have a girl. Doris brings them a folder haphazardly stuffed with several typewritten pages in Chinese and English inside. The choppy translation reminds Anna Grace of a third grader's book report: *she was found by train station. She was in paper box. The police could not find her parents. Her birth weight was 3.0 kilograms, her height was 46 centimeters. The orphanage named her Zhang Ling Yu. Ling means pretty girl, Yu means rain. The aunts named her Yu because that day it was raining.*

"I wanted to be an OB nurse but I always flunked science." Doris hands them a 5 x 5 picture as gently and carefully as if it were a baby, a puppy. Anything newborn. "This," Doris says, "is the best part of my job."

Anna Grace and Sean stare at the photo. An unsmiling, solemn-appearing six-month-old stares at the camera. Downy wisps of straight hair stick up from her head like black twigs. Her eyes glisten like onyx. Anna Grace wipes a tear from her cheek. A thousand gentle kicks erupt inside her at once, a thousand beats of black wings. She is perfect. She is living. She is half a world away.

"The waiting is hardest," Doris tells them flatly. "Months. Maybe a year. Take up a new hobby. Plant a vegetable garden. Knit booties. Learn tae kwan do." At first, anticipation invigorates their house like an exotic new fragrance, spreads through each room like jasmine, like incense. Anna Grace and Sean feverishly work on the spare bedroom on weekends, make love in late afternoon and drift off to sleep, woozy from sex and the smell of new paint and wallpaper paste. Lisa throws them a shower, expands her catering repertoire to egg rolls and potstickers. Odd items of parenthood crop up overnight, erupting on shelves like an unfamiliar new rash: teething rings, Diaper Genies. *Thermometers*. Anna Grace can't even remember where she's placed her own thermometer.

Excitement soon turns to impatience, to worry. Anna Grace has heard that there are still measles epidemics in China. She pictures their child in a glum roomful of babies, wheezing and coughing, underneath a leaky roof, one giant Petri dish as their wading pool.

"What about Hong Kong flu?" her grandmother warns further. "What about SARS?" She sends Anna Grace newspaper clippings, an alarming snapshot of Chinese ballerinas, all wearing respiratory masks. *What if we don't get her in time?* Anna Grace thinks.

"Don't listen to your grandmother," Sean says. "Everything's going to be fine." Anna Grace wants to believe him, but she's not so sure. She checks the CDC Web site every

night before going to bed to see if there's been an overnight outbreak in China. She dreams of disease-stricken orphanages, still wakes up in the morning with anxiety. Doris calls and says all is well; Zhang Ling Yu is thriving and growing, showing no signs of illness. Still Anna Grace worries.

"They've just reported another case of measles in Hunan," she tells Sean as they get ready for work. "That's only a city away from her." She pictures the virus slowly seeping from province to province like spilled gravy on the map downstairs on their dining room table. Her stomach feels leaden.

"SARS, schmars," Sean says, adjusting his tie and giving her a peck on the cheek. "It's out of our hands. You're going to make yourself sick over this."

Sean's right, as usual. Her latte and half a poppy seed muffin come up before she's left the coffeehouse parking lot on her way to work. She leans on the side of her car after heaving, dabs at her mouth with a Kleenex, then opens the car door and sits down for a moment, inhaling a gulpful of cold morning air.

"Are you OK, ma'am?" a nose-ringed teenager asks, passing by. A magenta-dyed strip of black hair bleeds from her forehead like a fresh neon wound. Anna Grace is unsure what surprises her more, being called "ma'am" or that word exiting the mouth of the punkish girl-sprite before her. She studies the girl's face. She appears almost Asian, behind all the makeup and eyeliner. She could almost be their daughter in fifteen more years, rebelling against the bourgeois Caucasianhood they're about to bestow on Zhang Ling Yu. That is, if she survives measles and SARS and the airplane ride. If she survives the rest of her childhood. Being married to an orthopedic surgeon has not made Anna Grace feel safer about parenthood. Now she sees menace everywhere: monkey bars, rollerblades, trampolines. Ice cream trucks.

"I'm fine," she smiles, wiping her brow. "Really. Thank you for asking."

The nausea comes back the next morning. She stands in the drugstore aisle, adds up the months. Once again there are too many options: E-P-T, Clear Blue Easy Read. One called Answer Quick and Simple. The kits all seem the same. All have the same apparatus: a white plastic indicator, one or two vials of liquid. Chemistry for Modern Living. She will check as soon as she's home. She will watch the plus sign slowly materialize inside the square window, almost like magic, a tiny blue cross, a shrine by the roadside she's almost forgotten on the way to somewhere else, overtaken by the exotic viny growth that Zhang Ling Yu has already become. They will have to buy two of everything; they will have to buy one of those double strollers. She will stand in line at this drugstore again. People will smile but look puzzled as they glance down and study the two yin-yang faces a moment, one Asian, one Caucasian. She won't even wait for their question. "Twins," she will say with a tired smile, then move on ahead to the checkout, with Pampers and colic drops and Tylenol for them, for her too. Her headache is going to be glorious.



# Harvey Wallman

by  
Matt Baggett

The sun lowered in the sky and the heat of August clung around the surface of the asphalt parking lot. Had you worked outside, it was the time of day to collapse or find the nearest sweating cold beer or both. Every time the door chimed, Harvey Wallman's shoulders moved inward and without moving he scanned the new face swinging the door open at the Minit Mart. Most of the customers looked like he felt and they stumbled woodenly to the "Coldest Beer in Town" section. Harvey looked back down at the spinning screen. His large busted-knuckle hands steadied himself and he refocused all of his powers at the electronic dealers' offerings. After another large swallow on his fourth quart of Schlitz he hid it on the already wet window sill behind the video poker machine. It did no good to curse the damn machine. He had done it and its lighted screen blinked back at him, unchanged and uncaring.

"Hey, Harvey—you gonna work a groove in that seat you sit there much longer," Juanita the lady behind the counter said as she dumped a fresh load of chicken tenders under the heat lamp. Harvey didn't move his head but raised his hand and made a movement like shooing a fly off a paper plate. The ugly black plastic ashtray beside him needed to be dumped. Had his attention not been glued to his poker hand, likely he would have dumped it and wiped out the residue. Even though Harvey got discharged seven years ago, the military still gripped him in small, pointless disciplines.

Harvey felt tight. His body constricted and the inner voice, the one that shamed him, told him what an idiot he was. Harvey wondered about that voice. Who was it? Was it the meaty, splotchy-faced drill instructor that had taken a particular pleasure in making his life hell at Fort Benning? Not quite. Nor was it the priest telling him the difference between a venial and a mortal sin on the hard plank benches at the orphanage that sat between the railroad tracks and the Ohio River outside of Cincinnati. It wasn't his first wife in a haze of thin, blue crack smoke pissed that he was nagging her again to throw that damn pipe out and start paying attention to their baby boy. It was as if that meaty drill instructor had become a priest and with moral conviction had taken a heroic hit off the crack pipe and then decided to lay into Harvey with a cascade of criticism.

This sewn-together Frankenstein of a voice now said, "You, Harvey Wallman, are broke. How many times do you have to come over here on payday—a Thursday rather than Friday that Mr. Mabry has reset permanently because you always seemed to need to be paid a day early—to know that you ain't gonna beat it. This machine owns you no matter how many times you hear of it paying off. It's got your number, Jack. You might as well kill that beer, tap the ash off of that pathetic, broken-down cigarette, and go see if you have any money left at all. Which you won't because you are seriously sick to come in here and flush all that money into someone's dirty pockets when the Bish and kids are at home."

Harvey considered the advice. Glancing up at the wall clock, he noticed it was ten after seven. A quick calculation told him he was late for dinner and that his little trip to buy cigarettes had taken over two hours. The Bish surely had dinner ready an hour and a half ago. The way her mind wanders, he was sure she was frantic. The only things anchoring her when he was gone were the kids. Bishop had something wrong in her brain. The doctor said one of her veins needed to be operated on in her head. They called it an And-your-ism. Bishop saw floating colors and sometimes people that were not even there. She got confused easily and moved between sweetness and rage. She was almost like a little child and this more than anything else scarred their two children. The doctor knew they were not insured and so went into a description of her And-your-ism like a shade tree mechanic talking about gaskets and rubber hoses.

"What Bishop has is a vein in her head. This vein, picture it like the inner tube of a bicycle tire, has a weakness in its wall. Sort of like if when it was made at the factory it was defective and now because of high pressure, it has a little bubble sticking out of the side of it."

The Bish stared at the chart on the wall. On it were diagrammed cross-sections of bodily systems and viscera. She leaned back in her chair in disbelief like she never knew all of that was inside her body and the thought of it shocked her. She could not concentrate on that chart and the doctor at the same time. Harvey heard every word but could not help losing track of the conversation every now and then because he was watching the side of the doctor's shiny bald head. As he spoke and Harvey nodded, a vein above the doctor's cheekbone popped out and quivered as if on command serving as a filmstrip of what he was telling them about The Bishop's condition.

"What I'm saying is that deep in the middle of her brain is an And-your-ism. This weakness could go at anytime. She does not need to get too excited or overly exert herself," as if this would not overly excite her.

"So whatmmyi supposed to do all day? I can't think straight and I lose track of things. Sometimes I go to put laundry in the washer and find that I washed a load the other day and forgot to put it in the dryer. Then I gotta wash it again because it's all moldy."

Dr. Neblett's gaze focused far away and his cheeks puffed out. Harvey thought if that video poker dealer could take human form, it would look like the doctor. The doctor had the answers but like the dealer never gave away his hand easily.

"I can give you a prescription that should knock out the worst effects. We have medicine now that can take away the hallucinations and the otherworldly feelings."

Harvey thought that maybe being in another world might be a relief. It was something he may take a gamble on if given a chance. His body had always been his most prized possession. Growing up in the orphanage, personal property had almost not existed. A couple of pairs of sympathy pants at Christmas donated from kids whose parents made them donate the stuff they never wore anymore. When a Canadian front moved down out of the Great Lakes, the wind howled down the Ohio River and ripped all the way through Harvey. So it was necessary to wear whatever type of heavy winter coat you could get your hands on.

Harvey always liked to warm up on his way back from school at the VFW. The guys in there were like Harvey. Misfits, lost, alone, with their insides partially frozen, they kept their heads down but they seemed to recognize a kinship with Harvey too. One day as Harvey rubbed his oversized hands and elbows over the gas space heater, the guy everybody called Klinard walked over with a dark bundle under his arm.

"You look a little frigid there, hamburger," said the man, half crippled from dodging bullets and shrapnel in a frozen hole in Korea.

"Its not too bad out there," Harvey beamed in the glow of attention.

"Well if you ain't one tough little S.O.B. It's colder than a welldigger's ass out there," the man shook his head and wagged his tongue in the hole where his front tooth should have been.

"Maybe, but this stove is sure nice and it's only a little ways off once I leave here."

"Looks to me and the boys like that damn orphanage should better equip you little dudes for the icy breeze coming down that chute out there. Why don't ya take this jacket? If you're too tough for it, I bet one of the guys you bunk with sure would like it." Pulling the bundle out, he presented the coat to Harvey like a Marine honor guard handing some teary widow the Stars and Stripes in a crisp fold. Harvey held it out, disbelieving what he held in his hands.

"Thanks a bunch. I guess it would wear easier than to carry it," he said as he slipped his arms into the sleeves. The fit was perfect. The way it felt made him think of his grandmother's quilt, but with 29 grandchildren she couldn't give a quilt to every one. It was like wearing a quilt, but was not so bulky as to feel restrictive. Looking down at the green canvas material, he saw all kinds of little pockets and cubbyholes to hide things in. It even had hand-warming pockets specially made to fit your hands into, and they were lined with a soft, fuzzy material. When he looked up, Sarge Klinard grinned that toothy grin and rubbed his salt-and-pepper growth of beard.

"Looks like YOU like that jacket. Keep it. I got it from a buddy that gets me things over at the PX when his manager ain't quite looking. It's strictly G.I. You probably won't get any wearing it—but by God you won't be cold no more.

Harvey put that jacket on when he was 14 and except for summers and the warm days of spring, he really didn't take it off until he unloaded at Fort Benning for basic training three years later.

He looked over at Bishop and saw that her demeanor had turned hard. It happened that way with her. Her sensitivities were tuned higher than Harvey's. Her sense of injustice felt genetic and immune to any soft talking or placating. Harvey noticed her winding up. Weak as she was, she at times could change the course of rivers, pulling the tides back out to sea. Energy that had been leaking out of a thousand holes flowed into her center and galvanized her broken body.

"Listen here. I been sitting and listening, sitting and listening. Watching you squirm in that seat, Doctor. You've overexplained everything like we are some dumbass backwards people. Like I never heard of no damned Any-your-ism! What I'm wondering is how we gonna pay for this medicine?" The room was silent but alive. It was like lying in bed after

a Led Zeppelin concert and all is quiet but the music still thickly hums. Dr. Neblett sat with slumped shoulders. He looked like a shaft mine caved in on itself. He suddenly straightened up and grabbed the white lapels of his lab coat and coughed to clear his throat.

“Medication is the best route for you. An operation is completely too risky. The And-your-ism is right in the center of your head. To repair it, we would probably kill you.” Now the Wallmans slumped and the doctor sat up straight. Bishop’s strength oozed back out through all of the little holes where the strength had bubbled up. Who were they kidding? Without insurance or a real way of paying him or any other doctor, why would he cut into the middle of her head and maybe kill her?

# Duncan Percy

(scene from screenplay)

by

Randy O'Brien

FADE IN:

EXT. SLEEPY SOUTHERN TOWN - NIGHT - 1974

Crickets CHIRP. An owl HOOTS. A cat SCREECHES.

A town square with a towering obelisk. The inscription reads "HONORING SPENCER'S WAR HEROES." A list of names for the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and Korea.

A church with an overwhelming steeple.

A distant train whistle WALLS.

A drugstore with a dentist's office next door. A lawyer's storefront office. A bakery and a small grocery. Several empty windows.

A slaughterhouse with an empty corral.

A single streetlight flashes yellow on both sides.

A dark, dilapidated house with the front door ajar.

A distant police siren HOWLS.

A big, yellow hunter's moon hangs like a teardrop over the roof of the Ross school, a converted antebellum mansion.

At the basement window, suddenly there's a loud POP!

From what seems an impossibly small crack between the frame and the heavy screen emerges eleven-year-old DUNCAN PEARCY, slim, with dark hair and pale, white skin.

ADULT DUNCAN (V.O.)

When I was a baby, if I was wet, I'd cry. If I was hungry,

I'd cry. If I was sleepy, I'd cry. Life was simple.  
Duncan unfolds himself, takes a deep breath and scans the yard.

He drops to one knee and ties his shoe. He sweeps the back of his hand across the wet grass.

ADULT DUNCAN (V.O.)  
As I got older, my mother would tell me to "use my words."

Duncan finishes tying his shoe.

In b.g. a huge, white building with all but the name, Rutherford Hospital, obscured by the mansion. Further to the left is the cemetery, filled with headstones glimmering with dew.

ADULT DUNCAN (V.O.)  
So, at about two years old, she says I started to "use my words."  
Bigger, juicier, fatter; I just wouldn't shut up. Drove my mother  
crazy.

Duncan puts his fists on his hips like a prince surveying his future kingdom. He raises his hands to the sky.

He takes a deep breath, sniffing the night air. He sticks his finger in his mouth, then holds it up to the wind.

ADULT DUNCAN (V.O.)  
Now, they keep telling me. Use your words. But they don't understand. My words can kill.

He struts toward the front gate, checks for traffic and scurries across the street.

ADULT DUNCAN (V.O.)  
I remember that night. The smell of the cool crisp air. The sound of the crickets chirping. The feel of the dew on the grass. I didn't realize it when it was happening, but this was the best time of my life. And the events that followed continue to color every aspect of my days.

EXT. DUSTY STREET - NIGHT

A police car ahead. Duncan ducks into the bushes as they drift by.

Duncan pauses, looks both ways, crosses the street, then bolts toward a picnic area.  
EXT. PICNIC AREA - NIGHT

Duncan walks up to a tree, steps off five paces and kicks the dirt with his toe. He bends over and pulls a pocketknife from the grass.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Duncan crosses over the railroad tracks. He turns and watches a train chug slowly through the sleeping station.

EXT. FRONT YARD - NIGHT

Duncan edges up to a wall of bushes, then easily slips through.

He creeps up to the back window of a big house.

EXT. BIG HOUSE/WINDOW - NIGHT

Duncan gently taps on the window. A rustle, then the sound of someone tripping as they flick on the light.

The sash slowly rises as ESSMAY JOHNSTON sticks her head out the window. She has freckles, pigtails, a pug nose and all the energy a ten-year-old can hold in one body.

ESSMAY  
Duncan, you scared the bee-Jesus out of me.

Duncan stares at the girl.

ESSMAY  
Don't give me that "I ain't done nothin' look." I swanee.

Duncan bends from the waist. If he had a hat with a plume he would be sweeping the grass with it. He looks up grinning.

ESSMAY  
There you go with those puppy dog eyes.

Essmay turns away from the window.

Duncan waits with arms folded. The light in the window goes out. Essmay climbs out the window and hands Duncan a huge flashlight.

ESSMAY  
Don't just stand there, make yourself useful.

He turns the flashlight on and puts the light under his chin.

ESSMAY  
I'm gonna' take you somewhere I ain't never taken you afore.

She glares at Duncan then snatches back the flashlight.

ESSMAY  
Yeah, you're real scary. Duncan, you still sure you want to go?

Duncan slowly nods.

ESSMAY  
Then, let's get.

EXT. ASH STREET - NIGHT

Duncan and Essmay march side-by-side, almost touching but not touching. Duncan sniffs the air like a pointer then bolts left across the street.

ESSMAY  
Duncan, come back here!

Duncan stops in the front yard of a two-story, white clapboard house. He sniffs the air again.

Essmay stands next to him and sniffs.

ESSMAY  
I don't smell nothin'. Old lady Webster's house. Why'd you stop here?

Duncan sniffs the air again. Essmay mimics him.

ESSMAY  
What is that?

A rapturous smile crosses Essmay's face. Duncan slinks toward the house.



ESSMAY

No, Duncan, we can't. Not tonight, we don't have time.

Essmay sighs and follows Duncan to the house.

EXT. WEBSTER HOUSE - NIGHT

The moon casts a shadow of Duncan's profile on the siding as he slides alongside the wall.

The weathered paint leaves white stripes on the back of his dark shirt. Essmay follows, flashlight aimed at the ground before Duncan.

EXT. KITCHEN WINDOW - NIGHT

Three chess pies sit on the ledge of the window. Duncan stares at the window sill and reaches up. He lets his hand fall away.

ESSMAY

Be careful.

Duncan frowns then rubs his chin.

With the skill of a surgeon, Duncan gently reaches up and slides the pie from the window sill. He allows gravity to slip the pie into the palm of his hand. He looks at the pie, then smiles at Essmay.

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Duncan and Essmay sit on the curb. Duncan pulls the pocketknife, opens the blade and cuts a slice out of the pie. He stares at the slice and opens his mouth. He hesitates then hands it to Essmay.

ESSMAY

Why, thank you kindly, Duncan.

Duncan nods then cuts a piece for himself.

ESSMAY

My mamma used to make pies that tasted as good as these, Duncan.

Essmay takes a bite and talks with her mouth full.

ESSMAY

She had a word for pie like this, said it was—What was it she called it?  
Oh yeah, belly-toasters. I wish you'd had a chance to meet her.

A breeze stirs in the trees. Shadows play over the sidewalk. She takes another bite.

ESSMAY

It just don't get any better than this, now does it?

EXT. DUNCAN'S HOME - NIGHT

Essmay leads this time with Duncan lagging slightly behind. He sucks pie crumbs from his fingers. Essmay turns and puts a finger to her lips, "shushing" him.

They walk past a decaying house. One of the shutters hangs catty-cornered. The front door is ajar.

Essmay turns toward the house, but Duncan keeps walking. He will not look at the house. Essmay starts to move toward the front porch, but turns and runs toward Duncan.

ESSMAY

Hey, wait up!

# Seeds and Leaves

by  
J. Terry Price

Lipscomb's wrinkled fingers pushed back the worn wool coat sleeve to reveal the time. Eleven-seventeen, still a little early, so once again he made sure he had everything ready to go.

He unrolled the top of his soft, wrinkled lunch sack, and slid the crustless cheese sandwich out, wax paper slowly stretching open from around it, like a magnolia blossom, he thought. Everything else was there too—peeled Roan apple slices, a bag of peanuts, and part of a Hershey bar. He returned the sandwich, rolled the top down, and set the sack by the thermos of strong, hot coffee.

Lipscomb closed his eyes and nodded, mentally noting contents in the trunk of his '89 New Yorker, a folding lawn chair along with a TV tray, the last one of a set Eva redeemed with three books of stamps and a buck forty-five, back in the early sixties. The tray had a black metal top with large red roses, and brass-colored legs that unfolded and snapped into place. For years, evenings found him and Eva eating their dinners on those trays as Walter Cronkite talked to them about the passing of JFK, then Bobby, and Martin Luther King. Walter pulled Vietnam from around the world and the moon from the sky and brought both these places into their den, first in black and white, later in color.

Lipscomb had returned home from his stint in Korea with a bundle of letters from her, letters filled with Eva's hopes and plans for the family, and even names she had picked out, Charles for a boy and Katharine for a girl. They tried unsuccessfully for years to have children. Months passed, each beginning with hope and ending in disappointment.

Every night, after Johnny Carson, after the baritone announcer recited "High Flight," after the national anthem, Eva played solitaire for hours on her tray. Lipscomb watched television through the station sign-off, watched as the signal disappeared, replaced by snow on the screen and the slow, continuous whoosh of the resulting white noise. The glowing screen and wind-like sound reminded him of the Korean winters, her letters somehow finding him in Pusan, keeping him warm when his outdated equipment couldn't. The army hadn't prepared him for the Korean winters, but there were many times after his return that he longed for them, longed to be as close to Eva as he had been, in trenches, 7,000 miles away. Finally Lipscomb would turn off the television set and leave Eva to finish her game, on her tray, God knew when. She was never one to go down to "ol' Sol" easily.

It was about the time they had given up all hope for children that Lipscomb found and bought a small parcel of land just west of Knoxville. At first he would have to coax her to go out and look at it, but soon, she began to look forward to the picnics he packed just for the two of them, and slowly the land began to allow her to dream, just a bit, again.

Eventually Eva got too sick to play solitaire, so he would set the tray beside her recliner to hold the remote control. When she could no longer sit, he moved it bedside, where it held at the ready her medicines, tissues, and water. After she died, Lipscomb would find some comfort eating dinners on her tray in front of the television.

Sack and thermos in left hand, he once again pushed back the sleeve. Eleven twenty-five. Good. Right on time. He put on his soft gray felt hat, carefully removed Eva's likeness from the wall, flipped off the den light and headed into the dark corridor to the elevators of the retirement apartments.

It was one of those autumn days that felt like spring and traffic was moderate. Lipscomb had all but given up driving, but the bus didn't take him where he needed to go and he would never again ride in the bright white Ford van with the facility's advertising on the side. He resented being shuttled about en masse in a pod advertising to the world, "old and helpless inside," like animals promoting an upcoming circus. *See what we do for the elderly? Send your parents here!* He rode in the van once and found that his stomach tightened at every stop light. When cars pulled alongside, children invariably looked up and stared, adults glanced at him through pitying eyes. Sure, driving was dangerous, but preferable to a slow death by humiliation.

The fifteen-minute drive took Lipscomb twenty-five as he clung to the right lane at thirty-three miles an hour. Small green cars with girls, left hands to ears as the right hands steered, ran up behind him, sent his heart racing as they whipped around him at the last possible second. Small red cars with boys, slumped down low with hats on backwards pulled up beside him and shouted and gestured in ways he hadn't encountered since his stint in Korea, at least not in public. Lipscomb felt the pounding of their music, the pounding of their selfish anger toward anything and anyone who interfered with their appointments to nowhere.

His turn signal clicked for three blocks before he had the nerve to move to the left lane. The signal light was already green with a left arrow, and he boldly cut a wide swath across the center of the intersection, the white Chrysler swinging out, then settling into the two-lane road, headed west away from town. Leaving the congestion of the city emboldened Lipscomb; he turned on his radio to the big band station and drum-tapped the top of the steering wheel with the fingers of both hands. He saw nothing ahead and lowered the glass on the driver's side, propping his left elbow up in the window. One hand on the wheel, how the young handled life. He knew he was old when life required more than one hand from him. But not today. Today was a one-handed day. He almost wished one of those kids would come up beside him now. Hell, he had underwear older than any of those kids.

Another few miles and he saw the muddy ruts that were supposed to pass for a driveway into their property. The right blinker light flashed, and he returned his other hand to the wheel and looked ahead, then rear view, then ahead, and back, until he was satisfied he could turn in. Once off the highway, he relaxed and pulled the car into the five-acre lot dotted with black oak trees and one old southern magnolia standing tall on a rise toward the middle. Lipscomb put the car into park, turned off the ignition and sat, taking it all in. An easy breeze waltzed across his face. Wood smoke, he thought and he closed his eyes and his mouth and just breathed.

He then hobbled to the trunk and with the chair and the photo in the left hand and the tray, thermos, and the lunch in the right, Lipscomb felt balanced. The leaves crunched

as he slowly penguin-walked his way a few yards and set everything down beneath the russet-colored canopy of the oaks.

Lipscomb looked up through the limbs and leaves as he unfolded and snapped together the tray. The blue of the autumn sky seemed deeper through ruby leaves. He set the tray down and moved it back and forth until the legs found level ground and no longer rocked. Only then did he place Eva's photo in the back left corner, angled so as to face away from the road and toward the magnolia. Lipscomb unfolded the lawn chair and put it down next to the tray so that he could look to his left, at Eva, and to his right, where her gaze fell. Slowly, he took off his coat and hung it on the back of the chair, sat, removed his lunch from the bag and spread it carefully between them on the tray. Lipscomb unscrewed the thermos and poured a half cup of black coffee into the top. He looked around their land, held the cup up to the photo and gestured a toast.

Lipscomb blew across the coffee and sipped, picked up half a sandwich and took a bite. Reaching across, he shifted the picture frame, just a bit, so that it faced more toward the magnolia.

He took the bag of peanuts and, holding on to a small handful, scattered the rest like grass seed a few feet from their luncheon spot.

Leaves rustled overhead. First one, then three squirrels began their staccato dances, hops, and jumps from limb to trunk, trunk to root, root to ground, toward the strewn peanuts. The squirrels ate the peanuts farthest away from him and moved slowly closer until he leaned forward and they ate from his hand. He threw out the rest of the peanuts and pulled out a handkerchief from his trousers to wipe his hands, more deliberately than usual.

From his left, he could feel Eva's sad, gray eyes looking directly into him so he reached over and picked her up and brought her closer to him, looked at her as he ran his finger along the scalloped edge of the frame. Tears made their way down the trenches of his face. Pulling his right shoulder up, he rubbed his face against his shirt as an autumn breeze cooled the tear trail.

He returned Eva to her rightful place on the tray, picked up the Hershey bar, and broke the remaining piece in two. Then he sipped the last of his coffee down, set the cup on the tray, and amidst the falling leaves, finished the last of his chocolate.

# **Placa de Catedral, Barcelona**

## **(a prose poem)**

by  
**John D. Stafford**

September afternoon. The light in the square slants and the shadows grow sharp and the gawking tourists, wrapped in hesitation, amble away to the cool edges of the plaza and the Barcelonans move in calmly and wait for nightfall.

Across the broad space the towers and the tombs and the fortresses of the gothic quarter stand silently on guard. Look closely and you will see a pale palm tree or two hidden around a cold corner, but most of the plaza is a dry, dusty manmade medieval plain, leading inexorably to the dark jaws of the cathedral.

Grime dominates. Oil smears the street. Dust grips the stone walls of every structure; dust along the alleyways, dust on the cathedral, dust of ancient Europe, dust of the Crusades, dust of the looted New World, dust of Columbus, memories of Inca gold dust, dust of conquistadors' bones.

The sun slips, and the tourists wait under the awnings of the Hotel Colon; English, German, wealthy Argentines and Chileans, clumsy Americans, sitting with legs crossed with their tapas and red wine, their eyes on the cathedral before them.

One by one, reluctant, wary, they pay homage to the old church. The giant wooden doors open stiffly, and the darkness within falls upon them like heavy black robes. Whispering, they shuffle along the aisles, huddled together like children, beside the shadowy chambers where the rich were forgiven.

Stepping out again into the sunset, relieved to be alive, they are immediately assailed by an ancient gypsy woman, perched on her shawl on the cathedral steps, her withered hand thrust out, begging "Por favor! Por favor!" Worn pesetas, doomed by history, fall in a felt hat beside her.

Night will come at last. One stumbles, looking upward: the buttresses, the spires, the dark fingers of the church looming overhead, picking God's pocket.

# “Diamonds”

(Chapter One of *Young Man River*, a novel)

by

John D. Stafford

I stood on the banks of the Mississippi River at Memphis one summer afternoon in 1972 and looking up, I saw lightning flash far above the Arkansas shore, and looking down at the torrent below, I saw the waves and the ripples and the froth and flotsam glide past me, and I wished then that I had a raft so I could float away too.

Instead what I had was a diamond, a diamond ring that I grasped tightly in my right hand. And I wondered: should I toss it away into the water?

This was no “pent-up aching river,” like my hero, Walt Whitman, wrote. There was nothing pent-up here on this riverbank but me, and letting go of the ring into the current below would relinquish it and everything it represented for all time. I stared into the glare on the water and saw something being swept away, a log, the remains of a johnboat, I couldn’t tell. I began to imagine it was the very house that Trudi and I had shared, being washed away in some apocalyptic flood.

The wind whipped across the river and against the bluff behind me, pushing me first one way and then another, blowing my long hair in my face. I steadied myself and looked around me. To my left, spanning the river a half-mile away was the old Memphis-Arkansas Bridge; to my right the Hernando DeSoto Bridge, the new bridge, not yet completed, a long, low, M-shaped span that arched toward the Arkansas shore. It seemed to promise perhaps something more than the usual, but what, none of us knew yet.

My gaze swept down again toward the water and I saw that the river was already sparkling with diamonds of its own, a million reflections of the setting summer sun. This river that trickled out of a little Minnesota lake, so narrow there that you could almost jump across it, this river that broadened past Iowa and Illinois cornfields and then swept slowly by the St. Louis diamond where the Cardinals, my favorite team, played under the shadow of that city’s new arch; this same river now here with me in Memphis, a mile wide and as mighty as they get, bellowing on to New Orleans—this river—it seemed to carry all of us along in its wake, like an infinite number of specks of sand. What would one more disappointment mean to something so old; old as the earth, like a vein pulsing from the heart of it?

So in one hand I held Trudi’s ring, holding protectively on to it, afraid to let it go. In my other hand was a battered and only half-read used paperback copy of *Siddhartha* that my sister Peggy had sent me from California. I remembered the inscription inside: “To Dave, I think you’ll find this enlightening. Share it with Trudi.” I never had the chance to share it.

I stood there on the bank for a long time and watched the river traffic; a barge, long as a football field, slowly made its way north, against the current. I wondered where it was headed, what it might discover. I watched it until it disappeared into the distance. Finally, bored, impatient with myself, I stuffed the ring back into my jeans pocket and turned away.

Not watching where I was going, I shuffled across Tom Lee Park as slow as that old barge going upriver. I plopped down on the grass and rubbed sweat from my forehead and the back of my neck, wiped my smudged wire rims on my tee shirt. Despite the impending twilight, the temperature must have still been in the low nineties and the humidity made the grounds of the long, narrow park steamy and tropical.

I closed my eyes to shut out the staring sun and wondered to myself: What if I concentrated, concentrated so hard that I went into a trance, then could I muster enough psychic power to make that pitiless river flow backward, maybe make time itself go back, a year, two years, three? Back to when I was standing in my parents' kitchen introducing Trudi to my mother, grinning when they hugged each other like they were old friends, me shaking my head with wonderment, with pride that I had finally brought someone home who pleased Mama, and me leaning back against the wall watching while Mama slipped a red and white checkered apron around Trudi's slim waist and the two of them started baking pies? Could I stand up against time that powerfully? Could I go back that far?

I heard a high-pitched squeal coming from my right. I looked around and saw two little black girls, one in pink frilly dress, the other, a little younger, in a white one. They were joyfully playing tag around a nearby wooden bench. A stocky man with a broad dark face and a short Afro was sitting on the bench, arms folded, smiling at them; probably the girls' father. The man never moved from the bench but just took in all the antics of his girls as they yelled and jumped and frequently ran into his strong arms for hugs. He struck me as very proud and satisfied. I envied him. I wondered if he knew how lucky he was. I watched him playfully point an accusing finger at the younger girl and then break into a broad grin. I guess he does know, I thought.

I stretched out my legs on the warm grass and reached back into my pocket for the ring. I held it between my fingers, the tiny diamond catching the setting sun's last light. I remembered that I came here to throw it away, deep into the raging river. Now it didn't seem such a good idea. The idea began to form in my mind that as long as I held on to the ring, there was still hope for Trudi and me. There was still a chance. The diamond represented now my last defense, *call it a diamond defense*, a defense made of pressurized hope, the hardest stuff on earth. I shoved the ring back in my pocket.

Thunder rumbled from far away in the west. Rain's coming, I thought, but probably not for a while. I stood and dusted the rear end of my jeans. I had promised Billy Henderson I would meet him for the official opening of McGovern Headquarters. I glanced at my watch and saw I was already late.

I took one last look at the two little girls and their dad; they were still over by the bench, still laughing, still happy. I turned away and shuffled across the park toward my yellow Mustang parked along the curb. I dropped *Siddhartha* into a trashcan with a sigh and a shake of my head. Never read a book out of its proper time for you, Peggy once told me. I thought that my time must be a long time coming.

The McGovern campaign's local headquarters was located in a faded, three-story Victorian rental on Union Avenue in Midtown. As I trudged up the walk I noticed that the



paint was peeling and a couple of shutters were leaning askew. It didn't bode well for the campaign, I thought.

A number of freaks were hanging out on the front lawn; one of them had a Gibson acoustic and was strumming some chords absentmindedly. I looked across the lawn for Billy, but didn't spot him. I figured he must already be inside, so I pushed open the ratty-looking screen door to the old house and nearly bumped right into Billy.

"Hey Dave! Where have you been?" he asked in that overeager voice of his that had a way of growing louder and louder the more he spoke. This time he really needed to shout; the room was buzzing with volunteers. "Didn't you say seven?" Billy continued, grinning. "You and Trudi been busy?" He slapped me on the back. "Come on. They've got free punch in the back." He grabbed my arm and tugged me down a long hallway past a knot of well-dressed middle-aged folks then around a couple of young guys, both wearing faded green army shirts along with their blue jeans. Vets perhaps, I thought, although it had lately become fashionable to wear castoff military duds.

Billy led me into a long room at the back of the house crowded with people picking at the finger food and drinks lined up at a long table. It all looked more like a party than politics to me, but my spirits lifted a little just from being around all these other liberals, a rare event in Memphis to be sure. We edged our way over to the refreshments. Billy handed me a paper cup filled with purple punch. "Free drinks are the best drinks, right buddy?" he said. I replied I would drink to that, so we toasted each other.

Billy Henderson was an old high school friend, once enrolled in grad school at Memphis State like me, although in his case strictly to get a draft deferment. When Nixon eliminated the college deferments, Billy dropped out. But the next year, out of sheer luck, he received a high lottery number and wasn't called up. Such was the power of contingency on our lives then.

Billy was a burly, barrel-chested fellow with thick, sandy hair and long, bushy sideburns that stretched down his round, ruddy face nearly to his chin. He was dressed in what had become practically a uniform for him: an old MSU sweatshirt with the sleeves raggedly cut off and patched Levi's. Only a wedding, a funeral, or a job could get him into anything else.

Billy surveyed the crowd then turned back to me. "Everybody looks happy, considering."

For a second, I wondered if he and everyone else knew about Trudi. When I came to my senses, I sipped some more punch before asking at last, "Considering what?"

Billy glared at me, cocked his head and grinned. "Considering Eagleton, of course."

Had I forgotten something? I did a quick review in my head. I knew that Thomas Eagleton, Democratic senator from Missouri, was McGovern's running mate, nominated at the convention in Miami three weeks ago. What else was there to remember? "What about Eagleton?" I asked. "I don't get it."

Billy leaned over in my direction. "Haven't you heard? Damn, Dave, you're the political science major. I thought you kept up with all this stuff. You mean that I'm telling you the news for a change?" He laughed, a phony sort of laugh, I thought.

"So what happened?"

"Our man George, side by side with Eagleton, gave a press conference today. And Eagleton confessed that he had a nervous breakdown and shock treatments years ago.

He says he's okay now." Billy's thick eyebrows arched. "Now how do you like that?"

Not a good way to start a campaign, I thought. "What did McGovern say about it?"

Billy drained the cup of punch and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Says he's behind Eagleton one thousand percent!" Billy crushed the cup with his fist. "You know, Dave, I thought one *hundred* percent was the limit. If you can back someone one thousand percent, then why not a thousand *and one*? Or *two thousand*? Or *a million*?" He laughed. "You know what? It sounds to me that old George is giving Eagleton one of those votes of confidence like college athletic directors give their football coaches. Just before the ax falls."

I shook my head. Tricky Dicky and his toadies in the White House must be having a good laugh over this.

Billy interrupted my thoughts. "Hey man, where's Trudi? You never told me." He threw his beefy arm around my shoulders and led me out of the room and back into the hall. "I haven't seen her in weeks. Now, Dave, if you've got a good-looking girl like her, you ought to take her out more, don't you think?"

I pulled away from Billy. "You might as well know. Trudi's gone. She moved out a couple of days ago and left her engagement ring behind."

Billy's eyes widened and he grabbed me again by the shoulders and shook me until I lost my balance and fell back against a campaign poster stapled to the wall; McGovern's convention theme was printed in big letters on it—"Come home, America!"

"Oh no, man!" Billy practically shouted. "What did you do to her? How did you screw up this time?" He had a maniacal look on his face, but I knew he was putting on a show.

I pushed him back. "I didn't do anything! It's just that . . . we haven't been getting along. She's real moody. She can turn cool and distant at the drop of a hat." I looked down at my feet. "I don't know what happened."

Billy shook his head. "Man, you really blew it this time." Suddenly his face brightened. "Hey, if you can't satisfy her, mind if I give her a call?"

"You're not her type. She can't stand loud-mouthed jerks."

Billy smiled. "Come on. We're getting out of here. You need a beer."

We took Billy's Plymouth Duster and a few minutes later we were sitting at a table along the riser at Huey's, a new bar and grill on Madison, not far away. Huey's catered to the young and the poor and the hairy and was casual, to say the least. Customers were writing their names with Magic Markers on the whitewashed concrete walls; others were blowing toothpicks into the matted ceiling with their drinking straws, like Amazonian hunters with blowguns. Billy and I finished off a cold pitcher of Bud real fast then ordered another.

Billy stared at a waitress who strutted by in tight cutoff shorts, then he turned back to me. "You know one of the owners of this place used to play with the Boxtops? Remember that band?" Billy was noted in our crowd for keeping up with the local music scene.

I must not have answered; my mind was elsewhere. Billy leaned forward, imploring me, his elbows crowding the tiny table. "You remember, don't you? Big hits, like 'The Letter' and 'Cry Like a Baby.' Remember those?"

I couldn't see why it was all so important, but I nodded. This encouraged Billy, who never needed much in the way of encouragement anyway. "I hear the lead singer is down

at Ardent Studios now with a new band. My sister knows a secretary who works there. She says this new band is going to be big, real big, maybe the next Beatles."

I decided to play along. "Okay. What do the next Beatles call themselves?"

"Big Star," Billy replied.

Seemed rather audacious. Then I remember the local grocery store chain by the same name. "Oh, like the supermarket?"

"I guess." Billy leaned back. "Lots of good bands in this town though. I was at High Cotton the other night. The band had a chick singer named Suzanne something and . . ."

My attention drifted away like the fadeout at the end of a record. I kept thinking about walking back into my duplex just a few hours ago, how quiet it was inside, Trudi's note still on the table, the ring lying there. How could she do this to me? What had I done? Nothing, that I could see.

How was I going to live my life now without her? For that matter, how was I going to pay the rent?

Billy slammed a full mug of beer in front of me; the suds on top spilled over onto the table. "Here you drink this. You need to snap out of it, man. I don't know where you are, but you ain't here. Let's order a couple of cheeseburgers. My treat. And you tell me all about how Trudi gave you the shaft."

So we drank lots of draft beer and ate the greasy cheeseburgers and fries and I rambled on and on, trying to make sense of it all, not knowing whether to be angry or sad, but leaning more and more to sad as time passed. Neil Young's new song, "Heart of Gold," started playing on the sound system and that just made everything worse. Was I going to think of Trudi now every time I heard that dopey song? I chucked a French fry at Billy.

"Hey, what did I do? Don't blame it on me. I'm your friend, remember? I'm here to help you forget about all that mess. Anyway, she'll probably be back tomorrow. If not tomorrow, next week. Now, what you need to do is let some of your frustration out." Billy was talking louder than ever. Was he drunk? How long had we been here, anyhow? I looked down at my watch, but it wasn't there. Then it occurred to me that I was looking at the wrong wrist. I rubbed my eyes. Was I drunk?

Billy leaned so far back in his wooden chair I was afraid he was going to fall off the riser. "You know what we should do?"

I hesitated. Was I now so far gone that I would start taking advice from Billy? I took another swallow of beer. Funny that no matter how much we drank there was always more beer on the table. "What should we do?" I asked.

Billy fell forward suddenly and thrust his face across the table. He spoke in a low, conspiratorial tone. "We should go to *New Orleans!* You've never been there, right?" When I shook my head, Billy livened up. "That's it, man! We can drive there *tonight!* My buddy Raymond lives near the French Quarter. He owes me fifty bucks. We'll go down there and collect and have a big time. We'll take my car. You can help me drive."

Road trips, especially to New Orleans, were a recurring theme for Billy. I don't know how many times I had heard him, usually over a pitcher or two of beer, propose just such nonsense. And in the past I had always been the voice of reason, had always been the one to gainsay the idea, but all the excuses I once put forward now no longer seemed to exist.

So when we stumbled out of Huey's a few minutes later, not even the flashes of lightning, not even the thunder booming, closer and closer, could dissuade the two of us of the viability, even the desirability, of a sudden journey to the Big Easy.

We fell into Billy's Duster and drove south until we reached his cheap apartment over by the airport. He dashed inside while I waited in the car, listening to the first few rain-drops hit against the roof. Billy soon reappeared, a duffel bag strapped over his shoulder like a sailor heading back out to sea. He threw the bag in the trunk and slid behind the wheel, then pulled two Coke bottles out of a paper bag. He gave me one. "I thought we could use some caffeine for the road," he said.

We headed back north and east, toward the Memphis State campus and my Kearney Street duplex. On the way, I found myself dreading going back into the place, even if I did need to pack a bag. But what if Trudi had changed her mind? What if she had already returned? Maybe she was waiting for me at this very minute. I perked up. Maybe this whole crazy New Orleans caper wouldn't be necessary. I could laugh about it all later, I imagined, my arm around Trudi, as we strolled across campus.

But no light was visible from the windows when we pulled into the empty driveway. I told Billy to wait, that I wouldn't be long. I didn't want to read some new note Trudi may have left, not with Billy hanging over my shoulder. "Grab some snacks. Anything will do," he yelled, leaning his head out the open passenger window as I unlocked my front door. The rain drizzled down like it couldn't quite get motivated.

I stepped inside the dark living room and flipped on the wall switch. Nothing seemed to have changed since I left that afternoon; the same stack of newspapers in the corner, the same record albums scattered in front of the stereo, the same two ceramic mugs on the coffee table, left there a week ago. I walked down the hall to the bedroom and the silence and stillness told me all I needed to know. No Trudi. I opened the bedroom closet; a long gap along the rack marked the place where her clothes had been. I stood there for a few seconds just staring at the emptiness.

Finally I rubbed my face and grabbed the blue canvas valise with the Amtrak logo that my cousin Marcus, the railroad conductor, had given me. It was the only thing resembling a suitcase I owned, and it was rarely used. I hurriedly stuffed in a few clothes and a toiletry kit and dashed to the kitchen at the front of the house. I made a quick survey; the only snack I could find was a half-full bag of Fritos. Billy honked the horn. I stood there for a moment before deciding that a pillow might come in handy, if we were to be riding all night. I hurried back to the bedroom and grabbed one from the unmade bed. A long blond hair lay across the dark blue pillowcase. I held the pillow up to my face. I could smell Trudi.

I finally made it out to the front porch, awkwardly lugging the Fritos, the Amtrak bag, and the pillow. As soon as I locked the front door, the rain started down hard. I darted out to Billy's car and jumped in. He had the motor running and he quickly pulled out of the driveway and drove down Kearney to Highland Avenue.

I felt resigned to it all now. I slumped back in the seat and watched the rain spot the windshield. The raindrops reflected the light from the overarching street lamps like sparkling diamonds.

I took a deep breath. Billy and I were going south.

# Reruns in My Head

(personal essay)

by

Suzanne Craig Robertson

The year my father-in-law died, we had five months to dread Christmas.

I hadn't given the holiday much thought during those months, but when it came I realized we'd been waiting for it. I tasted for the first time the tiniest edge of what my mother-in-law must know and feel every hour, every day.

As an in-law, I am just far enough removed from the gut-pain to be objective, able to filter the family's hurt like a gauzy window curtain. Trying to wedge myself between the pain and my daughter and husband, it still crashed in like a gale wind, blowing through my barrier like I wasn't even there. A barrier, yes, but not thick enough to keep out the sharpness of the day. You need a room-darkening shade for that, but they just don't make one strong enough.

This would be the first time the lights and ornaments went up without my husband's father sitting in the living room chair barking directions. I'd been there at the house many times since he died, but never felt him so strongly missing as when we sat with emptied boxes all around us, lights twinkling happily, the tree crazily decorated with a mix of shiny red balls and angel and reindeer plastic shapes, by our 5-year-old—and the chair empty. No one sat in it. Couldn't. Instead the overflow crowd chose the floor. I had one of those eye-blinking sensations you see on TV all the time where the dead person appears, sitting in the same position: for my father-in-law it would've been straight-backed, slightly uncomfortable in this dressy living room chair, his right leg square across the other knee, making a place for the grandkids to sit and be bounced. I looked hard at that chair, remembering.

Reruns flew through my head, filtered through glass ornaments—Bill sitting there on many Christmas mornings, shaking my gift once and announcing (usually and irritatingly correctly) what was inside. I'd be so mad at him for ruining the surprise, which just made his day. Him telling one of the grandchildren to hand another present to Grandmother, the love of his life; and sitting next to his mother—now dead also—in her wheelchair and him looking so much like her. Bill holding my infant daughter on her first Easter in that same chair, as bright yellow sun streamed through the filmy panels behind them. His comments on that last Christmas that the medicine he was having to take made the turkey taste funny and he didn't even want any. Him skipping his favorite dinner was one of cancer's many devious comments to all of us, although we didn't listen to it intently enough at the time. He didn't talk about it much, and until near the end I thought he was getting better.

I was watching him again, quietly in my head, as my mother-in-law paced in the kitchen, working out plans on the phone for how she'd spend this upcoming Christmas Day. No, I said, don't make the whole meal, really, we'll do it, we'll do it all, with yams and marshmallows and turkey and dressing and cranberry sauce sliced from the can and green

beans with canned fried onions like you like, and brown 'n' serve rolls, why don't you come spend the night with us, just stay with us. If I keep talking the emptiness won't be so resonant, I think stupidly. I can fix this with a casserole, I just know it. I want to make a thousand plans for her to keep her out of this house, keep her from seeing the TV head-reruns in the living room. Keep her from hurting.

It's not possible, I know in my head. She's seen the reruns and ten thousand more besides. She doesn't need the Christmas decorations to remind her. It's what her life is now. And this was just the first Christmas.

My older daughter, who was four when he died, must see the images clearly too. Even though it's been three years since she saw him in his hospital bed—him whispering "I love you" into her tender ear with the few breaths he had left—she recalls his presence-then-absence vividly every so often and will cry hysterically and in sadness for 20 minutes or until she falls asleep. My younger daughter doesn't have this trouble—she never even knew him.

• • •

This year as we were hanging ornaments on our own tree, my daughter, now seven, was clumping them all in one spot, down at her eye level. I couldn't see through her intensity to know if she was considering her granddaddy or really just focusing on lining five ornaments on one branch without it dumping them. With every bauble she pulled out of the box, I had a story to go with it—some were old, dusty stories, some were just from last year. Some stories she begged me to tell again; at some she rolled her eyes and moved ahead to the next box. (No wonder it's such a chore to decorate—it's so emotional.) I held up a scratched glass ball, the hook barely able to hold on one more year. It had been my great-grandmother's, one of about five left from her collection. I reached high to avoid the clumped area. In the murky, shiny redness of the ornament, I was surprised to see the room behind me. I saw my eight-month-old daughter in her bouncy seat, smiling all around and laughing at her big sister. I saw them as if captured in a scene from *It's a Wonderful Life*, not the retouched version, but the original that surely must be crackly by now. I had a terrible sense of dread about it, like I needed to remember this moment because it would never be this way again. And that is true. I blinked and saw in the red ornament the room without children. Inside this snow globe was too sad, too lonely, too much. It will happen, I know. People leave in all directions, dead and alive. I see evidence of it all around me—even I deserted my parents and grew up.

I squeezed my eyes hard to stop time. I opened them, relieved to find the little girls still there.

from  
***Room 201***

by  
**Janelle Rodgers**

(This is a passage from Chapter One of Janelle's novel, *Room 201*.)

*Dear Diary*

*Boarding school? Isn't that where problem kids go? Henry and Mom just sat down to tell me that I won't be at regular high school next year. There's some place called the Myers School that they think is more "academically impressive," whatever that means. I think they're just trying to get me out of the house for a while.*

A knock at the door interrupted Seesy's entry. "Go away," she said, slinking closer to the cream carpet, hiding between her bed and an overstuffed bookshelf. She heard the door creak open anyway. "Didn't you hear what I just said?" Her blonde hair swished around her face, trying to catch up with the rest of her rising body. Anger flashed in her blue eyes.

"Take it easy, sister," she heard her brother say. She almost looked him in the eye, the same shade blue eyes that she had. Their eyes were their one common feature. She bit her lip.

"Sorry. Did you hear about the latest adventure Mom and Henry have planned for me to 'expand my horizons'?" She drew quotations marks in the air with her fingers, red with the fury of her diary entry.

"Yeah, you're lucky," Will said, nudging her with a sun-kissed dark arm to sit on the floor again. He picked up Teddy, her muddy gray bear from childhood, and sat next to her. He had to bend his legs to fit into Seesy's space. His tanned toes propped against the base of the bookshelf. Seesy's legs stretched almost as far as his, though her legs had more of a "healthy glow," rather than a golden tan. Her fair skin turned burnt red in the summer when she went to the pool daily, only to fade after a few days.

"I'm not sure 'lucky' is the way I would put it," Seesy said when she had finished comparing her legs to Will's. "It sounds like I'll be studying my ass off, not to mention living with backstabbing girls. Yikes."

"It's not a convent," Will said. "It'll be fun."

"Fun?" she cut him off. "You are already away at college, free from their stupid rules and expectations. I have got another two years before I'm out of here."

"Not at boarding school. You'll be out of their care, just like me, but you'll still have connections to the funds." He leaned back against the bed like he had life made. His six-foot three-inch frame cramped the small space.

"I don't know. I'm going to be stuck in some nuthouse, surrounded by snobby people and delinquents. I'm going to have to live with other girls who are going to kill me with their hairspray and perfumes. I'm not sure I can handle that."

"Well, it's either deal with those girls and maybe make a few friends and get some fashion tips, or else be stuck here with Mom and Henry for another two years, letting them rule your life, as you say."

Seesy laid her head on the floor. Will held out her bear for comfort.

"Listen, Seesy. I think that going away to school is going to be great for you. It'll be like college two years early." He sat in silence, waiting for her protest.

"Can you keep a secret?" her muffled voice asked.

"Have I ever not?" Will replied.

Seesy took a deep breath. "I'm terrified." She squeezed Teddy harder. "I'll be like the girls' version of the jolly green giant with no athletic ability."

Will laughed. Seesy could be an intimidating force when she held her five-foot eleven-inch frame the right way. Will knew she had tried to lose the few extra pounds of baby fat that hung over the sides of her jeans, but they clung as stubborn as ever. He knew guys flocked to her because she was so laid back and easy to talk to, but girls ran from her in jealous circles for the same reason.

"It's not charm school or modeling school. Besides, it's not like you're having all that much fun here." Seesy sat up to defend herself, but stopped. "I'm just saying," Will said, starting to leave. "I would look at this as your great escape."

"Great escape to hell," Seesy said. "I'm being shipped off and sent to live with my worst enemy."

"Yeah, be nice to them, okay?" Will laughed, and left her room. Seesy picked her journal up again.

*Will just stopped by to chat about boarding school. He says it's like a "great escape." I think it's a great escape into the lion's den. But, I guess I won't have time to deal with prissy girls if I'm going to be studying all the time. Besides, there's plenty of time for friends in college, right?*

#

"Seesy, dinner's ready," Her mother called from downstairs.

"One second," she yelled.

"Mimi's here," her mother called, knowing that would speed her daughter up.

Seesy finished packing a box of books, leaving the overflowing bookshelf looking empty. Following the smell of oregano and basil in homemade spaghetti sauce, she walked down the stairs with a certain slowness, an unconscious knowing that this was the last time she would be going down this winding staircase for a while. Garlic bread and parmesan cheese called her to the kitchen. Everyone was at the table except for Will, who was standing by the stove.

"Here you go," he said, handing her a mound of spaghetti with meatballs. "Here's an extra slice of bread," he said with a wink. He sat on the other side of Mimi.

"Thanks," she said. "Hi, Mimi," she said to the woman at the table, who was moving a jeweled hand, inviting Seesy to sit next to her. Mimi did not look like anyone else's grandmother. She had the whitest hair Seesy had ever seen. Mimi said she had been struck by lightning when she was in her twenties, and her hair had been white ever since. When



she was little, Seesy believed that her grandmother was magic because she had survived the incident without a scratch, and her white hair made her the perfect fairy godmother. She had rough skin on her hands from work in the garden, but tanned and even, making her always look like she had just returned from the beach. She was an artist, drawing and painting landscapes when the mood struck her and portraits when she found someone who would sit for her. Pencil sketches and charcoal images of Sessy were taped to her grandmother's walls in her tiny loft apartment.

"So are you ready for another year of school, William?" Mimi asked. Seesy breathed a prayer of thanks that her grandmother didn't ask her about school. The rest of the evening continued in a chatter about school and Mimi's bridge club. Seesy tried to participate in the conversation, but she felt like she was watching herself from afar for the entire meal. She watched the way Henry's eyes squished together when he laughed, and the disgusting way the red spaghetti sauce clung to his graying beard. She watched her mother's delicate hands wind the spaghetti with a spoon and put it into her mouth, barely leaving a smudge of sauce on her lips. She wiped her mouth after every bite anyway. Seesy looked at her mother, knowing it was her fair skin she had, and her blue eyes. Her mother looked almost frail at the dinner table, the total opposite of her normal appearance. Seesy took a sip of water to resuscitate the present moment.

"Come, Seesy, come swing with me," Mimi said, pulling Seesy out onto the porch. Seesy moved a blue plaid cushion off the white, wooden swing. She traced a stripe of mold with her finger.

"Will needs to pressure wash this," she said, trying to make conversation. The green slime stuck to her fingers. She looked inside the French door windows, watching her mother do the dishes with a disturbed fury.

"I hear you are going on an adventure," Mimi said, taking her hand.

"I don't know if I'd call it that." Seesy bit her lip. "I'm sorry. It's just that one part of me wants to get away and see what it would be like to just do something different, and the other half just wants to stay here. Seesy squeezed her eyes together so the tears wouldn't fall. Her eyes had been overflowing every night it seemed. She felt the swing rocking again.

"Sara Claire," Mimi said. "You know there is always a greater plan at work than what we see." Seesy started to tune out the lecture. She could tell what religious walk this was going down. "Listen to me, Sara Claire," her grandmother interrupted. "The greatest experiences come out of some of the scariest circumstances. I know that you are lonely."

"I have friends, Mimi," Seesy said. "I'm not a loser, if that's what you're suggesting." She had sat at lunch all of last school year with the same group of guys.

"Of course you are not a loser, Seesy." They sat in silence for a few moments. Seesy took in the sound of the creaking swing and the zapping of insects against the bug light. Moonlight lit up the gravel driveway. "Come with me," Mimi said, guiding Seesy by the hand.

They circled the house, walking toward the fields behind it. Seesy thought about the snakes that would be slithering through the field looking for defenseless mice at this time

of night, but she didn't want to say anything. She partly hoped that this was her grandmother's escape route for her. Leave her in the woods, and bring her food in a basket, and she could live the rest of her life bathing in a pond. Seesy thought there was a strange ring to that. The crickets silenced as they cut a path through their orchestra pit.

"Sit," Mimi commanded. Seesy sat on the dirt, pulling her knees close to her chest. She didn't want any critters crawling over her. Mimi bent over and picked up a couple of the pebbles lying around on the ground. The frogs and crickets and owls seemed to be listening in from the surrounding brush. Seesy thought she felt the earth move. She waited in silence, listening to a slight wind and nothing else.

"Have you heard of a walkabout?" She didn't wait for an answer. "When I was in Australia, I met a young lad about your age. You probably would've thought he was quite handsome, but I'm certain he would think you are the beautiful princess of his dreams." Seesy felt the stiff muscles in her face ease into a smile. "He was leaving his home of his own accord. It was time for him to discover himself, to learn what his heart desired, to learn what he wanted to do with his life, to discover what kind of person he was. He left with a backpack of food, one change of clothes, a bedroll, and a journal and a pen, the bare necessities. He shook his father's hand and hugged his mother and started walking."

"Where'd he go?" Seesy asked, flinging a mosquito off her arm and into the night.

"That is a mystery known only to that young man. He was walking to be alone, away from familiarity, out of his comfort zone, you might say. I'm sure he has many adventures to tell, but that is only part of it. He learned more about himself than he ever would have if he'd stayed at home. I'm sure he faced challenges that required him to use his intelligence, confidence, and I'm sure many other skills that he didn't know he had. I bet he learned he didn't have some important ones too. It is a learning curve that is straight up." Mimi's crystal eyes twinkled in the moonlight.

"So, you're saying that boarding school is my straight up learning curve walkabout?" Seesy asked. Her grandmother didn't move.

"I am just saying that when opportunity presents itself, you should take it. You may be surprised at what you learn."

#

*Dear Diary,*

*I still have Mimi's words rolling around in my head. They're ruining my last night's sleep in my comfortable bed. Why does everyone think this is going to be good for me?*

*I have everything I need for my dorm room. It sounds weird to say that. I got a red and white comforter, and matching sheets and towels. I'm going to look like I got stuck in a candy cane war, but it's the only one I liked. I have to admit shopping was fun. Mom got all into it, and it was fun to see her excited. It was more like she was excited about helping me, rather than sending me off. I guess that's a good thing. I am looking forward to some time away from here.*

*I wish Will could help me move in, but he goes back to school tomorrow, too. Henry's working, of course, so it'll just be me and mom. I just keep wondering what it will be like. What if my roommate or the girls on my hall are total snobs? What if I get so jealous I punch one of them in the face? Okay, maybe I wouldn't do that. What if there are some girls that actually like me? What do I say to them? The last thing Will said to me tonight was "be yourself." I guess that'll have to do. I better try to get some sleep before I go to boarding school jail tomorrow.*


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